

County archives service

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Archives – a new profession

In 1947 Sir Hilary Jenkinson, head of the Public Record Office, deservedly described as ‘the doyen of the archival profession in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth’,¹ delivered a famous lecture at the inauguration of the University College, London’s postgraduate diploma course in archive administration, which he entitled ‘The English Archivist: a new profession’. This choice of title was significant – as a profession it was indeed *new*, although the occupation of archivist went back centuries.

In Britain, as a body of professional servants, archivists had been employed by the Public Record Office since its inception following the passing of the Public Record Office Act in 1838. But there was now being inaugurated a new scientific approach to their training in archive administration – in London and elsewhere – and the postwar decades would witness a remarkable growth of a pattern of local (mainly county) record offices throughout most of Britain, where large numbers of the archivists trained in London, Liverpool, the Bodleian Library, Bangor, Aberystwyth and Dublin were to find posts. Certain County Councils had already set up their county record offices before the Second World War, with Bedfordshire playing a pioneering role.

Other counties were also moving in this direction but their efforts were disrupted by the coming of the War. In Wales, for example, Glamorgan appointed its first archivist in 1939, whose activities were suspended during the war years; Caernarvonshire, which had set up a Records Committee in 1934, was forced by the pressure of the events of the day to delay appointing its archivist until 1947 – the first in North Wales. It was a new profession in Wales as well as in England!

The past fifty years have seen a remarkable growth in the provision of county archives services, perhaps best summed up in a presentation made to the Association of County Councils by the Association of County Archivists (ACA) in 1987, which drew attention to the ‘launch and achievement’ during this period of

sustained effort to secure the safe future, for the benefit of generations now and to come, of a vital part of the history of this country – the records of the lives of its local people and communities. The safe accommodation of a wealth of historical records, equalling in volume the archives of the state and surpassing in its range almost anything comparable in Europe, has been through the establishment of County Record Offices, administered by County Councils in England and Wales, to act as focal points for the preservation of an area’s written history.

Developing services

As record offices were set up the initial tasks of the archivists and their staffs were to secure adequate accommodation, conservation and cataloguing of the county records already in the possession of Councils – namely the Quarter Sessions and other official records. The collections in their custody grew rapidly as other archives were either donated or deposited – family and estate archives, parish records (both civil and ecclesiastical), solicitors’ collections and business records, for example, as well as certain public records of local interest transferred under the Public Records Acts of 1958 and 1967. These records, having been professionally processed, have been made available to a public whose interest in and use of them has grown at a staggering rate – particularly as new areas of study involving the use of archives have developed. The growth of interest in local history generally, and in family history in particular, together with a continuing increase in the demand for material for studies such as transport history have led to a considerable increase in the use of county archives.²

Considerable investment has been made by County Councils over the years in the provision of high-density storage, controlled environment and fire prevention systems, conservation workshops and properly equipped public ‘search rooms’ – and the evidence points to all this, in terms of viability, requiring a county scale operation. The ACA’s paper pointed out that in 1987 in the few instances (6 in number) where separate district record office had been founded within shire counties, ‘these norms have rarely proved feasible’.

The ACA has been particularly anxious to stress the role of county archives services in caring for and managing the records of the authority they serve.

The Local Government Act, 1972 (s. 224), required principal councils (including shire and metropolitan councils) to make ‘proper arrangements with

respect to any documents which belong to or are in the custody of the council or any of their officers'. A primary function of a county record office is to undertake this statutory responsibility for the care, preservation and management of the authority's own records. This makes a significant contribution to the administrative efficiency and economic use of the resources of the County Council. The county archivist and staff of the record office provide an information, storage and retrieval service for the files and papers of all departments, which may be required for administrative, legal or financial purposes. An effective records management service also enables the archivist to appraise and select records of enduring historical interest for permanent preservation as archives.³

This element in the work of county archives services is of increasing importance in view of the growing awareness of the need to deal with the management of the records produced by the new computer technology.

There is also considerable evidence of the county archives services responding to increasing public pressure with its demand for the use of their resources in the cultural and educational fields. There has been a long tradition of county archivists and their staffs communicating with the public directly through programmes of lectures, exhibitions of various kinds, participation in the work of local and national history societies and more recently answering increasing demands from the 'media' – press, radio and television. Demographic changes, particularly in terms of leisure interests and associated retirement patterns will surely bring greater pressures for these and other aspects of their services. These will have to be met in the context of a dichotomy with which archivists are already familiar – the need to preserve the records in their custody while at the same time allowing for their public use.

The introduction of the new National Curriculum in our schools, even if there are modifications of the recommendations of the Final Reports of the National Curriculum History Working Group and the National Curriculum History Committee for Wales, will bring an increasing demand on the resource of county archives services. Resource-based studies will form an important part of the curriculum, and many record offices have already identified these areas of demand and are preparing accordingly.

The new developments in computer-based learning will have a prominent part in the teaching of history and other related subjects. County archive services will have to be involved in the preparation of the appropriate resources. Gwynedd, for example, has prepared a four-year plan for National Curriculum resource production on the basis of the published timetable for implementing the National Curriculum. The aim is to offer a reasonable degree of provision for at least the core units and, if possible, certain options to which

a major contribution could be made, to be ready by the time the new curriculum is introduced in stages one year at a time.

This is but one area of change in education to which the county archive services will have to respond – and, indeed, to which they should be eager to respond.

Conclusion

County archive services hold the ‘collective memory’ of the counties. Their expertise is an essential factor, through records management, in the proper management and administration of these counties. There are increasing demands on their resources from the public at large. The nature of these demands is changing and will continue to change. It is essential that the profession is prepared to meet these demands, and this is dependent to a very great extent on the continuance of a viable county-wide service which draws on proven experience and tradition.

References

1. A.E.J. Hollaender (ed.), *Essays in Honour of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, The Society of Archivists, 1962.
2. The submission of the ACA points to 400 per cent user growth rates or above in certain counties over the previous ten years. See also B. Jackson, ‘Coping with the Crowds’, in Alan Norton (ed.), *Bringing Archives Closer to the Public*, INLOGOV/ACA, 1988.
3. *The Place of the County Archivist in the County Council Management Structure*, Association of County Archivists, 1988.