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*History in the Archives:
the Public Record Office and its staff,
1838-1886
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ON the eve of the Public Record Office Act of 1838, Britain's national records lay scattered in fifty-six metropolitan repositories administered by a bewildering variety of agencies, principally judicial and governmental. The Act was the first major piece of legislation to concern itself with remedying the grievous condition to which the country's records had for so long been exposed. The lack of a central administrative authority meant that Keepers of individual repositories received markedly differing salaries paid from a variety of sources. In the Rolls Chapel and the Tower of London, one of the two Keepers at each repository was paid exclusively out of revenue derived from the fees levied for searching and copying, whilst his fellow Keeper received a more orthodox Treasury salary.¹ The consequence of such diversity was, of course, passed on to the users of records in the form of high fees, and this was just one of the abuses to which the legislation of 1838 addressed itself. As early as 1800, the Cornish M.P. Charles Abbott had sought to publicize the parlous administration of the record establishments. His Committee had reported to the Commons in December of that year with recommendations that included the establishment of a central repository, a reduction in fees coupled with an improvement in salaries, and the publication of various finding aids designed to assist the searcher.² Almost four decades later, another Select Committee was to put forward similar proposals for parliamentary consideration in the wake of the six disastrous Record Commissions, and in 1838 these ideals finally found their way onto the statute book.

It was to be almost another twenty years, however, before monies were released for the realization of these plans. Despite a growing appreciation of the manifold value of the national records – a belief in their ability to establish historical 'truth', their triumphant procla-

1. P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice] 1.133, Memorandum, 1872/3, on the expediency of separating the office of the Keeper of the Public Record Office from that of the Master of the Rolls.
2. R. B. Pugh, 'Charles Abbot and the Public Records: the First Phase', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, xxix (1966), 69-85 (p. 81).

mation of the progress of the British people, and their commodity value – Parliament was nonetheless unwilling to commit large sums of money to the project which its legislation had set in train. The embarrassment occasioned by the cost of Parliament's own new premises was increased by the memory of the costly extravagances of the earlier Record Commissions. Public interest had to be tempered by economy, and in consequence the building of a central record repository could not be sanctioned before alternative cost-saving schemes were considered. The principal plan put forward by the Treasury was the adaptation of the Victoria Tower at the new Houses of Parliament.¹ Even after the abandonment of this scheme, little was done to implement the ideals of 1838. Henry Bickersteth, Lord Langdale, Master of the Rolls and first Keeper of the Public Records, was still wearily petitioning Parliament in the late 1840s:

The Records ... continue to be exposed to the same risk of destruction from fire and other casualties, and from want of space, and adequate means of arrangement ... [T]he public is still without many of the most important benefits which were justly expected to be secured by the Record Act.²

It was 1851, however, before work on the new central office finally began, though wrangles over expenditure and facilities continued both between the Record Office and the Treasury, and between the Record Office and its architect. Despite lacking appropriate accommodation, a central administration had been established immediately after the passing of the Act; and the medieval scholar Sir Francis Palgrave was appointed Deputy Keeper under the aegis of the Master of the Rolls.³ Palgrave had trained as a lawyer and was called to the bar in 1827, the same year in which he began editing for the Record Commission. His first book, *The Rise and Progress of the English Commonwealth*, appeared in 1832 – in which year he was also knighted. His principal work for the Record Commissions was the multi-volumed and costly *Parliamentary Writs*.

The first phase of building which by 1866 had provided the public with both the literary and the legal search rooms, ushered in a new era of record administration. Alongside the rationalization of actual record management, Sir John Romilly, Langdale's successor as Master of the Rolls in 1851 and thus as custodian of the records, initiated a series of ambitious projects. In the late 1850s, the Office

1. PRO 1.2, Treasury Minute, 8 Apr. 1839.
2. PRO 1.10, Master of the Rolls to Sir George Grey, 9 Nov. 1846.
3. Langdale was the Master of the Rolls, although there was no inherent legal reason for making him also Keeper of the Public Records. He had been a Record Commissioner and was asked by the Home Secretary to take temporary charge of the business of the sixth Commission after the report of the Select Committee in 1837. When the Public Record Office Act became law, Langdale was appointed Keeper, rendering *de iure a de facto* situation, because he had shown a degree of interest in record affairs and had been a leading mover in securing the passage of the 1838 Act.

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