

Regional History and the Local Record Office

W. N. YATES

It is a fair question to ask how much the study of local and regional history has been transformed over the past sixty years by the establishment of local record offices. Obviously it has, if only because many of the sources have become publicly available for the first time. Yet there are good reasons for thinking that local record offices could have had an even greater impact had they wanted to. Part of my argument in this paper is that local record offices have seen their role as a passive rather than an active one, and the result is that local history is still primarily the province of amateur antiquarians with limited vision, and regional history is not yet being seriously undertaken by an adequate number of professional historians. A change of attitude on the part of local record offices generally would certainly benefit the study of both local and regional history; it might perhaps also benefit the local record office. Before, however, we can adequately discuss such controversial issues we must look first at the role that the local record office occupies in contemporary society and the problems that it faces.

The establishment of local record offices

The term 'local record office' used in this paper refers to those offices that have been established, either wholly or partly, by county or district councils or their predecessors, arising from the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Public Records which issued three reports between 1912 and 1919. These institutions are not the sole repositories for local records. Because they were so late in being established many public and private libraries and museums acquired archive material in the past; a few are still collecting and others retain existing collections rather than handing them over to the more newly established local record offices. Various other institutions, particularly university libraries, have built up specialist

collections of archive material. It must also be remembered that many records of local provenance or national records of local and regional significance are housed in the great national archive collections in the Public Record Office, the British Library, the service museums, specialist ecclesiastical repositories, and so on.

In the counties of southern England the local record offices that have been established hold the bulk of locally created records. In the major cities and towns, such as Brighton, Bristol, Plymouth, Portsmouth and Southampton, public libraries still hold a good deal of printed archive material, for example theatre bills, election addresses, newspapers and general ephemera. There is a mistaken belief among some officers of public libraries that the words 'archive' and 'manuscript' are synonymous, and this has sometimes led to an unwillingness to transfer to record offices any printed archive material. This is unfortunate, since the level of security in libraries is not always very high, and there is also an unwillingness on the part of some librarians to restrict access to archive material to *bona fide* researchers, with the result that records of considerable historical importance have been damaged beyond repair through abuse by the public and the lack of any proper facilities for conservation. There are a few museums, such as the Royal Institution of Cornwall, that still hold small but significant archive collections, but museums have on the whole transferred most of their archive material to the local record office or are likely to do so in the near future. There seems to be a greater understanding on the part of museum curators than of librarians as to exactly what archives are. In the case of photographs and, sometimes, maps there is some overlap between local libraries, museums and record offices since all regard such items as falling within the legitimate limits of their collecting policies. Some local antiquarian societies also collect documents though most of the larger, and more academically orientated, ones have either transferred their holdings to local record offices, or else, as in the case of the Sussex Archaeological Society, have an arrangement with the local record office whereby their collections are made available to users under proper conditions of security. The only one of the southern universities to employ an archivist and to actively collect archives is Reading, but it has now limited itself to records in six categories: the records of British publishers and printers, the records of individual working farmers, the papers of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers, certain types of political papers of interest to the School of Contemporary European Studies, a collection of illuminated manuscripts held on behalf

of the Guild of St George, and the records of the university itself. There is, obviously, some potential conflict with the interests of local record offices, particularly in the case of local farm records, and the same sort of potential conflict exists in the case of local trades union records, which are actively acquired by the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick. There is no real solution to this problem. The local and regional historian would obviously prefer to see local records of every type in the local record office. But for the agricultural or trades union historian the existence of specialist collections at Reading and Warwick is of great practical convenience.

The earliest record offices to be established in the south of England were those at Bristol (1924) and Guildford (1928), followed by the county archive services for Kent (1933) and Somerset (1935). As in other parts of the country, the major establishment of local record offices came in the immediate post-war years. Between 1946 and 1960 offices were established by all the remaining county councils and by seven more cities and towns. Only the Channel Islands, unlike the Isle of Man, were without a proper archive service and they are still without one. The reasons for the establishment of record offices varied. Some like Bristol and Kent were established by councils who were themselves concerned that their own records should be properly administered. Others were established because of pressure from local antiquarian societies; Berkshire, Guildford and Portsmouth fall into this category. In Dorset the curator of the county museum pressed for the establishment of an archives service to which the museum's substantial archive holdings could be transferred. In very few places were archive services created as a deliberate extension of an existing library or museum service, as was the pattern in large urban areas in the midlands and north of England. The exceptions were at Exeter, where the public library had collected documents since 1908 and established a proper record office in 1947, and Plymouth, where the public library appointed an archivist in 1952. At Guildford the archive and museum service was combined until 1971, when the former became a branch of the main Surrey Record Office at Kingston. At Bristol, Portsmouth and Southampton record offices were established outside the library service even though all three city libraries had important local history departments. This situation has been very fortunate as the experience of record offices established as part of a library or museum service has rarely been a satisfactory one.

The reorganisation of local authorities made necessary by the

Local Government Act of 1972 made relatively little difference to the existing pattern of record offices in the south of England. Under the terms of the act district councils that wished to continue to operate an existing or to establish a new archive service had to apply to the Secretary of State for the Environment for an order. Of the very few orders so far granted five have been to southern district councils: Bath, Bristol, Canterbury, Portsmouth and Southampton. The district councils at Winchester and Windsor did not apply for an order and their offices have become the responsibility of the county council. In the case of Winchester this meant the closure of its separate office and the transfer of its collections to the Hampshire county office in the same city, though these collections continue to be separately administered and the district council continues to contribute to the cost of their administration. At Windsor the overall change in responsibility has made no significant difference to the service provided. The only county in which there have been major post-reorganisation changes has been Devon. Here the former city services operated by Exeter and Plymouth were merged with the Devon county service. For three years the three offices operated as they had done previously, though the two city ones were now exempt from library control, and there was a proposal to establish a new branch service at Barnstaple. In 1977 the high costs of maintaining two offices in the city of Exeter persuaded the county council to close the main county record office and to transfer the records and staff to the premises attached to Exeter library (the former city office), with the use of an outlying warehouse for records rarely consulted and the housing of its conservation department. There is little doubt that this rationalisation of the county service was the right thing to do, and the savings achieved have persuaded the county council to reconsider the possible establishment of a branch office at Barnstaple in 1981. The branch office at Plymouth has been maintained and its staff expanded.

