

January 1990

Short Subjects: Archives at the University of Oxford

Ned L. Irwin

Chattanooga-Hamilton County Bicentennial Library

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Irwin, Ned L., "Short Subjects: Archives at the University of Oxford," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 8 no. 1 (1990).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol8/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

SHORT SUBJECTS**Feature****Archives at the University of Oxford****Ned L. Irwin**

Access. Conservation. Records management. Limited resources. It is not surprising to find that archivists at the University of Oxford are confronted by many of the same issues as their counterparts in the States. In some cases, the issues are intensified in a way not known in America. With records dating into the twelfth century housed often

in equally ancient buildings, the management of archives at Oxford proves formidable.¹

A "boom"² of sorts in archives and the modernizing of archival management appears in full swing throughout Oxford at present. Trinity College opened its new archives in May 1989. Colleges, St. John's being the most recent, are emphasizing the need to engage a professional archivist. Other colleges, having outgrown library space or original archives room space, are seeking additional housing wherever it can be found. New College has begun plans to construct archives storage space within the bell tower of its chapel.³

The need for records management as the first phase of an archival program is being recognized. A consultant recently completed an examination of the records management need of the entire university. It is highly possible that in the near future a records management component will be implemented to complement the university's archival program. This will help prevent the maintenance of non-permanent records which has probably happened in the past, increasing the storage problem.

¹ The author expresses his thanks for assistance in his research at Oxford to W. H. Clennell and Stephen Tomlinson of the Bodleian Library; Mrs. Elizabeth Boardman, Brasenose College; Mrs. Caroline Dalton, New College; and Dennis Porter, Manchester College.

² W. H. Clennell, conversation, May 1989.

³ Caroline Dalton, conversation, June 1989.

An implication in this rise of archival interest is that problems long neglected in the management of Oxford archives are being addressed. This follows centuries of growth in records and the peculiar aspects of their control.

Unlike American universities where colleges are usually mere administrative units of the school, Oxford's some forty colleges largely manage their own affairs. So it must be noted that when speaking of Oxford archives one is speaking of two distinct sets of records.

While Paul Morgan notes sizable archival holdings for twenty-seven colleges,⁴ each college has its archives. Many have histories and house records preceding Columbus's discovery of the New World. Most of the early records in the college archives are concerned with property rights, which provided either direct income or protected such income. For example, Merton College's archives contains a license from Edward II dated 1331.⁵

Records began to accumulate early on, the earliest storage of the university archives being elusive. Reginald Poole suggests⁶ records were kept in a chest in the congregation house in St. Mary the Virgin, the university church built about 1320. The site is across from the present day Radcliffe Camera.

⁴ Paul Morgan, *Oxford Libraries Outside the Bodleian*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 1980).

⁵ "Merton College Archives Handlist," typescript, Bodleian Library, 1984.

⁶ R. L. Poole, *A Lecture on the History of the University Archives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), 6.

The early university chests had multi-key locks for security. Locks were usually of a four or five key type. The university chancellor held a key, as did selected heads of colleges. This arrangement did not encourage widespread or frequent use of the records. (A situation which no doubt aided in their long-term preservation.) The early emphasis was not on access (since for security and fire risk reasons most records were kept in thick-walled, difficult-to-reach tower rooms), but on storage. This emphasis has largely prevailed very nearly up until today. It helps explain one of the problems now being addressed—making records readily accessible to researchers through the creation of guides or a union catalogue.

In 1634 a university statute was approved which created the position of keeper of the archives in an early attempt to centralize control of the university records. In theory this should have promoted access and use since only one person would have to be contacted to obtain records. However, beginning with the first archivist, Brian Twyne, a fellow of Christ Church College, the pattern of electing a college fellow to head the university archives developed and continues to this day.⁷

Because fellows have teaching responsibilities, they have usually been forced to limit the time and effort given to archival work. This has led to another characteristic problem, what one might call the benevolent neglect of

⁷ The current keeper of the archives is Jeffery Hackney, law tutor and fellow of Wadham College, who does, in fact, have some prior archival experience.

archival management inherent in having people in charge of records whose principal occupation was not maintaining records.

The same can be said in general about the colleges, whose archives are usually administered under the auspices of its library, the librarian usually being a fellow of the college. At New College, for instance, the archives are in the custody of the college librarian, who is also the keeper of the college archives. The actual management is left to a professional archivist. This is not always the case. At Hertford College the archives are in the custody of the college bursar.

A sub-librarian, who generally is professionally trained, is often appointed to manage the library's normal operations. If there is no college archivist, this function is often filled as well by the sub-librarian or a designated assistant.⁸

A certain pattern of change is discernible in recent developments. Colleges have begun to hire a professional archivist from outside the institution on a part-time basis to study and advise college administrators on what direction should be taken in regard to their records. This may close the long period of "benevolent neglect" noted above. Many of these colleges are discovering that the mass of records will be an enormous undertaking. Thus

⁸ Morgan's book notes sixteen colleges where the librarian is in charge of the archives. Other colleges cited are headed by either archivists (nine), bursars (four), or other college officers (three).

some of these part-time advisors are becoming full-time archivists.⁹

Today the university archives are supervised by the keeper of the archives, who is assisted by a deputy keeper. This deputy is always a member of the Bodleian staff because much of the archives space is located in buildings of the Bodleian Library.¹⁰ The deputy keeper acts as a liaison between archives and library. Day-to-day management is the responsibility of a full-time professional archivist and an archival assistant.

