Introduction

The Plantagenet Acta Project and the Study of Charters

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I was deeply honoured to be asked to introduce the Stenton Symposium held at the University of Reading on 22 November 2018. That year the Symposium was devoted to the study of charters and to celebrating the then approaching publication of the Acta of Henry II.[1] The nine volumes of Henry II's acta, published by Oxford University Press, are an outcome of the Plantagenet Acta project, established in Reading in 1971 when J. C. (later Sir James) Holt was Professor of Medieval History (1965-78). I regard the publication of these volumes as one of the greatest scholarly achievements that I have witnessed during my long professional life-time. The well-attended Symposium and Nicholas Vincent's Stenton Lecture that followed it were both profoundly moving occasions. I introduced the Symposium and am writing this article as the Chair since 2014 of the British Academy's Plantagenet Acta Committee.

The edition of Henry's acta has been brought to completion by Nicholas Vincent's prodigious travels in Britain, France and elsewhere and his outstanding editorial and interpretative skills. His travels started in late 1993 when he was sent to France by Sir James to search manuscripts. Judith Everard was appointed as a Research Assistant to the project in 1998, a post she held until 2006. Since then she has continued to be involved in many ways that have involved research, editing, the compilation of an itinerary and the subject-index, and the proof-reading of all the volumes. She also serves as Secretary to the Academy's Committee. Many others have participated in the project

at Reading and after it was transferred to the University of Cambridge when Sir James (who I shall henceforth usually call Jim since that is what we all called him) Holt was appointed Professor of Medieval History there in 1978. All who have contributed will be personally thanked by Nicholas Vincent in the volumes' Acknowledgements. Here I will include only a warmly felt personal general thank you to all of them. A measure of what has been accomplished since 1993 is that the total number of Henry II acta then recorded as existing was just over 1,800. It is now more than 4,500.

At the Symposium and in this article, I have interpreted my responsibilities as being firstly to pay tribute to Sir James and to charter scholarship within the distinguished Department of History at Reading. And secondly to reflect briefly on the study of charters as it has evolved over the last half-century and to pay a specific tribute to Nicholas Vincent and Judith Everard and all the others who have worked on the Acta project. It is, however, only to state the obvious to say that the history of the study of charters in Reading cannot be limited to the half-century since the start of the Plantagenet Acta project in 1971. The names of Sir Frank Stenton, Lady Doris Stenton, and others, such as Barbara Dodwell, must be mentioned. Lady Stenton may indeed at one point have had aspirations to edit Henry II's charters. In a short article, a single illustration of what they accomplished will have to suffice, namely, the remark in a private letter to Sir Frank by another great charter scholar, Sir Charles Clay, in relation to his Ford Lectures, published in 1932 as *The First Century of English Feudalism*, that 'The use you have made of charter evidence is an encouragement to go on printing them'.[2] Much more ought to be said. Clay's remark is, however, especially useful here because it articulates the bridge that connects the editing of charters and the writing of history. Whatever we nowadays make of *The First Century of English Feudalism*, it was for many years an extremely influential book grounded in the interpretation of charters by a scholar who knew more about them quantitively and qualitively than most.

Tribute must also be paid to another great Reading charter scholar, the late Professor Brian Kemp, a long-time member of the Plantagenet Acta Committee. I will say more about Brian soon. But before I do so, I must write about Jim Holt and pay tribute to another

great charter scholar and member of the Committee, Professor Richard Sharpe, whose recent and sudden passing on 22 March 2020 came as a great shock to many of us. He spoke at the Symposium and could have contributed to this volume. There are several references to his work in the second part of this article and to his contribution to the interpretation of charters.

I first met Jim Holt in, if memory serves me right, 1973 when, as a very junior Lecturer, I was required to undertake the urgent delivery of a set of exam scripts from Cardiff to Reading. Jim was at the time External Examiner in Medieval History for the then University of Wales, which at that time comprised of five constituent Colleges. In those days the Externals had to read all the scripts and, in Wales, attend examining boards in all the Colleges. Jim met me off the train, walked with me to his car, took the scripts, and announced that he did not have time even for a cup of tea. I caught the next train back to Cardiff. The brisk conduct of business was something for which Jim was renowned. I hasten to add that I subsequently had many profitable conversations with him. And that I had already encountered him in print in the two books *The Northerners* and *Magna Carta*, both of which I read as an undergraduate, and which certainly influenced my decision to specialise in medieval history. Present in both is a brilliant awareness of the currents, sometimes on the surface, and often beneath it, that motivate individuals and create documents. Although Jim has no record to speak of as an editor of charters and texts, he was constantly reflecting on the circumstances that produced them. Thus – and for example – his article on the Assizes of Henry II in the volume published in honour of Kathleen Major magnificently sets out how they were created, and how they then evolved under the pressure of events.[3] *The Northerners* and *Magna Carta* were of course published while Jim was employed by the University of Nottingham, where he rose through the ranks from Lecturer to Professor between 1949 and 1965, another institution to which homage must be paid.