Only one new southern county was created under the 1972 act, but Avon County Council is one of only three county councils in England and Wales which have so far made no provision for an archive service, though two of its districts, Bath and Bristol, have been granted archive orders. There is no doubt that it would have been senseless for the county council to have established a county service competing with the existing Bristol office, but to have taken no action at all is not really satisfactory. In the only similar situation, that of the new northern county of Tyne and Wear, the county council assumed responsibility for a county-wide service based on

the former Newcastle City Record Office, but in the present circumstances a more acceptable solution would be for the county and districts to agree on the provision of a joint service based on the Bristol Office, with a branch office in Bath if felt necessary.¹

At the time of writing, therefore, the local archive services of southern England are administered by twelve out of thirteen county councils and by five district councils. Five county councils operate more than one record office. Three district councils contribute in some way to the support of the county archive service. One branch office (Salisbury) for diocesan and capitular records is manned by the county in a building provided by the Dean and Chapter and maintained by the Diocesan Board of Finance, and one district office (Canterbury) receives financial support from the cathedral chapter whose records it administers. Of the seventeen archive services, two (Somerset and West Sussex) are independent council departments, one (Isle of Wight) is part of a library-based cultural services department, and the other fourteen form part of the legal departments of their respective local authorities. In most cases the heads of repositories in this position have a very large measure of independence in practice. The current trend in local government is towards the amalgamation of departments, so it is unlikely that many other record offices will become independent departments in the foreseeable future, but it is very important that archivists should not be improperly restrained, by those who do not understand the nature of the service, from carrying out the policies that they consider to be appropriate. It is also important that archivists should have frequent access to the local politicians who carry the ultimate responsibility for the service, but in some councils this does not happen. Only two counties (Cornwall and Wiltshire) have a committee composed of councillors as well as professional and amateur historians: in Cornwall it is a County Records Committee and in Wiltshire a sub-committee of the Policy Committee. In other counties and districts archives tend to be a minor responsibility of a committee responsible for several other council activities, and this can lead to the service being both under-financed and understaffed.

Finance and staffing

Tables 1 and 2 give the current level of financial support and staffing for local record offices in the south of England. In both cases offices

¹ But see note on p. 234 below.

TABLE 1: *Record office finance, 1978-9*

Archive service	Declared budget	Adjusted figure	Expenditure per head of population
Kent	£ 94,500	£125,000	£0.09
Hampshire	126,000	125,000	0.12
Surrey	90,520	110,000	0.11
Devon	112,450	115,000	0.12
East Sussex	89,200	90,000	0.14
Berkshire	45,270	55,000	0.08
West Sussex	129,475	130,000	0.21
Dorset	25,250	35,000	0.06
Wiltshire	57,000	75,000	0.15
Bristol	39,330	65,000	0.16
Somerset	105,870	105,000	0.26
Cornwall	63,000	65,000	0.16
Southampton	27,550	35,000	0.16
Portsmouth	83,260	95,000	0.48
Canterbury*	—	15,000	0.13
Isle of Wight	24,310	30,000	0.27
Bath	—	10,000	0.12

* Only partly-financed by the City Council; there is a similar level of financial support from the cathedral chapter.

TABLE 2: *Record office staffing, 1978-9*

Archive service	Total staff	Professional	Technical	Clerical	Manual
Kent	25½	10	2	10½	3
Hampshire	15½	6½	3	6	—
Surrey	16½	7	2	7½	—
Devon	19	8	3	7	1
East Sussex	12	5	2	4	1
Berkshire	9	5	1	2	1
West Sussex	16	7	2	6	1
Dorset	5½	3	1	1½	—
Wiltshire	10	6	2	2	—
Bristol	9½	4	—	3½	2
Somerset	15	4	2	7	2
Cornwall	8	4	2	2	—
Southampton	5½	2½	1	2	—
Portsmouth	11½	3½	2	5½	½
Canterbury	4½	1	1½	1	1
Isle of Wight	3	2	—	1	—
Bath	1½	1	—	½	—
Totals	187½	79½	26½	69	12½

have been listed in an order based upon population, beginning with the largest and ending with the smallest; the populations of counties containing district as well as county archive services (i.e. Hampshire and Kent) exclude the populations of the relevant districts. The seventeen archive services employ a total of nearly 200 staff and have a current budget of approximately £1,250,000, an average of £0.15 per head of population. The level of staffing and financial support is clearly not in proportion to the population, or the rateable value, of the respective archive authority. Theoretically the expenditure per head of population should be smallest towards the top and greatest towards the bottom of Table 1. Certainly no record office is a burden to the ratepayers at present, and some could have their expenditure substantially increased at little cost to the local authority. What is also clear is that some archive authorities are spending an enormously high proportion of their budget on staff and relatively little on anything else. Table 3 gives a breakdown in percentage terms of the budgets of those record offices for which detailed figures were available. In calculating record office budgets allowance has to be made, as in Table 1, for what may be termed 'hidden subsidies'. In some record offices certain costs, usually storage or postage or central administrative charges, but in some instances, such as Kent and Surrey, the employment costs of certain staff members, are absorbed by the council department of which the record office is part. The figures given in Table 1, though in some cases clearly approximate, are intended to be realistic, and there is sometimes a substantial gap between the declared budget and the adjusted figure which takes account of the 'hidden subsidies'.

