

‘The *Acta* Project’ at Reading, 1970–1978

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Already officially in retirement when he took me on as a student in 1992, Professor Sir James Holt warned me that he was ‘not a very good actuarial risk’ for seeing my thesis through to submission. Happily, he defied the odds to guide my doctoral studies and then to mentor my post-doctoral fellowship at Fitzwilliam College.⁴⁵ After that, it was my privilege to work as research assistant on the ‘*Acta* of the Plantagenets’ project, with Jim Holt as chairman and Nicholas Vincent as director. The latter was then intrepidly searching out Angevin *acta* in all parts of France, the British Isles, and beyond, and reporting the fruits of his research back to the office in the History Faculty at Cambridge. There the collected notes, photographs and photocopies were filed, by beneficiary, in a bank of filing cabinets that took up half the room. From those paper files, Nicholas Vincent undertook the monumental task of transcribing the *acta* of Henry II, followed by the even more monumental task of producing the edition.

Having joined ‘the *Acta* project’ when it was in full swing, for my contribution to the Stenton symposium I thought it would be interesting to look at how the project came into being and its early years at the University of Reading. When the filing cabinets were in my care, I was dimly aware that in the bottom drawer of the furthestmost one lurked some old correspondence and paperwork, old forms and computer print-outs, but with the project moving ever forwards, there was not the opportunity or motivation to investigate its past. Alas, Jim Holt is no longer with us to recount it himself.⁴⁶

In 2006 the project’s tenure of the Cambridge office came to an end. By then, the contents of the paper files had been transferred to digital format by Nicholas Vincent as a complete preliminary edition. The paper files, nevertheless, still formed an important archive of reproductions of the manuscripts, from large black-and-white photographs of original charters to mere slips with photocopies or

microfilm print-outs from cartularies and printed editions. The destiny of this archive had been decided, apparently, at an early date – it was to return to Reading, where the project had begun. In recognition of the influence of Sir Frank and Lady Doris Stenton on his career and his lasting affection for them, the archive was to join the Stenton collection in the University Library’s Special Collections. And so one day in the autumn of 2006 Jim Holt and I visited the Museum of English Rural Life to be shown where the filing cabinets had been placed with Sir Frank Stenton’s library and office furniture, as he had long planned. It was in preparing this paper that I next returned, and had the odd experience of ordering from the Special Collections the same materials over which I had once enjoyed completely free rein.

Nevertheless, the materials had been well catalogued at Reading.⁴⁷ In response to my unhelpfully vague request to see a couple of old filing cabinet drawers-full of old correspondence and computer print-outs, what was produced was several archive boxes containing exactly what I had in mind. And the contents were more interesting and important than I had suspected.

It will come as no surprise that Jim Holt organised his correspondence with military precision. The main repositories were a couple of expanding wallets, concertina-style, with alphabetically-labelled pockets in which correspondence from the start of the *Acta* project was filed by name of correspondent – just as we would later file the acts of Henry II by beneficiary. And thus I have been able to piece together an outline of how the project began, fifty years ago.

While Professor of Medieval History at Reading, Holt formulated his plan for the edition of the *acta* of Henry II and his family. In November 1970 he finally put his proposal on paper in a letter to Professor Christopher Cheney at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge: ‘Dear Christopher, This is a very preliminary letter on a very large subject...’. And it was a long letter, two-and-a-half typed foolscap pages, which ended: ‘There it is ... I hope it doesn’t appear utterly lunatic. I feel confident it can be done given the resources ...’.⁴⁸

Cheney evidently thought it best to humour Holt. His reply was prompt, detailed and supportive but he left no doubt that he thought the proposal over-optimistic on all points. Cheney reminded Holt that others had proposed such an undertaking but it had failed to get off

the ground. V.H. Galbraith ‘was toying with this sort of scheme (with Ena as dogsbody) way back in about 1930, and I know Doris Stenton has had the idea very much at heart for a long, long time’. He suggested that Holt should consult Doris Stenton, V.H. Galbraith, Alan (T.A.M.) Bishop, Pierre Chaplais, John Le Patourel and Geoffrey Barrow. ‘... you’ve got to exploit the genuine wisdom of these octogenarians – you can’t afford to ignore them, even though they aren’t attuned to a Blitzkrieg of the sort you envisage,’ likewise ‘the two readers in diplomatic and the others I’ve named’.⁴⁹

What had Jim Holt proposed?