Brian Kemp, who sadly passed away on 12 August 2019, that is after the Symposium had taken place, was a renowned editor of charters. He spent almost all of his life in Reading, arriving there at the age of eleven, taking his BA and PhD at the University and then being appointed as a Lecturer, and retiring as a Professor in 2006. His

productivity as an editor of charters was prodigious, including not only the cartularies of the abbey of Reading, but also five volumes for the British Academy's Episcopal Acta series, and a collection of twelfth-century archidiaconal acta for the Canterbury and York Society.[4] He also published a very important book on English church monuments.[5] My personal memory of Brian, based mostly on meetings at committees and academic events, is of a congenial and helpful man whose love of learning was both inspiring and daunting. I readily recognise the qualities highlighted in the tributes and obituaries written since his passing, notably those about his kindness and his devoted service to the University of Reading and to the welfare of its staff and students, as well as his skills as a musician. When a history of charter scholarship in the twentieth and early twenty-first century is written, as arguably it should be, he is someone who will figure prominently.

While writing the talk for the Symposium, I often thought of it as not just as an act of homage to Jim Holt, the Plantagenet Acta project, and the University of Reading, but to other greats of the past. It is not just England and the British Isles that we must think about, but also Normandy, Anjou, Aquitaine and Brittany. The name of another great master of the craft, Léopold Delisle, the first editor of Henry II's acta, was in my thoughts then as it often is now.[6] For those of us who have spent many hours in the Salle des Manuscrits of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the walk past his bust on the stairs was always a reminder of the standards to which we must aspire.

It is important also to contextualise the beginnings of the Plantagenet Acta project. The 1960s and the 1970s were a remarkable time for the establishment of charter projects. The Anglo-Saxon Charters project was established in 1966, with the first volume being published in 1973, and the English Episcopal Acta in 1973, with the first volume published in 1980. All three of them were supported by the British Academy, as they still are, the Plantagenet Acta from 1996. With the 1970s in mind, I cannot resist mentioning that I was sent to France in 1978 by the Episcopal Acta committee to confirm that there were texts in manuscripts there not included in J. H. Round's *Calendar of Documents preserved in France*, a visit that was of huge personal importance. The prime mover behind this mission was Professor Christopher Cheney who, as Judith Everard's article in this

volume shows, also played an important part in the early development of the Plantagenet Acta project. I would also wish to place on record the importance of his encouragement to my ambition to edit the post-1066 charters of William the Conqueror.[7] All of the projects mentioned in this paragraph represented a cultural change that was evident at the start of my professional career and has continued ever since, namely, the shift away from reliance on the individual scholar's efforts towards the creation of research teams. In 2020 we have reached the point where all three of these projects are moving towards completion. The Plantagenet Acta project has, however, evolved very differently from the other two. It is old-fashioned in the sense that the edition – and the others which we expect to follow – are ultimately the work of one remarkable individual, assisted by a second remarkable individual.

A commentary on recent charter scholarship must also celebrate the continuing publication of editions. In close proximity to the Plantagenet Acta project, the acta of Constance, duchess of Brittany, whose first husband was Henry II's son Geoffrey (died 1186), were published by Judith Everard and Michael Jones in 1999.[8] And, although charters were not directly involved, Judith Everard also checked the transcription of the edition of the Norman Pipe Rolls for the reign of Richard I, a project which was for a time based in the University of Reading supported by a grant from the Leverhulme Trust, and to which Brian Kemp also contributed enormously.[9] Alongside his work on the Plantagenet Acta, Nicholas Vincent has published many books and articles devoted to the study of charters. While they are too numerous for them all to be mentioned here, it is irresistible not to highlight the volume devoted to an edition of Norman charters in England which elucidated one of the great nineteenth-century stories – some would say scandals – in the history of charters, namely, the removal to England of a large number of charters from the Archives départementales of Calvados. Some have since found their way to the United States.[10]

When it comes to the interpretation of charters, I will say that I am not going to become involved in the taxonomy of charter scholarship.