The breakdown of the budget of the four offices given in Table 3

TABLE 3: *Percentage breakdown of selected record office budgets*

Category of expenditure	Hampshire	E.Sussex	W.Sussex	Somerset
Cost of employees	56.3	66.3	55.4	69.9
Establishment, premises	38.9	30.1	30.9	22.9
Supplies and services	4.8	3.6	13.7	7.2

is fairly typical of the breakdown in many other offices. Record offices are labour-intensive, so services can only be pruned in times of financial difficulty through the 'freezing' of vacant posts. The cost of premises and the services of other council departments is also high and outside the control of the archivist. The only part of the budget which the archivist can effectively control is the supplies and

services element, and this can be very low. Only Portsmouth and West Sussex appear to spend more than 10 per cent of their budget on supplies and services: printing and stationery, travel and conferences, the purchase of books and documents, conservation materials, and so on. But simply because it is so low, it is this element of the budget which record offices could most usefully increase and with the least inflationary effect.

In the case of staffing there is a general imbalance in most record offices between professional and clerical staff; most offices employ too few clerical staff with the result that professional staff have to frequently undertake essentially clerical tasks. In many offices the day-to-day management of the search room is undertaken by archivists, when it could be just as well, and perhaps better, done by clerical staff, leaving the archivist free to tackle the customary backlog of cataloguing, yet still available to advise certain readers who may require the benefit of specialist knowledge. The only southern record office that has fully adopted this approach is Somerset and the system seems to work very well; Somerset has the lowest proportion of professional to non-professional staff of any southern record office. For the purposes of this paper I have counted in Table 2 the archive education officers employed by Kent and West Sussex and the head of the repository at Bath as professional staff. Three offices employ no technical (i.e. conservationist) staff. Very few offices employ manual staff, such as their own cleaners or porters, but have to rely on the services of those employed by another department, which is not always satisfactory.

The level of local archive services

Restrictions in finance and staff numbers inevitably limit the range of services that the local record office can offer to its potential users. Table 4 provides a summary of the main facilities and user rate of twenty out of the twenty-two local record offices in the south of England; the offices at Windsor and Folkestone are excluded because of the limited range of their services at present. Although services are restricted by resources they are to a large extent also curtailed by the outlook of archivists. All archivists would agree that their fundamental *raison d'être* was the acquisition and preservation of the records that their offices were set up to take care of; for most local record offices this means the records of their local authority and the records of those individuals and organisations that can be

persuaded to deposit them in a record office. Thereafter archivists differ substantially in what they regard as priorities.

Search room facilities

Over the past decade there has been a phenomenal increase in the public use of local record offices and there is every likelihood that this will increase even further in the decade ahead. One wonders, frankly, how some record offices are going to cope with this situation. Record offices open, on average, for no more than 250 days each year and should, theoretically, be providing at least one seat for every 250 readers. Table 4 shows that five record offices are

TABLE 4: *Record office facilities and user rates*

Record repositories	Hours open per week	Seats for readers	Readers per year	Readers per seat	Services provided*
Kent (Maidstone)	37½	20	3,900	195	CDE
Hampshire (Winchester)	39¾	20	4,150	210	ACE
Surrey (Kingston)	33½	12	1,750	145	AC
(Guildford)	25½	6	1,400	235	A
Devon (Exeter)	38¾	30	6,350	210	AC
(Plymouth)	38¼	6	1,500	250	A
East Sussex (Lewes)	39½	12	3,100	260	CE
Berkshire (Reading)	42	12	1,850	155	BC
West Sussex (Chichester)	33¾	25	5,350	210	CDE
Dorset (Dorchester)	40	12	2,450	205	C
Wiltshire (Trowbridge)	41¾	33	2,300	70	BCE
(Salisbury)	35	8	800	100	E
Bristol	42½	18	2,850	160	AE
Somerset (Taunton)	36¼	35	3,500	100	AC
Cornwall (Truro)	37½	10	3,300	330	AC
Southampton	37½	8	900	110	CE
Portsmouth	31	18	1,700	95	BCE
Canterbury	28¾	14	2,550	180	C
Isle of Wight (Newport)	40½	12	1,800	150	B
Bath	37	6	1,500	250	

*Key to services: A Saturday opening (often by appointment)
 B Regular late evening opening
 C Conservation facilities
 D Specialist education service
 E Publication programme

already seriously overcrowded and three more are likely to become so within the near future if the number of readers continues to increase. Only two of these offices, Hampshire and East Sussex, have current plans to cope with this situation. Hampshire should be able to provide new search room facilities by 1980, when the final

stage of the St Thomas Church conversion programme is completed. East Sussex hopes to be able to open a new record office in the Maltings which currently houses only its conservation and modern records sections. On the whole those offices that have been able to develop the best search room facilities, particularly extended opening hours, are those with premises independent of other local authority departments. Record offices in county or city halls have to fight other departments for space and tend to end up with cramped offices and search rooms, inadequate storage and limited conservation facilities.

With the number of readers increasing, record offices have been under very considerable pressure from the public to improve their facilities. There has been a widespread feeling that record offices should be open in the evenings and at weekends and should not have to close over the lunch period. The result in the south of England is that at the time of writing four record offices remain open after 5.30 p.m. on one evening each week, seven open either by appointment or twice a month on a Saturday morning (Cornwall opens practically every Saturday) and nine remain open through the lunch period on weekdays. On the other hand there are still four offices that offer none of these facilities and not one office offers all three. It has to be remembered, however, that record offices cannot provide the opening hours achieved by some libraries without employing more staff. Also the archivist might rightly ask if the maintenance of a public service is to be the record office's main concern. There is already a good deal of evidence to suggest that the present opening hours of some record offices with their existing staff has had a detrimental effect on the essential work of the office, the acquisition, description and physical care of archives. Which takes priority, documents or public? Or will the local authority make the question irrelevant by agreeing to more realistic staffing levels?

