

1. Re-discovering the English past

This introduction is designed to help those who wish to re-discover a world which survived for over five hundred years but is now rapidly vanishing. We speak of 're-discover' for a number of changes in the last fifty years are making that world seem strange and alien, a 'world we have lost' in the title of Peter Laslett's well-known book (Laslett 1965). This distancing is partly the result of technological change. As Marc Bloch observed: 'successive technological revolutions have immeasurably widened the psychological gap between generations. With some reason, perhaps, the man of the age of electricity and of the airplane feels himself far removed from his ancestors' (Bloch 1954:36). Since Bloch wrote, the pace has quickened and we now have television, computing, nuclear weapons and a host of other technological gulfs. The difficulties in understanding are also increasing rapidly as a result of recent attempts to bring England into the European community. The measures of weight, distance, length, the principles and institutions of law and government which were built up over a thousand years have been or are being rapidly swept away. Old county boundaries and old communication systems are being changed. Alongside these changes is a re-shaping of the physical landscape. During the last thirty years, many of the houses, roads, hedgerows, woods and fields have been destroyed, old town centres have been pulled down, ancient landscapes cut in half by motorways.

The difficulties in studying English history over the five

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hundred or so years up to 1800 were considerable enough even by the later nineteenth century. Often it was necessary to uncover modes of thought which were almost gone. Thus F.W. Maitland warned that those who would attempt to make a study of the ecclesiastical courts 'would have to learn much that has not been taught in England during the past three centuries' (quoted in Brinkworth 1943:95). The difficulties are immeasurably greater now. This book is meant to be a contribution to help those who wish to explore again worlds which we may not quite have lost, but are rapidly losing. It is to help the rapidly growing band of amateurs and professionals, from schoolchildren to the retired or redundant, who wish to uncover the workings of a past civilization.

Materials for the study of the English past

While a great deal of the material heritage in the form of buildings and fields has been destroyed and is being destroyed, much still remains. The same is true of the documentary records which are the subject of this introduction. The surviving English records are among the most continuous and diverse in the world. England is a small country, yet a number of factors made it create and keep more records than many large empires. The English have for centuries depended heavily on writing, on making records on paper and parchment. The reasons for this emphasis on writing rather than on oral tradition, as in so many societies, are too complex to analyse here, though historians and anthropologists have speculated on them (Goody 1968, 1977; Clanchy 1979). The unusual and early established central political and legal system, whose central courts and departments regulated life through written processes from the twelfth to nineteenth centuries, produced a vast body of material. Likewise, the presence of a landholding system that remained intact from the twelfth to nineteenth centuries produced, and retained for its later use, a mass of documentary material. These political and social forces which created the documents also led to the belief that old documents were still relevant to present

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needs, hence preserving them in an unusual way.

The possibility of keeping ancient archives was increased by other factors. England has never been fought over by large destructive armies in such a way as to destroy large numbers of records nor have there been violent revolutions among whose aims was the destruction of all records of the past. Furthermore, the climate and the absence of record-destroying termites make record preservation moderately easy. It is possible to pick up a parchment or even paper sheet written five hundred years ago which is in better condition than paper in books printed during the last ten years.

Partly as a result of this superb survival of documents, but also one of the reasons why records survived, was the very ancient and active tradition of antiquarian research in England. The emphasis on precedent, on the relevance of the past in law and custom, combined with curiosity and a love of one's particular corner of England, led to an intense and early interest in research into early documents and physical remains of the past. The very survival and study of local records tells us a great deal about the attitudes of people in the past to time, to history, to writing and to one's locality. Thus one could partly explain both the survival and the study of documents by a cultural tradition which for over five centuries believed in the power of precedent, in re-affirming the customs of one's ancestors, a belief that an understanding of the past would guide the present. One could also partly explain the tradition in social terms; the presence of a large, literate, middling group of professional people, clergy, lawyers, minor gentry and others, both in London and spread throughout the counties, has led to the formation of numerous local history societies and has provided an active hobby for many. The energies which in some European countries have gone into the study of the 'folk', of their material culture and lore, now enshrined in the splendid folk museums of France, Germany and elsewhere, in England went into the study of documents, in the massive collections of

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records in public, local and private collections.

