

THE PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE

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The Public Record Office by Charles Johnson

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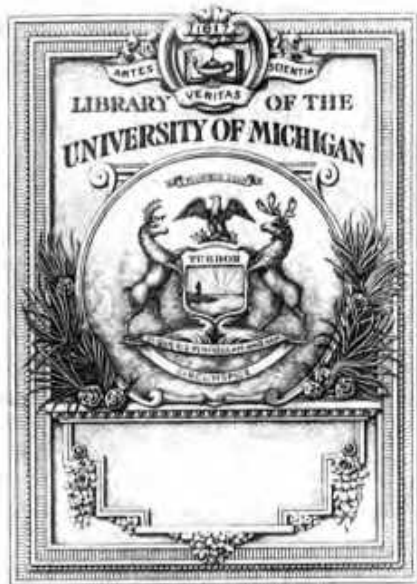
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**THE PUBLIC
RECORD OFFICE**



HELPS FOR STUDENTS OF HISTORY. No. 4.

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THE PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE

THE Public Record Office is one of the principal sources from which the writers of English, and to some extent of European History, derive their materials. It is, as its name implies, the place of deposit of the Public Records. What these are, and how the ecclesiastical historian may use them, it is the object of this paper to explain.

The Public Records may be generally described as those documents which accumulate in the offices of the various departments of the central government in the ordinary course of business, and are either deliberately preserved for future reference or accidentally escape destruction. These alone form a vast assemblage of material, and present an infinite variety in the degrees of their historical importance. To these must be added the documents which arise in the custody of local authorities in consequence of the provisions of various

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statutes. All these may fairly be regarded as "Documents . . . of a Public Nature belonging to His Majesty," and therefore Public Records as defined by the Public Record Office Act, 1838.

LEGAL CONSTITUTION.

Before the date of this Act, each department of State, whether administrative or judicial, kept its own records, and, if they appeared to be of sufficient importance, appointed a Record Keeper of its own to look after them. The Act made the Master of the Rolls, already the titular custodian of the records of the Court of Chancery, the actual custodian of practically all judicial records; and empowered the Crown to place all administrative records under his charge and superintendence. This power was exercised by an Order in Council in 1852.

The department thus created was further entrusted with the task, previously laid upon successive Royal Commissions between 1800 and 1837, of making the contents of the records accessible to students by the publication of abstracts or "Calendars," and Lists. A general record repository was begun in 1851, and now contains the greater part of the records in the custody

of the Master of the Rolls, and a considerable proportion of those under his charge and superintendence.¹

ADMISSION OF STUDENTS.

This building is upon the portion of the Rolls Estate between Chancery Lane and Fetter Lane, and is open to the public daily from 10 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. (Saturdays, 2 p.m.). It is closed from Good Friday to Easter Monday, on Whit-Monday, the King's Birthday, the August Bank Holiday, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day. A search fee of one shilling is charged for the inspection of each document in the custody of the Master of the Rolls, a description roughly comprising the records of ancient and modern Courts of Law, but no fee is charged for producing the records of public departments, which are still technically in the custody of the departments to which they belong. The search fee is remitted to the holders of Students' Tickets in the case of all documents of earlier date than 1801. These tickets may be obtained by all British subjects sending to the Secretary a written application stating the object

¹ For a full treatment of this subject see the "Reports of the Royal Commission on Public Records," 1912 (Cd. 6361, 6395-96), 1914 (Cd. 7544-46), and 1919 (Cmd. 367-369).

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of their search, and accompanied by a recommendation from a householder or other easily identified person. Aliens must, however, apply, in the first instance, through their diplomatic representatives. There is an official "Guide to the Various Classes of Documents preserved in the Public Record Office," of which the third edition was published in 1908.¹ Some of the more interesting documents are exhibited in a Museum, which occupies the site of the old Rolls Chapel, originally the chapel of the house for converted Jews founded by Henry III., of which the Master of the Rolls was *ex-officio* Warden. *N.B.*—The Museum is open from 2 to 4 p.m. daily, except Saturdays. Parties may be admitted at other times by special arrangement.

CHANCERY.

Of the two groups of documents accessible to the public in the Public Record Office those in the custody of the Master of the Rolls are more interesting to students of Church History, since they include almost all the older records. The principal classes of these are the records of the Chancery, and the three Courts of Common Pleas, King's Bench, and Exchequer.

The distinction, which persists to the present day, between the Chancery and the Courts of

¹ This is now out of print.

Common Law is that the Chancery is fundamentally an administrative department and only incidentally a Court of Law. It is closely connected with the King's private chapel, the Chancellor in the eleventh and twelfth centuries being of necessity a clerk, since laymen were at that period always deemed to be illiterate. The Chancellor wrote the King's letters and attached the King's seal to them; he was originally, in fact, the King's domestic chaplain and secretary.

Many of the King's letters had to be written in duplicate. If, for instance, an order was issued for the payment of money, a counterfoil might be required to protect the Treasury from forgeries.

CHANCERY ENROLMENTS.

At the beginning of the thirteenth century it began to be found more convenient to copy the duplicates on to a roll, and thus arose the great series of Chancery Enrolments which continues to this day. At first everything worth registering in this way was entered on one annual roll, but as business increased new rolls were begun for particular branches of it which threatened to overload the original roll, and this process of subdivision was continued as circumstances required. The original roll was very soon reserved for the specially solemn