THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF ARCHIVES

The HMC and the NRA

The Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (HMC) was founded in 1869. Amongst its terms of reference, as defined by its revised royal warrant of 1958, is the requirement to make enquiry as to the existence and location of manuscripts, including records or archives of all kinds, of value for the study of history, other than records which are for the time being public records by virtue of the Public Records Act. Since 1945 the National Register of Archives (NRA) has been the principal means by which the Commission has fulfilled its responsibility to locate, and to disseminate its knowledge of, archives and historical records. The NRA is not itself a record repository but acts as a central collecting point for information about manuscript sources for British history.

Development of the NRA and its indexes

The NRA is available for public consultation in the HMC’s searchroom in London. It now includes more than 42,000 unpublished lists of major manuscript collections, as well as approximately 150,000 further lists of minor or miscellaneous archival groups, totalling over one and a half million pages. These catalogues are usually freely supplied to the NRA by archivists and librarians in Great Britain and abroad, though some are compiled by the HMC’s own staff. Lists are received from record offices, libraries, museums, universities, specialist repositories and other bodies as well as individuals, families, companies and institutions. HMC is generally able to provide advice about conditions of access to collections for the purposes of research.

A system of indexes has been devised for the catalogues filed in the NRA; these indexes also note relevant information about archival sources derived from guides, annual reports, thematic surveys and other published sources. A major advance occurred in 1987 with the transfer of the indexes to a relational database, enabling complex searches to be made quickly and easily. These indexes have been available remotely on-line since 1995, originally only via a Telnet connection, but from 1998 also through a Web front end designed for simple searches, delivering results in HTML pages. (The catalogues from which the indexes are derived are not, however, available remotely in this way.)

There are currently four main indexes to the NRA. The Personal Index notes papers of individuals who can be traced in appropriate works of reference. Details of the nature and location of the individual’s own papers are given first where known; these are then followed by references to his or her correspondence found amongst other manuscript collections. The Business Index notes the records of over 26,000 companies or businesses, which can be searched by the name, the location or the nature of an enterprise. It includes references to some 1071 businesses engaged in building and construction. The Organisations Index notes the records of a wide range of institutions, including political parties, trades unions and employers’ associations, churches and societies of all kinds, and records relating to the armed forces, ships, turnpike trusts, and organs of local and central government. It has wide scope and there are currently over 84,000 references on it. The other main index is the Family and Estate Index (FEI), which records the papers of families and their property. It is currently undergoing development and has over 8,000 references. At a much earlier stage of development is an index devoted to diaries and papers of individuals of historical importance, for whom an entry in a standard work of reference and therefore a place in the
Personal Index has not been found. When fully developed, this index will allow searches by family name and place and also by subject, such as diaries relating to working life or travel.

ARCHON

HMC maintains ARCHON (Archives On-Line) on its website as an electronic directory of contact details for all repositories (other than those designated as ‘private’) which have collections of manuscripts that are noted in the NRA. It includes links to the websites of those repositories which have them. Repositories within the British Isles, of which there are more than 1,400 recorded, are listed alphabetically and can also be searched for by name or location. The establishment of the new Web front end to the NRA indexes has enabled them to be integrated with ARCHON, so that the results page automatically generated from searching the NRA indexes also automatically provides a link to the ARCHON page which gives the details of the repository where particular papers are deposited. Similarly, all ARCHON pages now include details from the NRA and its indexes for each repository.

The form in which information from the NRA indexes is presented remotely differs a little according to whether the Web front end or Telnet is searched, although the details deployed are the same in both cases. The Web permits searches on place names, organisation (including business) names and family names (for the records of both individuals and families). The Telnet option additionally allows searches of the Business Index and the Organisations Index by means of codes and sub-codes. In the case of the Business Index coding is arranged in accordance with the standard industrial classification, so that it is possible (for example) to access a list of all records relating to building and construction through only one search.

OTHER SOURCES AT HMC

The HMC publishes information about sources for British history in a variety of other ways. Its Accessions to Repositories exercise provides details of annual accessions of manuscript material to British record repositories. The information thus acquired is added to the indexes of the NRA and is also used for the production of a number of annual thematic digests. The HMC also publishes guides to sources for British history on selected topics, such as the papers of British politicians and, most recently, principal collections of family and estate papers. The series includes two business orientated volumes, one on textiles and leather, the other on metalworking and engineering. Other publications include: Surveys of historical manuscripts in the United Kingdom (3rd edition, London, 1997); the Commission’s Twenty-Eighth Report to the Crown, Archives at the Millennium (London, 1999); and the periodically up-dated Record Repositories in Great Britain (a handbook of addresses and other information about the nation’s more important record offices and libraries). HMC’s earliest series of publications, only now being wound up, is its Reports and Calendars series, which provides transcripts and summaries of the most notable contents of over 600 great collections in some 240 volumes. Also available are a number of information sheets, which provide introductory information about sources for the study of particular types of historical record. There is an information sheet about sources for business history. Many of these publications can be viewed on HMC’s website and all may be consulted in our searchroom, as may many publications of repositories and other bodies in the field of archives and historical research.
A recent and notable addition to the links on ARCHON is the Artists Papers Register, a detailed specialist register of primary sources for artists, designers and craftspeople in collections in the United Kingdom, initiated by the Association of Art Historians, and to be maintained by HMC.

Also available through HMC’s website are sections of the Manorial Documents Register, a record of the whereabouts of the archives of manorial administration maintained by the Commission since the 1920s. At present the entries for the counties of Wales and for Yorkshire, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, having been thoroughly revised, are so accessible. The remainder of the Register, which is in the process of revision, may be consulted in the Commission’s searchroom.

This article provides a brief summary of some of the work of HMC and in particular of recent developments concerning the NRA and ARCHON. Further information about the HMC’s activities is included on its website and its staff are always happy to answer enquiries about the Commission and its information and advisory services.

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