Clearly the reasons for the compilation and preservation of past documents are much more complex than this. What is important for those setting out to re-discover the past is the fact that English records are continuous from a very early date, often from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries onwards, that they are usually well organized and accessible, and that there has been a great deal done over the last hundred years to put them into print and to provide guides to their study. In the rest of this chapter we will outline briefly what has already been undertaken in some fields of documentary analysis and some of the aids already available for those setting out to re-discover the past.

The English tradition of antiquarian and topographical research

In practice it is difficult to distinguish between general antiquarian interest in past documents and research on the records of a particular place or topography. The greatest figures in each tradition have been identical, from Aubrey, Spelman and Dugdale through to Maitland and W.G. Hoskins. We will thus treat the two streams in English history together. Hoskins and others trace the interest in topography and local history back to William of Worcester, who made his tours of England to note down local antiquities principally in the years 1477-80 (Hoskins 1963:15). If we accept this starting point, then, as Hoskins argues, the study of English local history and topography is five hundred years old. Since that date, and probably before, the English have been keenly interested in their past and in their locality. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there emerged that great tradition of topography and antiquarian research, a roll-call of whose names can be expanded in the work of Hoskins (1959:ch. 2), and on the antiquarian side in that of Pocock and Hay (Pocock 1957; Hay 1977:chs. 7,8). The great county historians included Saxton, Lambarde, Carew, Burton, Dugdale, Spelman, Dodsworth and Thoroton. The town historians included Stow, Butcher and Grey. The parish

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historians included White, Kennett, Gough and Lucas. The antiquaries included Camden, Aubrey, Dugdale and Spelman.

The early development of research into old documents and physical remains can be judged in various ways. As early as 1572 the Society of Antiquaries was founded. By 1696 there was so much work in this field that Bishop Nicolson could publish his English Historical Library. Giving a Short View and Character of most of our Historians either in Print or Manuscript: With an Account of our Records, Law-Books, Coins, and Other Matters Serviceable to the Undertakers of a General History of England (1696-9; 2nd edn 1714). By the middle of the eighteenth century a very great amount of work had been done and it was again surveyed, this time in Richard Gough's British Topography: Or an Historical Account of What has been Done for Illustrating the Topographical Antiquities of Great Britain and Ireland (1768; best edition 1780 in two large quarto volumes). The subject became so popular that a journal was started, the Topographer, 'Containing a Variety of Original Articles, Illustrative of the Local History and Antiquities of England...' (1789-91).

Work in the field of local history and topography, delving into and transcribing large quantities of records, continued apace through the nineteenth century. The nature and quantity of work published is indicated in four bibliographies. In 1815 Sir Richard Colt Hoare published a catalogue of his magnificent library of topography at Stourhead (Colt Hoare 1815), and three years later William Upcott published a similar work on English Topography, which provides a detailed collation of the works to that date (Upcott 1818). In 1881 John Anderson published a classified catalogue of all the topographical works in the British Museum (now British Library) (Anderson 1881). Finally, there was Charles Gross's Bibliography of British Municipal History (1897). Many of the works noted in these bibliographies were based on detailed archival research on private and public manuscripts. They often contained lengthy transcripts of original records. Much of this

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disparate work was regularized and systematized when the Victoria History of the Counties of England (still in progress with many volumes for some counties) began to appear from 1899, based on very extensive indexing of local and public records.

The tradition which began in the fifteenth century has continued up to the present, and this century has produced some fine histories of counties, towns and parishes. The authors have often used sources which were unavailable to earlier antiquaries. This has been possible because of improved indexing and arranging of the records and the growing number of aids for those wishing to work on records.