Within the search room there is probably now less variation between record offices than there used to be. This is no doubt an inevitable result of the replacement of amateur or self-taught archivists by professionally qualified archivists since the introduction of the post-graduate diploma courses in the late 1940s. Nevertheless frequent users of record offices find the search room staff in some record offices very much more helpful than in others. Yet helpfulness to the reader is an essential service since most record offices' finding aids are far from adequate. Lists tend to be a mixture of detailed calendars, frequently giving far too much information and summary descriptions, which sometimes give far too

little. Record offices are only gradually working out, in most cases, consistent criteria for the listing of documents and the serious listing backlog in most offices will mean that there will be long delays before this work can be completed. Indexes are usually even worse than lists, mostly either non-existent or incomplete, 'of more use to the staff than they are to the readers'. Where record offices have dramatically improved their facilities in recent years is in the provision of better search room libraries and more technical equipment; microfilm readers and photocopiers are no longer luxuries but essential aids to research.

The great problem for archivists in developing further their search room facilities, and most are clearly anxious to do this, is the enormous range of ability and interest among record office users. On the whole the heaviest users of record offices are genealogists, over 60 per cent of the total number of users in many record offices; the rest consist of the authors of school and college projects, people interested in the history of their houses or property, those in search of information for legal purposes, enthusiastic members of local history societies and (usually well to the bottom of the list) academic or professional historians. The needs of these various types of reader are very different. Archivists have hoped in the past that it is possible to develop a search room service that caters for them all, with the inevitable result that none of them really get what they want. Perhaps it is time that archivists started to think (a few already have) about these different needs and which they feel able to fulfil. There is an unwillingness on the part of archivists to discriminate in favour of one set of users and therefore against another; but as the public become more aware of the uses to which record offices can be put, the pressure on archivists to develop particular services will increase and they will have to determine their own priorities if the essential 'back room' work of the office is not to be undermined.

Conservation and storage

The users of record offices may well be aware of the shortcomings of the search room, which they can see, but they sometimes fail to appreciate that for the archivist these have to be balanced against the requirements of conservation and storage. Most record offices have been able to develop conservation sections although these are expensive in terms of equipment, limited in terms of staff, and the space that can be assigned to them is not always sufficient. In most

record offices the listing backlog is infinitesimal compared with the conservation backlog. Although the days of the large accessions, those vast family collections and solicitors' deposits, are over for many record offices, the need for further document storage continues and this is also expensive if it is to meet the requirements of proof against fire, theft and vandals as well as control of humidity and temperature. Many of the record offices in the south of England are critically short of storage space, in some cases so much so that they would have to refuse a major deposit. Others have had to resort to the use of temporary, and inadequate, storage facilities for their less important collections, particularly the vast quantities of recent records created by local government itself. Again it is mostly the record offices which are incorporated in the local authority's headquarters buildings that suffer the worst storage problems. The message seems to be that on pretty well every count it pays to find premises elsewhere.

Education and exhibitions

Compared with the larger local authority museum services, record offices have barely begun to expand in this area. Only two archive services in the south of England, those for Kent and West Sussex, have education officers attached to them and in both cases these are teachers seconded by the local education authority and not directly employed by the record office. No record office in the south of England has substantial exhibition facilities to compare with those, for instance, of the Lancashire or Northumberland record offices. Record offices tend, therefore, to concentrate on mounting fairly small-scale exhibitions throughout their areas of operation, usually at the request of different organisations, and this can be very time-consuming. As far as educational policies are concerned most offices are doing no more than responding to requests from individual schools for visiting speakers or group visits to the record office or photocopies of archive material, in much the same way as they respond to similar requests from Women's Institutes and a whole range of local societies. Clearly there is a whole new role for any record office that wants to develop it in the field of education and exhibitions. Even where major expansion is not possible, it is still desirable that record offices should frame a more constructive policy for themselves in this field. Merely to respond to requests on a day-to-day basis in the long run can be extremely wasteful of slender resources both in staff and finance.

Records management

The major development that has taken place in local government record offices in recent years has been the acquisition of more and more very recent material from the various departments of the local authority. In a few offices, particularly those in the south-east of England, there has been a deliberate policy by the record office to secure more control by archivists over the way in which these departments manage their semi-current filing systems or deeds registries. In others records management means little more than an attempt to salvage as much as possible from the documentary chaos caused by the reorganisation of local government in 1973-4 and the amalgamation of so many second-tier authorities. As far as the record office user goes the present concern with records management may seem irrelevant and in the long term it probably is, though no doubt a few historians will want eventually to see those records of twentieth-century local government that have been deemed worthy of permanent preservation. In the short term it is very far from being irrelevant. Where manpower and finance are limited it is simply not possible to develop in all directions at once. At least in the area of records management, record offices have been forced to make decisions about priorities and in the circumstances they have probably made the right ones. But their decision to try and deal with this problem will inevitably mean that other developments which the public might welcome will have to wait. They need not, of course, be put back forever. The problems of records management are temporary ones. Once a records management system has been designed, and some offices have either achieved this or are well on the way towards doing so, then it can work perfectly well on a fairly mechanical basis and need not be an expensive drain on a record office's resources.

Publications and research

For most record offices the development of a publication programme and the stimulation of research has been a very low priority, very far behind the other functions that we have so far considered. One might ask why this is so. There are probably a number of reasons. The very considerable debate within the archive profession over qualifications, and a feeling among some archivists with professional qualifications that their unqualified predecessors were little more than bungling antiquarians, has produced a very strong

anti-academic bias in certain sections of the profession. The fact that local record offices are part of the local government machine, and paid for out of the ratepayers' pockets, has also influenced some archivists into believing that their priorities must be either to the administration that employs them or to the general (and presumably non-academic) public that theoretically pays them. It is interesting that one finds a very much greater resistance to this view among the staffs of local authority museums, yet if we weighed the academic qualifications of the staff of an average record office against those of the professional staff of an average museum the scales would be tipped fairly heavily in favour of the average record office. One sometimes gets the impression that archivists feel somehow guilty about their academic abilities and that professional propriety necessitates that they should subdue any academic interests that they might have, except perhaps in the evenings and at weekends. Whilst it is perfectly true that a record office whose staff was solely interested in building up academic reputations for themselves would offer a pretty poor professional service, there does seem to have been an over-reaction in the opposite direction.

