

The British Council Course in Archive Administration

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A two week course for senior practising archivists drawn from a number of different countries, provided a rare opportunity to address common problems.

Meetings between archivists from different institutions are valuable at any time. International contacts, especially, throw open a new horizon of attempted solutions and achievements against which common problems may be set. A working meeting provides a background even more propitious than a conference or a congress to assess the relative importance of questions at issue in one's home situation. This is one role the British Council Course in Archive Administration fulfils. The same may be said of the French Stage Technique Internationale d'Archives. Among archivists from outside France who have at some stage in their career attended this three-month course is Dr Hans Booms, now Director of the Federal Archives at Koblenz. The State Technique Internationale was inaugurated in 1956 and has ensured the circulation of important concepts in the French archival tradition.

The British Council Course, though of much shorter duration (two weeks), is set fair to emblazon in similar fashion the distinctive British contribution to archival theory and practice, addressing itself in particular to 'senior practising archivists, especially those acting as deputies or in charge of smaller repositories'. The 1984 Congress at Bonn includes speakers, such as Peter C. Mazikana, the Principal Archivist, National Archives of Zimbabwe, who have honed their expertise among colleagues from a score of different countries in the Oxford college setting of the British Council Course.

The 1983 archives course was the Council's second. The first was held in 1980 at a country house south of Oxford. The course has had the inestimable advantage of having as its Director of Studies the doyen of British archival educators, Dr Felix Hull, formerly the County Archivist of Kent and widely known for his eloquent writings in the *Journal of the Society of Archivists* and elsewhere. The open-minded non-insularity of his approach has well merited the supporting grant the course has received

from UNESCO. At the 1983 course (held between 4 and 16 September) the lectures on Archival Legislation were given by the distinguished French Archivist, Michel Duchein. The lecturer on International Relations was the Hungarian-born Executive Secretary of the International Council on Archives, Dr Charles Kecskemeti.

From inside Britain the Society of Archivists lends its valuable support, which includes giving a reception for participants. Dr Hull, who was the Society's President from 1976 to 1982, has been succeeded by Harry S. Cobb, Clerk of the Records, House of Lords, who issued a gracious invitation to those interested to visit the House of Lords Record Office and the Parliamentary Sound Archives. Organised visits during the 1983 course itself encompassed a range of institutions including the Public Record Office at Kew, the Berkshire County Record Office at Reading, the Conservation Unit of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, the Rhodes House archives, also in Oxford, and the archives of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust at Stratford-on-Avon.

In planning the 1983 course Dr Hull made changes in the style and emphasis he gave the course in 1980. Emphasis was shifted somewhat from the vast scale of operations at the United Kingdom Public Record Office level to the more readily comprehensible scale of the County Record Office. In style, group discussions, which had been only peripheral in 1980, were made integral to the programme. The sequence of instruction thus became: lecture, group discussions, reports by group leaders, concluding remarks by lecturer and Director of Studies. All subjects were approached from the combined standpoint of policy, planning and management. From this angle legislation was treated in some depth, as were conservation, access to records, international relations, accessioning and appraisal, archives and automation, non-traditional archives, archival training and, finally, management itself.

The slight shift of emphasis to a smaller scale of operations did not mean that subjects were not covered from the point of view of a national archives. Besides Michel Duchein, from the Inspection Generale des Archives de France, the lecturers included Michael Roper and Dr David L Thomas who are both Assistant Keepers at Kew. The sessions on management: financial and personnel, are a good illustration of the thoroughness with which practical considerations were tackled in the course. Michael Roper was joined by a professional management consultant, William E Halson, for a spirited double act. While William Halson adumbrated the theory, Michael Roper fleshed out each tenet with illustrative examples from archival experience.

This part of the course was rounded off by group consideration of an intricate logistical case study presented in great detail by Michael Roper in terms similar to the following:

A National Archives is running two branch record offices: one is half a mile

from the centre of a busy commercial city, the new national capital; the other is 100 miles away to the north in the old capital, with rail and road links, including bus services, to the new capital. 25% of ministries still remain in the old capital, though their eventual removal is planned. The old capital is also the seat of the national university.

The scenario was elaborated with details of record holdings and equipment, statistics of use, budgetary commitments and a run down of personal details of twenty-nine members of the staff. Assuming that a site for a new national archives five miles outside the new capital was to be developed, course members were asked, as National Archivist, to (1) allocate space in the new national archives; (2) allocate responsibilities for the staff; (3) prepare a draft timetable for a move to be completed within twelve months; and (4) assess the behavioural problems that might result from the merger and reorganisation and say how they could be mitigated.

Peter Mazikana of the National Archives, Harare, and Colin Smith of the CSIRO Archives, Canberra showed particular skill in piecing together the various given facts and presenting solutions on behalf of their groups.

The sessions on archives and automation were similarly practical. Michael Cook, the authority on the subject, conducted his lectures with course members seated round computer terminals at the Oxford Computing Centre.

The lecturers on conservation were David G Vaisey and Michael Turner of the Bodleian; on non-traditional archives, Dr David L Thomas of the PRO; on access, Victor W Gray, County Archivist, Berkshire; on accessioning and appraisal, David J Butler, County Archivist, Durham; on the British County Record Office, Miss Amanda J Arrowsmith, County Archivist, Suffolk; and on archives training in the UK, Dr Hull himself. Dr Hull kept a careful rein on the direction of the proceedings at all times and concluded with a polished resume of the course, which was subsequently typed and posted to participants.

In 1983 these included two Australians, three white South Africans, one Canadian, one Pakistani (the Director of the National Archives), two Jordanians (one of whom was the Director-General, Department of Libraries, Documentation and National Archives), one from the UK (the British Council's own Chief Registrar) and 17 others, chiefly from developing countries. There was a preponderance of keepers of public records, but there were five archivists from universities or research organisations and one archivist of a large industrial concern.

Credit for envisaging a course of this nature, for the choice of Dr Hull to direct it and for suggesting the venue belong in the first place to the British Council's Libraries Department. The administration of the course is the responsibility of the Courses Department, who discharged it with clockwork precision, the Director of Courses participating with the Assistant Director of Libraries in a frank and public evaluation prior to dispersal.