First, as to the scale of the undertaking, Holt provided his ‘rough and ready calculations’. For Henry II, he thought there might be 5000 (within a few hundred) specifically ‘English’ *acta*, but did not provide an estimate of the continental *acta*. For Richard I, his initial estimate was 600–1000; and 500 for the rest of Henry II’s family, including Eleanor of Aquitaine but excluding John as count of Mortain.⁵⁰

Measuring these original estimates against the current figures, they are generally under- rather than over-estimates – as Jim Holt would no doubt have been pleased to acknowledge. The acts included in *The Letters and Charters of Henry II* total just over 3300, plus 150 issued prior to Henry’s accession as king.⁵¹ Royal charters may be what Jim Holt had in mind in estimating the scale of the project, but no one was more aware that the Angevin royal *acta* included large numbers of written mandates of all sorts.⁵² *The Letters and Charters of Henry II* (Appendix 3) also presents samples of the English and Norman pipe rolls from Henry II’s reign, listing entries that explicitly mention the authority of the king’s writ (*per breue regis*). For the year 1166/7 there are over 250 such entries,⁵³ meaning that over the course of the reign thousands of writs were issued just in relation to the fiscal administration of England. In this sense, the original estimate of 5000 *acta* of Henry II for England was a conservative one.

The other ‘rough and ready’ estimates have also proved to be on the conservative side, largely thanks to Nicholas Vincent’s endeavours in exploring French archives. For Richard I, the figure of 600–1000 acts proved an under-estimate by as much as 50 per cent, with over 1000 letters and charters already collected in the draft edition. For ‘the family’ up to 1203, 500 was a reasonable estimate for Eleanor, the

Young King Henry, Richard as count of Poitou, and Geoffrey duke of Brittany. The *acta* of John as count of Mortain and lord of Ireland account for perhaps as many again, at around 400.⁵⁴

In his 1970 letter to Christopher Cheney, Holt proposed publication of the edition by the Pipe Roll Society. Cheney disagreed and instead advocated ‘two or three stately volumes – perhaps got up to look like the *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, which will be publicised and marketed and not just confined to the few hundred members of a society with an odd name ... But don’t tell Doris [Stenton] I said so!’⁵⁵

As to the duration of the project, the intention was to search the archives of England, ‘or more properly Great Britain and Ireland’, first, estimating that would take three to five years. That was to be ‘followed by a full search of the continental repositories’ before publication.⁵⁶ Treating the rest of the British Isles almost as an afterthought, and France as a mopping up operation tagged on at the end, may appear Anglocentric. Regarding France, however, there was already Delisle and Berger’s edition of the acts of Henry II ‘concernant les provinces françaises et les affaires de France’, containing nearly 800 acts of Henry II as king.⁵⁷ Hence it may have seemed more important to concentrate on the British Isles when the continental sources had been treated by a respected predecessor, and when, on the basis of that work, they were expected to represent but a small portion of the corpus. Additionally, in 1971, Jim Holt wrote to Jacques Boussard and R.-H. Bautier informing them of the project.⁵⁸ Boussard put him in contact with Claude Fagnen, who replied with a long letter on his work on the *acta* of Richard I.⁵⁹ In 1972 Holt also corresponded with Norbert Friedrich (in Essen, ‘West Germany’), who advised that he was working on the writs of Henry II, but not the charters.⁶⁰

For the planned ‘modus operandi’, a research assistant would be employed at Reading.⁶¹ An important aspect of the project would be ‘as far as possible obtaining photos/microfilms/xeroxes, not just transcriptions’,⁶² hence the need for an assistant to file them. A strong candidate had already been identified in Mrs Peggy Jefferies, ‘who is just completing a PhD. on the Berkshire gentry in the later Middle Ages’.⁶³ Dr Barbara Dodwell, then reader in history at Reading, was

also recruited as an early associate who would share the exercise of visiting repositories.⁶⁴