There are, however, signs of a more balanced approach in a number of record offices and one is hopeful that when they can clear their backlog of listing and their administrative problems, then their contributions in the field of publications and research will be considerable. If we look at the final column of Table 4 we will see that of the twenty record offices listed only nine have begun on any sort of publication programme although a number of other offices have produced various useful handouts, usually either introductory leaflets or guidance for genealogists. Two offices, Bristol and Kent, have produced ambitious guides to their collections; one or two other offices produced rather more limited guides in the early years of their existence but they have been rendered virtually useless by the passage of time. In Hampshire and the Isle of Wight the four record offices have got together under the auspices of the Hampshire Archivists' Group to produce a series of subject guides to education, poor law and transport records in their collections. Two offices, Portsmouth and Wiltshire, are in the process of publishing guides to their collections in parts. The Hampshire record office has recently launched the first volume in a series of record publications, and the Windsor office has produced three volumes of corporation minutes covering the periods 1653-1783 and 1828-52; other record offices are heavily involved in the work of record publishing organisations even though they do not publish such volumes directly. In

the past the Southampton record office has published *Southampton Papers*, a series of historical monographs, but this programme has been in suspense since 1975 because no money has been available to print new papers. In Portsmouth, a similar series of historical monographs, not published directly by the record office (though the archivist is an active member of the editorial board), continues to produce volumes at the rate of about two each year.

The three offices with the most ambitious publication programmes are East and West Sussex and Portsmouth. The two Sussex offices originally shared the same archivist, and the policy was to produce a series of printed calendars to the major collections. This policy has been maintained in West Sussex and supplemented by other publications such as an invaluable guide to local history sources, which has already gone through two editions since its first appearance in 1971. In East Sussex 1971 marked the abandonment of the original policy of publishing calendars in favour of a policy of producing less detailed handbooks, and the publication programme was further broadened to include the production of archive teaching kits. Since 1976 the Portsmouth record office has published an annual journal, the *Portsmouth Archives Review*, which includes articles on local history and archival matters, book reviews, an annual report and list of accessions. A few other record offices also produce printed annual reports on the work that they have done, though one wonders how many people bother to read them. It is, however, clear that there is substantial scope in most record offices for thinking seriously about a more varied, and therefore more profitable, publication programme in the future when staff are available to undertake the substantial amount of initial work that such a policy inevitably involves.

Although very few record offices appear to encourage officially indulgence by their staff in academic research, many offices employ staff who either have research degrees or have published. Of eighty archivists in the record offices of southern England fifteen appear to have research degrees or to be currently undertaking research for a higher degree, and about thirty have either published or are preparing work for publication. It is, however, fair to say that much of this published work is editions of documents, frequently volumes for record societies. In only five record offices have no current members of staff undertaken any form of academic research. It should also be pointed out that in virtually every case the work involved in research and publication has been undertaken outside normal office hours. The personal contribution by local archivists to historical

scholarship has therefore been considerable and it seems a pity that it does not receive more official recognition and encouragement. It needs to be pointed out that the archivist who does involve himself or herself personally in historical research is likely to understand the needs of other users of documents better as a result. The archivist will thus be able to provide better lists to records and fulfil a more useful advisory role to those starting work on a research project. The public service of the record office can only benefit as a result of such research commitments.

The record office and the historian

The conclusion that I would draw from what I have been saying about the present level of local archive services is that, bearing in mind the poor staffing levels and low budgets of most record offices, they are providing a reasonably good service to their councils, to the depositors of records and to the user but there are clearly areas in every record office where improvements can and ought to be made. It is certainly true that most record offices can and ought to make a greater contribution to the stimulation of historical studies, both locally and regionally. Too many offices exercise a decidedly passive role; they acquire, conserve and list the records and they make them available to those who ask to see them; they provide, upon request, exhibitions and speakers for local organisations; a few have made modest attempts to encourage the use of documents in schools; others have begun to produce some basic publications. Is this really sufficient, especially at a time when interest in local and regional history is steadily increasing, at both an academic and a non-academic level?

If they wanted to, local record offices could provide many of the answers to some of the problems being experienced by those involved in local and regional history. In the first place, the record office is ideally constituted to act as the meeting place for the academic and amateur historian, since both have to use the record office and both could benefit from contact with each other. One would like to see record offices organising seminars in which both these groups of people and interested school teachers could participate. In non-university towns the record office is likely to employ the most academically qualified historians in that community, and this really places a moral obligation on the record office to undertake the leadership in the stimulation of historical studies. It is, of course,

true that many archivists do serve as officers and committee members of local archaeological, historical and record-publishing societies and give the benefit of their advice in this way. Also it might be counter-productive if the record office was thought of as trying to exercise a dictatorial or patronising role in its relationship with local societies. But amateur historians do need professional guidance and are usually prepared to accept it if it is tactfully offered. The local record office needs to work out the historical needs of its area and then to find ways in which these needs can be satisfied. The production of a local journal or series of monographs and the organisation of a local history workshop are obvious examples. Where the record office can work in partnership with another organisation (university, polytechnic, schools, societies) or group of people (adult education tutors, 'friends' of the record office) then they should certainly do so. But clearly there may be times when the record office will have to take an initiative on its own if historical needs are to be satisfied.