I am going to use the word charter as a generic term to include diplomas, writs, writ-charters, chirographs, notices, and whatever. The general points I want to make are fundamentally a development of the ones I made when I introduced another symposium, the Wiles Colloquium, held at the Queen's University of Belfast from 26-28 September 2003 which was organised by another member of the Plantagenet Acta Committee, Professor Judith Green, and by Professor Marie Therese Flanagan. The proceedings were subsequently published and contain contributions by many distinguished charter scholars.[11] The first point to make is that many charters have been published since then. For Ireland and Wales, the editions of rulers' acta by respectively Marie Therese Flanagan and Huw Pryce represent a huge contribution.[12] And for Scotland there is Norman Shead's edition of twelfth-century Scottish episcopal acta.[13] The acta of the great aristocratic families also continue to be published, notably by David Crouch.[14] The completion and accessibility of the ARTEM project based in the University of Nancy makes available on-line facsimiles of all original charters preserved in France for the period before 1121.[15] Since Normandy matters enormously to the subjects that the Symposium was celebrating, the appearance of editions of the cartularies of Saint-Pierre of Préaux and Mont Saint-Michel constitute major additions to the corpus of readily accessible evidence, with both of them especially important to the themes of the Symposium because they contain so much eleventh- and twelfth-century material.[16] The ongoing work of Richard Allen and Grégory Combalbert on Norman episcopal acta is going to make a huge difference. This list is far from exhaustive. Many others deserve to be mentioned and thanked.

At the 2003 colloquium I commented on 'a strong tide flowing in the direction of treating charters in the same way as what are broadly termed literary sources'. In making this remark, I foregrounded a statement by Paul Hyams, that 'charters often hide the circumstances that produced them'.[17] I now realise, thanks to an article by Julia Crick, that something similar was said by two of the great scholars of the generation that shaped my career – and also that of Paul Hyams incidentally – namely Frank Barlow and Sir Richard Southern. It was Barlow who commented that charters could not be expected to

perform their work indefinitely, but needed to be adapted to changing circumstances, while Southern wrote that 'in the twelfth century the historical revival is to be seen as a continuous process of collecting and arranging charters, transcribing documents, ...'.[18]

With these comments in mind, Nicholas Vincent's thought-provoking essay on the way in which the twelfth and thirteenth centuries made creative use of Anglo-Saxon charters, and also, incidentally, of charters of William the Conqueror must be mentioned.[19] A recent commentary on the composition of cartularies by Joanna Tucker has surveyed a lot of material, as well as examining a cartulary's dynamic function within the community that produced it.[20] It is a reminder that no simple explanation of their origins is possible. The early eleventh-century sections of the Worcester cartulary known as Hemming's Cartulary notwithstanding, it does look as if the late eleventh and early twelfth century was a turning-point in the Anglo-Norman world. Thus, in England we have the resumption of Hemming's Cartulary and that remarkable combination of law-texts and charters known as *Textus Roffensis*. And in Normandy we have cartularies from the abbeys of La Trinité-du-Mont of Rouen and Saint-Etienne of Caen, as well as the lost late eleventh-century cartulary of Fécamp, which Michaël Bloche's thesis will, when published, greatly deepen understanding.[21] A remarkable illustration of these processes at work is Kathleen Thompson's demonstration of how one of the monks of one of the new religious orders of the early twelfth century, the Tironensians, set out to create a cartulary which covered the first half century of the existence of the abbey at Tiron and its daughter houses in England, Normandy, Scotland, and Wales.[22]

It is quite wonderful when we have a narrative that describes the circumstances in which a charter was produced, a reminder of how much more we wish we could know. Thus, the *Historia* of the abbey of Abingdon, written in the 1160s, contains three writs, two of them of Queen Matilda and one of her husband Henry I, that deal with the grant to the abbey of building material from the island of Andersey in the Thames to the south of Abingdon, and eventually of the island itself. Read in isolation they are bald statements that the grants were made and confirmed. But the *Historia* locates them within a story that describes how Matilda came to Andersey when she was pregnant with

the child who became the Empress Matilda for medical care by doctors who included Abbot Faritius. The grants were made after conversations that the queen had found deeply rewarding.[23]

A narrative of this kind can also serve as a warning about how we should approach charters when we do not know the circumstances in which one was produced. Thus, in an article published in 2003, I drew attention to a remarkable series of four original charters concerning the history of tithes at Gauville (Eure, cant. Gauville) given to the abbey of Jumièges in the early twelfth century. The earliest of the four is a small chirograph that simply records a donation. The names of the donor's wife and two of his sons were added by a later hand at the foot of the parchment with the text continuing on to the reverse, suggesting that their consent may not have been originally thought necessary. The later charters record disputes that had subsequently taken place and introduce another son and a lord and also the memory of an aged widow into the narrative.[24] If only the first of the charters had survived or if the later disputes had not occurred, we might have deduced either that the donor had no family or lord or that their consent was not necessary, all of them erroneous conclusions, albeit ones apparently justified by the absence of any evidence to the contrary. This is just one case that reminds us that we must study charters with sharpened critical faculties and not jump quickly to conclusions.