Evidently, all that was delaying the launch of the project was funding to engage the research assistant. With typical acuity, Jim Holt secured university funding for the post in 1971.⁶⁵ Dr Jeffries was engaged as research assistant with some tutorial duties, and the project was officially launched on 1 October 1971.⁶⁶

An application was then made to the British Academy for a small grant (maximum £200) to cover the costs of travel and reproductions,⁶⁷ a grant that was renewed annually until 1978 and has been awarded annually as long as I have been involved with the project.

Holt evidently warmed to Cheney’s idea of identifying the *acta* of Henry II with the *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum*, having first checked with R.H.C. Davis that he did not intend to continue the *Regesta* beyond the reign of Stephen.⁶⁸ Hence the project was initially named ‘*Acta Regum Andegavensium*’, later ‘*Acta Regum Andegavorum*’, a label that lingered on the door of the Cambridge office long after the project’s name had changed to the rather more accessible ‘*Acta* of the Plantagenets’. In November 1971 Holt wrote to Mr Davin, the secretary to the Delegates of the Clarendon Press, informing him of the project, which was to be published as an extension of the *Regesta* series, but that ‘it will not be ready for publication for many years’. Mr Davin replied that it was unlikely ‘that the Delegates will jump for joy when they hear of your proposed extension. I think it would be well for you not to hurry in making the more specific proposal...’.⁶⁹

Towards the end of the project’s first (academic) year, in June 1972, a newsletter was produced by Jim Holt and Barbara Dodwell, stating their intention to send regular circulars to interested colleagues from time to time to generate comment and suggestions. The document explains, among other things, the plan to arrange the edition generally chronologically, with ‘English’ *acta* not separated from ‘continental’. An appended ‘Schedule of filing and retrieval arrangements’ also sets out in some detail the ‘modus operandi’ devised for organising the collected materials.⁷⁰

A particular treasure from the project’s correspondence in this era is a handwritten letter to Jim Holt from Lord Denning. Expressing

his willingness to help with access to documents in his official capacity, the Master of the Rolls wrote, 'I have long admired your work and made great use of your *Magna Carta* for the 1965 celebrations.'⁷¹

In the summer of 1974 Peggy Jefferies was succeeded as research assistant by Dr Gillian Evans, who had recently completed her PhD at Reading.⁷² By December 1974, Evans reported, there were 690 items accessioned and filed. Most of these represented surviving original charters, with photographs on file. Evans seems to have revived the newsletter idea, with 'Acta regum andegavorum, circular no. 2' issued in December 1975. By this time also, orders for copies of documents were being sent to repositories in France, Ireland and the USA.

The Reading era came to an end in 1978, when Jim Holt was appointed Professor of Medieval History at Cambridge. This is also more or less the terminus of the archive of correspondence on which this paper is based. There seems to have been a hiatus in the project's operations for several years - no doubt connected with the challenges of holding the Cambridge chair and, from 1981, the mastership of Fitzwilliam College - until its revival under Dr Richard Mortimer as research assistant from 1982.⁷³

A postscript to this short history of the early days of the *Acta* of the Plantagenets project is to remark on a pioneering example of digital humanities. In 1987, Professor Thomas K. Keefe of Appalachian State University, North Carolina, held a visiting fellowship at Fitzwilliam College, no doubt at Jim Holt's invitation, while he worked on the project files, apparently preparing a digital list of accessions and database.⁷⁴ The archive contains a large bundle of computer print-out, printed in May 1987, with headings, 'Acta regum Andegavensium: Accession List: Data Base', prepared by Keefe.⁷⁵ Additionally, a printed email from Keefe, sent on 31 March 1989 to a @phx.cam.ac.uk account, explains the software he was using for the Henry II *acta* and how the data could be imported onto Holt's Apple Mac personal computer at Fitzwilliam College.⁷⁶