One of the problems that will face any record office that wants to adapt itself to such a role, quite apart from the fact that a record office may quite justifiably feel that its priorities are likely to lie in different directions for the foreseeable future, is the whole question of public relations. Record offices have always been one of the 'back-room' departments of local government. Many of those archivists who have felt that this ought to be altered and have sought the cooperation of the media to brush away the mystique that surrounds record offices have been driven to despair by the inability of the press and others to understand the work of the record office. If the record office is to be projected more into the public arena, and this is probably inevitable if it is to fulfil a satisfactory role in the stimulation of local historical studies, archivists must involve themselves in an exhaustive programme of educating the public into understanding what a record office is and what it is not. In some cases, one regrets to say, this will mean that archivists themselves will have to decide what a record office is before this educational process can take place. As far as the public is concerned, a record office is either a sort of manuscript museum or a genealogical information centre. There are not many, if any, archivists who would describe a record office in either of these ways, but there is clearly a division between those who regard the record office as primarily the council's extended filing system which, incidentally, provides a service to non-council depositors and readers, and those who would see the record office as a very much wider document

resource centre. Not all archivists, indeed perhaps the majority, have really decided in their own minds which function they are called upon to fulfil. When they have decided, and when they do want to bring the work and services of their offices more to the public notice, there is something to be said for establishing a 'friends' organisation which can, hopefully, undertake a good deal of useful public relations work. So far only two record offices in southern England, Portsmouth and West Sussex, have followed the initial example of Essex and established such organisations.

Another problem that the record office that wants to establish itself fully as the local coordinator of historical studies has to come to terms with is the priorities of its public service. As I have already indicated, the users of record offices are so varied and their needs are so diverse that it would be difficult for any office to satisfy them all. If a record office commits itself to the needs of the practitioners of local and regional history it will be aiming at providing a rather different service from that required, for instance, by genealogists, who are now the major users of record office search rooms. There are no easy solutions here. The record office must decide whether its priorities lie in the promotion of family history, which is, when properly done, a perfectly respectable branch of history, or in the promotion of local and regional history. What it must not do, and many have done, is to evade the issue and hope that in the long term it will resolve itself. Too many record offices stagger along from day to day and hope that decisions will make themselves. It is very much better to work out a programme, even if it has to be modified later than simply to respond to issues as they arise without any idea of an overall philosophy to guide one's decisions.

The future of local archive services

I suspect that many archivists who have read this far will challenge what I have written, not necessarily because they disagree in principle, but because they will suggest that many of these ideas are simply not feasible under the existing levels of record office staff and finance. They are right, but the rejoinder to that is that, on the whole, archivists have consistently viewed their services in far too limited terms. If local archive services are to be really effective in any sense, and one would hope that this would include the sort of participation in local and regional history that I have suggested, then they need more staff and more money. This could, theoretic-

cally, be achieved simply by increasing public expenditure on archive services, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that a more radical reassessment of the present situation might be both more effective and cheaper in the long term. There are a number of questions that need to be asked.

Are archive authorities too small?

Some record offices are desperately under-financed even when local authorities are spending a reasonable amount per head of population on archive services. In order to run an effective record office there are certain minimum requirements no matter what size the local authority is: the larger the authority the smaller the amount that has to be paid per head of population in order to achieve an effective service. District archive services can only really be justified if the district council is prepared to spend a good deal more than the average amount per head of population on such services, and it is a pity that the Secretary of State for the Environment and his advisers did not take sufficient account of financial provision for the service when they agreed to grant archive orders to certain councils in 1974. Although county councils have an automatic right to operate an archive service there is nothing to prevent counties getting together to provide a better and cheaper service, as is being done in South Wales, where the three counties of Mid, South and West Glamorgan operate a joint record office, and as used to be the case in Cumberland and Westmorland before 1974. There are particular advantages to be gained from the amalgamation of archive services, particularly as it need not involve the closure of existing offices. There could, however, be substantial savings achieved by the centralisation of certain administrative and specialist functions, particularly conservation. Indeed the savings could be used to employ more staff and to establish more branch offices which in certain counties, such as Devon and Kent, could clearly be to the advantage of both depositors and users.

If services were to be merged they would have to be managed by joint committees, preferably including some non-political members, and this would perhaps be an ideal opportunity to make the record office rather more independent of the rest of the local government machine. There is also no reason why existing district and county council services should not be merged in a similar way where this seems to be appropriate, with the district still financing part of the combined service and appointing members to a joint

committee. It is important, however, that where services are combined the archivists in charge of branch offices should be given a large measure of independence. Archivists tend to be autocratic, given the opportunity, and it is the inability of one archivist to work with another which is the factor most likely to stand in the way of a sensible rationalisation of existing services. Looking into the more distant future, it is probably inevitable that there will eventually be a further reorganisation of local government. This will probably take the form of the creation of regions, probably two or three for the south of England, and a series of districts probably the size of three or four of the existing district council areas. If that happens it is absolutely essential that archives should become a regional function with branch offices in each district or group of districts. If archive authorities were to become in most cases even smaller than they are now, their services would certainly have taken several steps backwards.

Can there be more integration with library and museum services?

Archivists are understandably suspicious of services that seem to threaten them, but there is little doubt that the substantial overlap that exists in some parts of the country between the three services is both financially wasteful and administratively destructive. It also restricts the development of coordinated local and regional historical studies. The problem is that for all libraries and some museums historical studies are an even lower priority than they are in record offices. This, of course, is a further argument for record offices taking the leadership in this area. In the national context one can only welcome the fact that the Library Association, the Museums Association and the Society of Archivists are trying to produce a policy document on the relationship between the three professions, although one doubts whether anything very concrete will emerge. There are, however, surely steps that can be taken locally if archivists, librarians and museum curators are able to see, beyond the confines of their narrow professional interests, the overall needs of the users they have in common (i.e. the local and regional historians).