The exploration of the worlds that produced the English writ and writ-charter will always be one of Richard Sharpe's great achievements. Thus, his analysis of the writs preserved in the cartularies of the abbey of Bury St Edmunds has illuminated not just how the energetic Abbot Baldwin strove to put the abbey's house in order after 1066, but has also suggested a pattern discernible there whereby every new abbot sought a confirmation of their abbey's rights from the currently reigning king, a process discontinued during Henry I's reign.[25] If, as he suggested, the same pattern probably existed elsewhere but is concealed by either documentary loss and/or decisions not to copy, then we have a revealing insight into the interaction of great religious landholders and the kingdom's rulers. In similar vein, his two articles on address-clauses, the second of them devoted to all the nations of the British Isles, with a short excursion into northern France, are commentaries on three major subjects, namely, the centralisation of

royal authority associated with the itinerant justices and the legal developments of Henry II's reign, cultural difference across the British Isles, and ethnicity. In all cases he identifies patterns that are sufficiently consistent for them to be meaningful. In the first case, shire addresses cease 'perhaps in the late 1160s, perhaps *c.*1170' suggesting that the officials of the shire court were becoming less executive agents of royal authority and more recipients of orders from above.[26] In the second, a study of the phrase *frencisce > englisce* present in some of the earliest writs of William I and its successor *francis et anglis* that continued to appear intermittently into the time of Richard I and John and in variant forms in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, such as, for example, *scottis et anglis* in the kingdom of Scots, reveals a long-standing awareness everywhere of ethnic difference and multilingualism.[27] There is here perhaps in the writing of writs and writ-charters an enduring sensitivity to personal feelings of identity.

The abbey of Bury St Edmunds in the time of Abbot Baldwin (1065-97) supplies a good example of the process whereby an institution kept its charters up to date and tells us a lot about the mental world of monastic archivists and their communities. This is also a case where a writ exists alongside narratives intended presumably to explain it which consist of an elaborate bilingual diploma that described and confirmed the result of the plea and a narrative in the *Miracles of St Edmund.*[28] When Bury had to face up to Bishop Herfast's threat to make the monastery the site of the East Anglian see, Baldwin, so we are told, organised his successful defence before William the Conqueror at Winchester on 31 May 1081 by reciting a detailed history of his monastery and producing a charter of Cnut, which was certainly amended and possibly forged, and a writ of Edward the Confessor, whose text may well have been adjusted. He also had a bull of Pope Alexander II (1061-73) apparently obtained when he visited Rome in 1071, but does not seem to have produced this in 1081.[29] The writ addressed to the sheriff of Suffolk simply says that Herfast had been defeated and that his successors should not renew the claim. Its text was nonetheless treated with the same authority as the diploma and the papal bull and inserted into the same late eleventh-century Gospel Book as them.[30] A lot more could be said about Baldwin's thoroughness. Suffice to say here that it extended to

having the report of a land plea involving Bishop Gundulf of Rochester that concerned Freckenham (Suffolk), which lay within the abbey's liberty, copied into the very same Gospel Book. He also learnt a lot from the practices at Saint-Denis, the monastery from which he was appointed to Bury by Edward the Confessor in 1065 and an abbey notable at that time for its recent documentary creativity.[31] It is crucial to be aware that the purpose of this dynamic activity was not just to retain a record of a decision in the abbey's favour in the king's court. It was also intended to sustain institutional memory should the issues be raised again. Albeit that we are not dealing with continuous prose, this was certainly historical writing.

This Bury St Edmunds' story is just one of a multitude that show not just how communities up-dated their charters, but also how they were using them to write histories – the word 'invent' can certainly sometimes be used – to secure new charters. One well-known example of this which involved Henry II is the dispute between the abbot of Battle and the bishop of Chichester about the abbey's exemption. At one point in a very long narrative in the abbey's Chronicle we are told that a charter of William the Conqueror was read out to Henry by his chancellor Thomas Becket and inspected by Henry himself. A likely narrative is that what purports to be the abbey's foundation charter was presented to Henry in Lent 1155 and that, some aspects of this having been judged to be unsatisfactory, a supplementary charter was presented to Henry in 1157. The originals of both survive, both written in hands of the mid-twelfth century.[32] These forged Battle abbey charters are another subject on which Nicholas Vincent has written.[33] Having recently been made aware of another copy of one of them which, on palaeographical grounds, looks to date from the early thirteenth century, I would add that the creative process within the abbey looks to have continued for more than fifty years.[34]

A telling statistical commentary on the Battle charters and their broader context is that out of the 206 known English charters of William the Conqueror, more than a quarter (fifty-nine) were written after the king's death. The most productive communities were Durham, Battle, Westminster, and Gloucester, all of which owed a great deal to him and to the many newcomers who arrived in England