Notes

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- 45 At which point he insisted that I call him Jim, and, following the precedent of David Bates’s generous introduction to this volume, I will continue to do so.
- 46 But see, ‘Interview with Sir James Holt, 16 May 2008’, in *Making History: The Changing Face of the Profession in Britain*. Institute of Historical Research.
https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/interviews/Holt_James.html
- 47 University of Reading, Special Collections, Angevin Acta [SC AA], Boxes 18–21 (Project files 1–4).
- 48 *Ibid.*, Box 20, Letter to Cheney, 12 November 1970.
- 49 *Ibid.*, Letter from Cheney, 16 November 1970. ‘The octogenarians’ was Cheney’s jocular reference to the scholarly authority and experience of these colleagues: only Galbraith had actually achieved such maturity, Lady Stenton was in her seventies, and the other counsellors Cheney recommended were around his own age or younger.
- 50 *Ibid.*, Letter to Cheney, 12 November 1970.
- 51 *The Letters and Charters of Henry II, King of England 1154–1189*, ed. N. Vincent (Oxford University Press, 2020) [*Letters and Charters of Henry II*], counting the main edition plus Appendixes 1, 4 and 6.
- 52 See, for example, *Letters and Charters of Henry II*, no. 2647.
- 53 *Letters and Charters of Henry II*, nos. 3190–3438. More than the 248 items cited here, because several include mentions of two or more writs.
- 54 Information kindly provided by Nicholas Vincent; and see *The Charters of Duchess Constance of Brittany and her Family, 1171–1221*, ed. J. Everard and M. Jones (Woodbridge, Boydell, 1999).
- 55 SC AA, Box 20, Letter to Cheney, 12 November 1970; letter from Cheney, 16 November 1970.
- 56 *Ibid.*, Letter to Cheney, 12 November 1970.
- 57 *Recueil des actes de Henri II*, ed. L. Delisle and E. Berger (Paris 1916). There are fewer individual *acta* in this edition than appear from the numeration; calculated by Nicholas Vincent at 755 for Henry II as king and 92 prior to his accession: *Letters and Charters of Henry II*, Appendix 9.
- 58 SC AA, Box 20, Letters to Boussard and Bautier, 10 December 1971.
- 59 *Ibid.*, Letter from Fagnen, 15 April 1972.
- 60 *Ibid.*, Letter from Friedrich, 14 May 1972.
- 61 *Ibid.*, Letter to Cheney, 12 November 1970.
- 62 *Ibid.*, Letter to Cheney, 20 September 1971.

- 63 Ibid., Letter to Cheney, 12 November 1970.
- 64 Ibid., Letter to Cheney, 20 September 1971; Obituary: Barbara Dodwell. *The Independent*, 10 March 1999.
- 65 See 'Interview' (note 1 above): 'I received a telephone call from the Dean, saying can you possibly make a further appointment this year? This was gold. I said "Of course, yes", and I duly did.'
- 66 SC AA, Box 20, Letter to Cheney, 20 September 1971.
- 67 Ibid., British Academy application form with covering letter, 29 November 1971.
- 68 Ibid., Letter to Davis, 30 December 1970.
- 69 Ibid., Letter to Davin, 29 November 1971, and Davin's letter in reply.
- 70 Ibid., 'Acta regum andegavensium, circular no. 1'; letters in response from Christopher Cheney, 8 June 1972, R.H.C. Davis, 10 June 1972.
- 71 Ibid., Letter from Lord Denning MR, 29 November 1971.
- 72 Gillian Evans, 'Insight in the thought of St. Anselm', *Reading Medieval Studies*, 1 (1975): 1-15.
- 73 See, e.g., SC AA, Box 20, folder 'Correspondence - Completed'.
- 74 Ibid., Letter to Keefe, 2 June 1987; Special Collections at Belk Library: Keefe Collection: <http://www.collections.library.appstate.edu/rare/british/keefe>; The ORB: Online Reference Book for Medieval Studies, Editorial Board: <http://the-orb.arlima.net/text/board.html>
- 75 SC AA, Box 20.
- 76 Ibid.