In a small local authority there is clearly a lot to be said for the closest links between the three professions, as exists in the Isle of Man and the Isle of Wight. But where this cannot be satisfactorily achieved, and clearly it cannot in larger authorities, particularly where the three services are split between county and district councils, then it is important to provide adequate links between those parts of the three services that need to function together. In particu-

lar, there is enormous advantage in the local history library being in the same building as the record office, as it is in the Isle of Wight and Exeter. Where new record office premises are likely to be built or adapted in the future there is a very strong case for detaching the local history department from the rest of the library and siting it in the record office; its staff could either become part of the record office establishment, which might be difficult, or else remain part of the library establishment provided that they work in close cooperation with record office staff. The development of archive education services is an area in which cooperation with museum schools services, with possibly the sharing of non-professional staff, seems obvious. In the case of exhibitions there should be an overall policy in the local history field in which archive, library and museum services can decide their aims and priorities jointly. This would mean an extension of the existing policy in most authorities, under which the three services arrange occasional joint exhibitions on a 'one-off' basis.

Looking even further ahead, the whole concept of local history or, even wider, local studies, resource centres need to be considered. This may not necessarily mean common premises and should almost certainly not mean a common establishment. On the whole, archivists, librarians and museum curators work a great deal better together when they are not in the same department than when they are, and this fact has to be recognised, even if it seems to challenge the superficially attractive theories of those involved in personnel management. Common premises are, of course, convenient, as the example of Guildford, with its record office, museum and specialist library (all administered by different authorities but in the same building) demonstrates. But common premises are not essential. In Portsmouth a local studies centre was set up in 1976 by a group representing the archive, library and museum services, the polytechnic and local societies. It is still too early to judge what success it will have but the commitment to work together is there, even though there are still disagreements between the archive, library and museum services on some matters of common interest. One hopes that similar centres can develop in other parts of southern England in the not too distant future.

Is there enough public participation?

I have suggested at various points in this paper that one of the problems in record-office management is that decisions are often

taken in a vacuum and that responses to pressures are made on an ad hoc basis. If record offices are to decide their future policies and their priorities in implementing them in the most advantageous way then there is a very strong case for them to do so bearing in mind the needs of all those who ought to benefit. The only way for record offices to do this effectively is for them to create some kind of machinery whereby the needs of users, and the response of the record office to these needs, which is just as important, can be adequately discussed. There are a number of means whereby this can be done, and indeed in which it has been tried by a few record offices: 'friends' organisations, non-political representatives on controlling committees or, failing that, a record office advisory committee with a few of the political members of the controlling committee placed on it to hear the views of both academic and amateur historians. Most record offices are without any of these arrangements; one hopes that they might consider whether one or more of them would be useful.

There is a corollary to public participation in the work of the record office, and that is that record offices should be as involved as they can be in the work of local educational institutions and societies. Many record office staff are certainly involved, though too often this is in a personal rather than an institutional capacity. Obviously record offices would want to take personal interests into account when seeking to involve members in institutions and societies, but it is important that such involvement should be seen as an essential part of the record office's function and not just something that people do in their own time. The areas of involvement naturally must depend on a careful balancing of commitments and priorities, but ideally they should include active participation, preferably at committee level, in local historical societies, as well as lectures to such organisations, adult education groups and, where possible, students at local polytechnics, universities or other institutes of higher education.

Are there alternative sources of finance?

This may seem a strange question but, bearing in mind what has already been said about low record office budgets, it is surely a realistic one. Record offices may be able to acquire a better financial base in the long term through mergers and partial integration with other services, but in the short term the only way for them to improve their services, assuming that public expenditure on archives

does not noticeably increase, is to find alternative sources of finance. There are a number of possibilities: popular publications, such as maps and prints, though this would require initial investment of both time and money; substantial increases in photocopying and other charges; new fees for postal queries, already introduced by one record office in the north of England; fees for the consultation of certain classes of records, preferably those used by genealogists; conservation work for the public on a proper commercial basis; statutory charges for certain types of lectures or exhibitions to outside bodies. Archivists have in the past been very reluctant to charge for many of their services, and in principle it is right and proper that they should have taken this line. But archive, unlike library or museum, services are used by only a small proportion of the public, many of whom would accept the introduction of such charges if they were told that this was the only way of paying for a necessary expansion of, or improvement in, the service. How long can the moral stand of archivists be justified in times of financial deprivation? It would be important, however, that any methods introduced to achieve alternative sources of finance should be seen to offset the cost of an improved service and not simply to reduce the cost of the existing service. In the case of one record office in the south of England that charges fees for the consultation of certain classes of records, Canterbury, this income is used specifically to improve the facilities of the record office and the results will no doubt have been noticed and appreciated by its regular users.

An even more ambitious scheme to raise alternative sources of finance would be to encourage sponsorship. Already substantial sums are made available to museums, the arts and building conservation programmes by commercial and industrial sponsors. Why should not such organisations, who have frequently deposited their records in local record offices, be encouraged to contribute either generally to the improvement of record office services or more specifically to some particular record-office project with which they would like their name to be associated? If archivists really want to improve their record offices, and the services they offer, they may have to be prepared to drop many of their conventional attitudes and try radical and unusual experiments to achieve their goal.

What I have tried to present in this paper is a personal, and I would like to stress that word, assessment of the present position of local record offices and local archive services in the south of England, and the contribution that they make to the study of local and regional

history. There is no doubt that, whatever criticisms I may have levelled against them, the study of local and regional history would be almost impossible without them. I hope that this paper will encourage archivists to ask fundamental questions about the nature of the services they are providing, even if, after consideration, they find that some of the suggestions I have made are both impractical and improper. I hope that it will encourage local and regional historians to recognise the present difficulties of archivists, whilst at the same time trying to persuade them to play a more active role in the stimulation of local and regional historical studies.