The indexing, cataloguing and publication of English records

Many of the great antiquarians and topographers were themselves collectors of manuscripts or in charge of manuscript collections. In order to use their own and the public material it was necessary to order, index, catalogue and, preferably, publish the records. There were thus from very early on a number of serious attempts to survey and catalogue the records. In the years 1800-19 Commissioners appointed by the Crown surveyed the public records and in 1819 their two large volumes of Reports with appendices were published. This work was later taken up again and amplified in the numerous reports of the Historical Manuscripts Commission from 1874 onwards (see Stephens 1973:6, and Mullins 1958). These covered many private and local, as well as public, records, the public records also being described in the numerous Reports of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Record Office from 1840 onwards and in the lists, indexes, catalogues and guides (1963) published by the Public Record Office. The massive collections of manuscripts in the British Museum, Harleian, Sloane, Stowe and Additional, were calendared from the start of the nineteenth century onwards. The National Register of Archives issued reports and a visit to it is a useful part of any detailed study of a particular place or family. Indexes to certain types of documents, particularly probate

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materials, have been published in quantity by the British Record Society. Since the last war local record offices have been re-organized and most of them now have published guides to their records, an early example being Emmison (1969). The great English libraries also have catalogues of their manuscript collections, for example those at the Bodleian, Oxford, the University Library, Cambridge, and the John Rylands Library, Manchester.

Many of the early antiquaries published substantial extracts from documents within their works. Reports of law cases from the late sixteenth century onwards were another source of original documents in easily accessible form. The publication of original documents was always one of the major concerns and thus publication has been continuous since the sixteenth century. But the pace of publication of original records increased very rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century. The texts published by the official public bodies, the Record Commissioners and Public Record Office, were then supplemented by the great national and local record-publishing bodies. Exact transcripts of particular classes of record such as court rolls or wills were made, often with a scholarly introduction explaining how they came to be written. Especially remarkable for their early date and quality are the publications of the Camden Society from 1838 onwards and the Selden Society from 1888 onwards, the latter under the inspiration of one of the major figures in the drive towards the use and publication of original materials, F.W. Maitland. Simultaneously with these national societies, there was a growth of publications by local societies. Among the earliest were those of the Chetham Society, concerned with Lancaster and Cheshire, from 1844 onwards and the Surtees Society, from 1835, for Yorkshire and Durham. Their publications were joined for many other counties from the 1850s onwards. A list of their works arranged by record society up to 1857 has been published (Mullins 1958), and for those who need a list published under each type of archive, for example publication of manor court rolls, there is an earlier list up to 1851

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(Somerville 1951).

Many other record societies exist to publish other kinds of historical record. For instance in the period 1834-44 there were founded the Camden, Parker, Percy, Shakespeare, Aelfric, Caxton and Sydenham Societies, devoted to the editing and publication of historical and literary manuscripts (Dorson 1968A:44). Thus a very large amount of historical material is in print. There have also been other kinds of publication. All the surviving Elizabethan records for the whole of a large circuit produced by the clerks of Assize are being published under the editorship of J.S. Cockburn (Cockburn 1975B). F.G. Emmison has published substantial extracts from most of the Elizabethan records for the county of Essex (Emmison 1970-8). We have published on microfiche all the surviving located records for one English parish from 1400-1750 (Macfarlane et al. 1980-1). National historians have also published selected extracts from documents as teaching and research aids. The most famous and earliest of these was William Stubbs's Select Charters (1870), which went into many editions. This covered the period up to Edward I. For a later period G.W. Prothero edited statutes and constitutional documents for the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I (1894). This was later superseded by J.R. Tanner (1940) for the period 1485-1603, which has again been superseded by Elton (1960). Alongside these mainly political and constitutional selections there emerged a generation later similar extracts illustrating economic history. Bland, Brown and Tawney (1919) published a set of documents arranged under such headings as 'the manor', 'towns and guilds', 'rural conditions'. This was supplemented by further documents partly edited by Tawney and Power (1924). These have been updated recently by Thirsk and Cooper (1972). These introductions to records dealt with one delimited branch of history over a limited period. An attempt to cover most kinds of historical interest over the whole of English history in any depth necessarily leads to a massive publication. Such a co-operative work was edited by David C. Douglas in twelve volumes covering the period 500-1914.

