

The Assembling of the Public Records

“Your Majesty was graciously pleased to appoint me to the office of Deputy “Keeper of the Records, by your Majesty’s Sign Manual, on the 14th December “1838”: thus Sir Francis Palgrave, in the first of a long series of Reports. The first requirement of the Act being accomplished, the Master of the Rolls and his Deputy attacked without delay the two next—the assembling and housing of the Records and the appointment of ‘Assistant Keepers’ and other staff. For the moment these formed one large and tangled problem since the Records obviously could not all be removed from a large number of places immediately; existing Staff must presumably be retained in the meantime and absorbed gradually into a single organization; and the place and buildings in which these concentrations were to be effected had not yet been settled.

The Master of the Rolls (Lord Langdale) immediately took up this last point, pressing upon Lord John Russell, in a letter dated 7 January 1839 the necessity of diminishing the number of places (there were nearly sixty) in which the Records were deposited and of putting in hand the construction of a single Repository. The Deputy Keeper, under warrants dated between 10 July 1840 and 4 November 1841 took over some of the principal Repositories and Records specified in the Act, with their Staff and by 1843, had in being an organization consisting of a Head Office—the Public Record Office—in the Rolls House and five Branch Offices* under ‘Assistant Keepers’: at the Tower of London (in charge of Thomas Duffus Hardy); in the Chapter House at Westminster (Frederick Devon); at Carlton Ride, with which went the Stone Tower annexed to Westminster Hall (Henry Cole and Joseph Hunter); in the Rolls Chapel and part of Rolls House (Robert Palmer); and in another part of Rolls House in charge of W. H. Black, who brought thither the Exchequer Records from the Controller’s Office immediately on his appointment as an Assistant Keeper in 1841. To these was added in 1854, as a result of the Order in Council of 1852 and an arrangement of 1848 confirmed by a subsequent decision of the Treasury, the State Paper Office.

Of the shifts that were necessary in Chancery Lane before further concentration was possible we may say something later. Before his death† Palgrave had seen all save one‡ of the Branches completely cleared or in process of final clearance and the first Block of the new Buildings in use: and his successor (Sir Thomas Hardy) was able to announce in his first ‘Report’ (1862) that “my first act has “been to relieve the Assistant Keepers of their temporary responsibility, by “taking solely upon myself, as the Act of Parliament requires, the entire custody “and control of all the Records, subject to the higher jurisdiction of the Master “of the Rolls”.

Of the transfers of Records both ‘Legal’ and ‘Departmental’, and including

* There had in the beginning been nine but the Records at No. 3 Whitehall Yard, Somerset House, the Augmentation Office and the Office of the Controller of the Exchequer were removed to Carlton Ride between 1841 and 1843.

† 6 July 1861.

‡ The keys of the Wakefield Tower were given up to the War Office on February 20, 1858 and those of the Norman Chapel in the Tower were surrendered in May of the same year. On December 3, 1858 Carlton Ride was given up and by August 1861 the Chapter House had been cleared. Removals from the State Paper Office were completed in 1862, the Colonial Office, Foreign Office and Home Office having given their agreement in the previous year, just before Palgrave’s death. The Stone Tower was not evacuated till 1886.