As is often true in archives, much of the staff's actual working time is taken up with "housekeeping duties," such as checking climate controls and retrieving records. This limits time for the processing and cataloging of material or for long-range planning.

Access to most college archives is available to any researcher with a legitimate purpose, and those of the university are generally available to researchers under the guidelines for using the Bodleian Library facilities. Whoever tries to do research in the college archives faces a problem. There are few archives with any thorough catalogue or guide to the material available. No union

⁹ Caroline Dalton's career at New College is a good example. Beginning as a part-time consultant, over a period of two years she became the college's full-time archivist.

¹⁰ The current deputy keeper, Stephen Tomlinson, is a member of the Bodleian Library's Department of Western Manuscripts.

catalogue exists for the archives at Oxford. What efforts have been made by archivists over the years depended largely not only on their training but upon personal interests and whims. Catalogues exist for most collections (chiefly from the last century). These are updated to an extent in certain colleges by card indices or supplemental access aids.

The university archives includes financial and administrative records of the university vice-chancellor's office (Oxford's chief administrator); of the university chest (treasury); surveys, deeds, and other legal documents related to the university's holdings; graduation records, etc. The types of records housed in the colleges are similar, being concerned with the college's governance, its financial development, its academic functions, and its domestic arrangements. These records can be arranged into several general series and into sub-series by office or function under the series heading. Series would include 1) government of the college, 2) financial records, 3) academic records, 4) domestic records, 5) social records, 6) external records (those dealing with outside institutions such as the university), 7) personal papers, and 8) miscellaneous records and artifacts.

Poor planning has also created the necessity of scattered records storage. For instance, the university's archives are currently housed in the two tower rooms of the Bodleian Library's Tower of the Five Architectures (the upper room also providing archival work space), in two basement rooms of the Faculty of History Library across the street, and in cellar rooms in a building on High Street. This "scattering" does not promote use of records.

Storage is varied. It is possible to follow the whole history of conservation methodology in Oxford's storerooms. Records may be housed in tower rooms such as those of the university in the original wooden cabinets, or as at Brasenose, in a great wooden chest built in situ in 1509. Envelopes lie in both glass-covered drawers and acid-free folders. More recent records are being stored in acid-free boxes. These are custom-made and purchased through the conservation department of the Bodleian. Movable, high-density storage shelving holds much of the material located in the Faculty of History Library facility. Large conservation retroconversion projects to rehouse older records present daunting tasks for present and future college archivists.

Attempts are being made to provide optimum climatic conditions in regard to temperature and humidity levels. In the tower rooms this is fairly easily controlled. Basement rooms, such as those in the history library prove more difficult. These rooms are located on either side of the building's boiler room, where temperature fluctuations are often acute.¹¹

However, the ancient storage rooms have certain advantages not often realized. Climate is more nearly appropriate to current standards than more modern, unadapted rooms. The rooms are cool; there is little circulating air to dry out records; humidity levels approach acceptable levels; there is little exposure to light. The thick stone walls provide security. And the moderate English

¹¹ Stephen Tomlinson, conversation, June 1989.

climate is less extreme in temperature and humidity than is found in continental North America.

It can be said that the archives at Oxford are *organic* rather than *synthetic* in their development¹²—their processing and management was not planned, but was developed as a necessity long after the fact of creation. The same could be said for most archives in the United States. Characteristic problems have developed from the inheritance of records generated over eight hundred years of "organic management" by the university and colleges at Oxford. The personal individuality of the early masters and students which made Oxford a seat of learning in the Middle Ages bred the individuality of the colleges. This helps explain why so little cooperation or coordination between archives has occurred.

The quality of archival management (usefulness of descriptive aids, storage facilities, arrangement or lack thereof, etc.) varies from one archives to another, and from those of the university's central administration. Individually, both the university archives and the college archives are attempting to develop a modern archival management system for their records. However, there remains little indication that the interaction between these archival institutions will increase in the near future.

Efforts of current and future archivists at Oxford are likely to provide solutions to many of the problems noted here. It will not be an easy task. They have inherited the

¹² Because records have many of the qualities of living organisms (growth, age), it has usually been as an organic (pre-existing) entity that archivists have treated them.

common problems of the modern archives in the unique situation found at Oxford. The ancient nature of college buildings limits their usefulness for expansion or ease of access to it. The ancient nature of many records predates the concept of retention and disposition schedules which would have helped reduce the size of records needing permanent preservation. Cuts in government funding¹³ limit resources for archives. As in the United States there will be a need to increase funding from non-traditional, that is, private sources.

All of this will force Oxford archivists to be more imaginative in planning and more innovative in procedure, so as to make of the rich research material in their charge the "convenient form of artificial memory"¹⁴ the doyen of English archivists, Sir Hilary Jenkinson, saw as the purpose of archives.

Ned L. Irwin is special collections librarian and archivist at the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Bicentennial Library. While in England for a seminar about English libraries and librarianship co-sponsored by the Bodleian Library and the University of Oklahoma, he visited the archives at Oxford.

¹³ The University of Oxford, like all English universities, is in the midst of a five-year retrenchment in funding from the national government.

¹⁴ Sir Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1937), 153.