

General Information Series



The Public Record Office: A Brief History

***A public record is a document created or stored by
a government in the course of its business.***

In the middle ages, the public records were the king's personal records, created in the course of his business of governing the kingdom. The king moved around his estates from day to day, carrying all his documents around with him, along with his gold, jewels, and other personal belongings.

From the early twelfth century, royal administration became more complex: Two great departments of state gradually evolved: the **Exchequer**, which dealt with the financial aspects of medieval government, and the **Chancery**, the administrative side. They generated their own records and, in addition, documents sent to them also had to be properly organised and recorded. Instructions issued to individuals and institutions (known as Writs), records relating to the courts of law, plus detailed accounts of royal income and expenditure, came to be copied 'for the record'. Copies were made on cleaned, dried and smoothed sheep-skin (parchment). For convenience, these copies were 'enrolled' - that is, sheets of parchment were sewn together to create rolls for easy carriage and storage. The person whose responsibility it was to care for these became known as 'Master of the Rolls'.

Eventually, there were far too many records for the king to carry around with him, even if, by this stage, the entire royal court was becoming less mobile, staying in only a few major palaces each year. The problem then was where to store the records. From the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, there were over two hundred sites in London and elsewhere in use. Many of the records, now on paper as well as parchment, were kept in appalling conditions where they were simply rotting away. In one instance records were held in a cellar previously used for storing fish and there are also accounts of bird skeletons and mummified rats turning up inside bundles of records!

In 1800, parliament set up a commission to investigate the state of the public records. This revealed the appalling state of neglect into which the nation's memory had fallen. It was not until 1838, however, that it was recommended that a Public Record Office be set up to rectify this state of affairs, and this was ratified by an Act of Parliament that same year.

In 1858, work was started on a purpose-built repository (the first of its kind in the world) designed by Sir James Pennethorn. It was built on the site of what had been the redundant chapel of a hostel in Chancery Lane, known as the *Domus Conversorum* - previously a lodging-house for Jews who had converted to Christianity. While the benefits of a centralised record office were evident, and quickly seized upon by the courts of law and other government departments, it was not, at this stage, compulsory for public bodies to deposit their records there. In fact, it was not until the Public Records Act of 1958 that the selection and transfer of material by all government departments was given the force of law in England.

This was not the case in Ireland, where the first Public Records (Ireland) Act, passed in 1867, declared that

'all Records ... of the Courts of Chancery, Queen's Bench, Commons Pleas, Exchequer, Probate and Admiralty Courts, and of the former Court of Prerogative, and also all the Records, Maps, Books, and Documents ... and also all original Wills ... and all the Bermingham Tower Plea, Pipe and other Rolls, and the Parliamentary Records, the Records deposited in the State Paper Department ... and all other Records ... should ... be under the charge and superintendence of the Master of the Rolls, and should be removed to this Office ...' (30 & 31 Vic. c.70, s.4.)

On the 19th November, 1867, the Public Record Office of Ireland was opened in a building to the rear of the Four Courts, Dublin. Many precious, unique and irreplaceable manuscripts were placed there for safe-keeping. In June, 1922, the Four Courts was destroyed by fire in the period of civil disturbance following the establishment of the Irish Free State.

This had repercussions for the new Northern Ireland government. One of the first acts to be ratified was the Public Records Act (Northern Ireland), 1923. The first Deputy Keeper was Dr D.A. Chart. Dr Chart had previously worked for the Public Record Office of Ireland and had an extensive knowledge of the records, including a familiarity with those that had been destroyed. It was he who ensured that the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland was permitted, by law, to bring in documents not expressly created by or for Government use:

It shall be lawful for any trustee or other person having the custody of any deeds or documents, which ... are fit to be deposited in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, so to deposit the same ... and any deeds or documents so deposited shall be deemed to be Northern Ireland records ... (Geo. V, 13, s.5.)

By approaching solicitors, business people, politicians and - particularly fruitful - the landed aristocracy, Dr Chart was able to compile a significant substitution for some of the destroyed manuscripts. These were initially held in the first Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, situated on the fourth floor of a disused linen warehouse in Murray Street, Belfast, before moving to the new Courts of Justice building, Chichester Street, Belfast, in April, 1933.

Today, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, housed in specially built (1968) premises on Balmoral Avenue, Belfast, holds 53 kilometres of shelf-filled records covering every aspect of life in Northern Ireland, a veritable treasure store of information about our past, protected for our future.