Guides to the nature, use and reading of English documents

The volume for 1485-1558, edited by C.H. Williams (1967), for example, is over one thousand pages long, but it contains useful bibliographies, as well as lengthy extracts from many sources.

Guides to the nature, use and reading of English documents

Nicolson's work of 1696 may be seen as the first attempt to provide a guide to those interested in using documents. This began a tradition which found expression in a number of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century guides which are still useful today. There is Richard Sims's Manual for the Genealogist, Topographer, Antiquary and Legal Professor (1856) and Walter Rye's Records and Record Searching (1888). Later a broad survey of the sources for national and local history was provided in Hubert Hall's Repertory (1920). There was also a simple guide for beginners in E.E. Thoyt's How to Decipher and Study Old Documents (1893). This early work has been developed in a number of guides, among the earlier and most successful of which is W.E. Tate's The Parish Chest (1946). There are useful guides by Redstone and Steer (1953), Pugh (1954), Celoria (1958), Hoskins (1959, 1967), West (1962), Emmison (1966) and Rogers (1977). The most comprehensive of the surveys of local records is by W.B. Stephens (1973). The longest and widest overview of English records is provided in two books by J.J. Bagley (1971) covering many sources with extracts from records, over the period 1066-1914.

These guides to documents are arranged either by type of document produced (parish records, probate records, lay subsidies, etc.) or by a general field of interest ('towns', 'education', 'agriculture'). Only one general author has recently written a survey, primarily of national records, which has divided the topic into the different institutions and hence the procedures which created the documents (Elton 1960, 1969). There have also been guides to particular document-producing institutions such as the Established Church (Owen 1970). There have also been a series of studies of particular records. An early move in this direction was

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a series called 'The Antiquary's Books', which included works on The Manor and Manorial Records (1906) by N.J. Hone and The Parish Registers of England (1910) by J. Charles Cox. More recently the publications of the Standing Conference for Local History, for instance the guides to ordnance survey maps and folklore and local history (Harley 1964; Phythian-Adams 1975), have been useful. Likewise the Historical Association have published a number of small pamphlets on particular records and topics, including two indispensable publications entitled County Records (Emmison and Gray 1961) and English Local History Handlist (Kuhlicke and Emmison 1965). Further useful articles on sources and methods of analyses are to be found in the journals The Amateur Historian (later Local Historian), Archives (Journal of the British Records Association) and the Journal of the Society of Archivists. The journal History also contains from 1962 some helpful 'Short Guides to Records'.

There are also a number of books which are more concerned with the methodology of analysing particular documentary sources. An introduction to the analysis of parish registers and listings of inhabitants and the method of 'family reconstitution' is provided by Wrigley and his associates (Wrigley 1966). A very useful glossary to the demographic terms and techniques is Bradley (1971) and to demographic sources and their accuracy Hollingsworth (1969). We have attempted to provide elsewhere a general description of how to reconstruct the history of a parish through the indexing and combining of various records (Macfarlane, Harrison and Jardine 1977). Probably the most interesting way in which to discover how to use such records and their potentials is through their use in works by local and other historians. Among the more stimulating recent studies are those of Britton (1977), Clark (1977), Hoskins (1957A, 1963), Phythian-Adams (1979), Ravensdale (1974), Razi (1980), Spufford (1974) and Wrightson and Levine (1979).

A number of the general guides to records include transcripts of documents (e.g. Stephens 1973), sometimes with