Appendix: Local archive services in southern England

County archive services

- Kent:** Main office at County Hall, Maidstone, open Mondays–Fridays, 9–4.30. Branch office at Folkestone Central Library, established in 1976. Published guide to archive holdings (1958), first supplement (1970), second supplement in preparation.
- Hampshire:** Office at Southgate Street, Winchester, in the former St Thomas's Church, open Mondays–Fridays, 9–4.45 (4.15 on Fridays); 2nd and 4th Saturdays, 9–12. Church only partially converted and second stage of conversion due to begin in 1979. Office has recently launched *Hampshire Record Series* and is largely responsible for publications of Hampshire Archivists' Group. Office now incorporates former Winchester City Record Office.
- Surrey:** Main office at County Hall, Kingston-upon-Thames, open Mondays–Wednesdays and Fridays, 9.30–4.45; Thursdays, 1.45–4.45; 2nd and 4th Saturdays, 9.30–12.30, by appointment only. Branch office at Castle Arch, Guildford, open Tuesdays–Fridays, 9.30–12.30, 1.45–4.45; 1st and 3rd Saturdays, 9.30–12.30, by appointment only; closed on Mondays. Guildford office holds records chiefly for south-west of county.
- Devon:** Main office adjoining Central Library, Exeter, open Mondays–Fridays, 9.30–5; 1st and 3rd Saturdays, 9.30–12. Branch office adjoining Central Library, Plymouth, open Mondays–Fridays, 9.30–5; 2nd Sats. 9.30–12.
- East Sussex:** Office at Pelham House, Lewes, open Mondays–Fridays, 8.45–4.45 (4.15 on Fridays). Conservation and modern records sections in the Maltings, and there are plans to convert the whole of this building (currently subject to

review) into a new and much enlarged record office. Published guide (1954); original plan to publish detailed catalogues to major collections abandoned in 1971 in favour of less detailed handbooks; other, more popular publications, have also been produced.

- Berkshire:** Main office at Shire Hall, Reading, open Mondays–Fridays, 9–5 (7.30 on Thursdays, 4.30 on Fridays). Published guide (1952), lists of enclosure maps and parish registers, summary guides to additional classes of records planned. Windsor muniment room now a branch of county archive service but still run by honorary archivists and open only by appointment; holds mostly official borough records, handlist published in 1973; three volumes of Corporation Minutes from 1653 have also been published and further volumes are planned.
- West Sussex:** Office in separate building, though part of County Hall complex at Chichester; open Mondays–Fridays, 9.15–12.30, 1.30–5. Published guide (1954) now largely superseded by *Local History in West Sussex* (2nd edn, 1975). The office has an extremely ambitious publication programme, including detailed catalogues of major collections, documentary anthologies, reproductions of posters, engravings, prints and seals.
- Dorset:** Office at County Hall, Dorchester, open Mondays–Fridays, 9–5.
- Wiltshire:** Main office in converted factory on County Hall site at Trowbridge; open Mondays–Fridays, 8.45–12.30, 1.30–5.15 (9.30 on Wednesdays). Published guide in three parts (1959–69). Branch office, for diocesan and chapter records mainly, at Wren Hall, Salisbury, open officially Mondays–Fridays, 10.30–12.30, 1.30–4 (actually, most days, 9–12.30, 1.30–5). Published guide (1973). The county archive service also provides the Salisbury District Council with a part-time archivist on two days each month, and the records deposited in their muniment room may also be seen at Wren Hall by arrangement. There are plans for a new record office in Salisbury to provide better facilities for the storage and consultation of the records in both Wren Hall and the Council House.
- Somerset:** Purpose-built office at Obridge Road, Taunton; open Mondays–Fridays, 9–12.45, 1.45–4.45 (4.15 on Fridays); Saturdays (by appointment), 9.15–12.15. Annual accession lists published in *Proceedings of Somerset Archaeological Society*.
- Cornwall:** Purpose-built office on County Hall site, Truro; open Mondays–Fridays, 9–1, 2–5 (4.30 on Fridays); Saturdays 9–12 (except before bank holidays).

Isle of Wight: Office in converted former police station at Hillside, Newport, which also houses the former local history section of the County Library; open Mondays–Fridays, 9.30–5; Wednesdays, 5.30–8.30. No publication programme apart from contribution to that of the Hampshire Archivists' Group.

District archive services

Bristol: Office in Council House, open Mondays–Fridays, 8.45–4.45 (4.15 on Fridays); Saturdays (by appointment) 9–12; published guide (1971). Also guide to diocesan, capitular and probate records (1970), and guide to parish records published by Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society (1963). Annual list of accessions published in *Transactions* of same society.

Southampton: Office in Civic Centre, open Mondays–Fridays, 9–1, 1.30–5; occasional late opening by arrangement. Publishes *Southampton Papers*, though last one appeared in 1975, and contributes to publications of Hampshire Archivists' Group. There is particularly strong record office representation on all local archaeological and historical committees.

Portsmouth: Office in part of converted former barracks next to City Museum, open Mondays–Fridays, 9.30–12.30, 2–5, (7 on Thursdays, 4 on Fridays); publishes annually *Portsmouth Archives Review*; first part of office guide published 1977, other parts in progress; office also contributes to publications of Hampshire Archivists' Group.

Canterbury: Office situated in cathedral cloisters, open by appointment Mondays–Fridays, 9.30–12.45, 2–4.30. Office also houses excellent cathedral library and is jointly financed by cathedral and city authorities. Roughly 55 per cent of collections are ecclesiastical, 30 per cent are city archives and 15 per cent are private deposits. Statutory fees charged for access to certain records but income used directly to improve the archive service. From Easter 1979 the cathedral library will be part-managed by the University of Kent and a professional librarian will be appointed to work with the existing staff.

Bath: Office in Guildhall, open Mondays–Fridays, 8.30–1, 2–5 (4.30 on Fridays), when records officer available. Holds a few private deposits in addition to city archives.

Additional note

Since the text of this paper was completed, the Avon County Council has advertised for an archivist to establish a county archives service (see p. 212 above).