

The Care of Quaker Records

Being the substance of a talk given by Felix Hull at the Annual Meeting of the Friends' Historical Society, held in the Library at Friends House, London, on 4th December, 1948.

GENERAL REMARKS

THE following notes are by no means exhaustive but may serve as a brief guide to the custodian of Friends' Records and others interested in the preservation of old documents. Suggestions made during the discussion which followed this introductory talk have been incorporated where it seemed desirable, and a brief list of useful books has been added.

The first rule to remember in dealing with past records is that the majority of them are composed of animal and vegetable substances and that, therefore, any place which is thoroughly suitable for human beings is, generally speaking, suitable for records. From this it follows that good ventilation and the avoidance of excessive heat or damp are first essentials, and in a brief review of the dangers and problems facing the keeper of old documents consideration of this requisite forms a good starting point.

VENTILATION AND COGNATE PROBLEMS

In a properly constructed muniment room, special provision and proper air circulation, or even air-conditioning will be made, for most, however, a wall-safe, cupboard, basement strong room or a chest, must suffice. The principal dangers are three: (a) damp, (b) excessive heat, (c) stagnant air.

(a) *Damp*. If there is evidence of damp only the most radical methods will suffice—generally *remove the documents* to a place of dry storage even if it is less "safe" than the other storage. If the cause of the damp can be remedied, well and good, but while experiments are being made irreparable damage may have been done. There are chemical appliances available which absorb moisture from the atmosphere but I have no experience of them so far as records are concerned and would not advise their use unless approved by some acknowledged expert.

(b) *Heat*. This is really the reverse of (a), a drying up of the tissues which form the parchment or paper causing the former to curl and become brittle and paper to perish. It is not usually as common a danger as damp but would generally attend proximity to a boiler, or might arise in an ill-ventilated centrally heated room where radiators are not regulated. Generally speaking, 60 degrees Fahrenheit is the figure to aim at. As before, if the cause of heat cannot be removed or ventilation improved, *remove the documents*.

(c) *Stagnant air*. It is not always realized that stagnant air is just as dangerous to the well-being of documents as is excessive damp and heat and it is far less likely to be noticed. Air that is not circulating forms an admirable breeding ground for all kinds of moulds and the same effect may result as in damp surroundings. The cause may be an unopened chest or cupboard in which event it may be possible to remove the records. In the case of a wall safe this may be more difficult, but at least have the door open as often as opportunity arises. Whenever the custodian is present this should be done to allow some fresh air to replace the old, far more damage may be done by being over-zealous in keeping the safe locked than by running the risk of losing a document.

VERMIN AND INSECTS

After bad air conditions the most likely cause of damage is from animals, large or small. Perhaps one should not ignore the human animal but he is so important as to warrant a separate paragraph below. One of the chief dangers of storing in wooden receptacles lies in their vulnerability to rats and mice. The proper safe or strong room is not likely to be bothered by these vermin but in any event the methods of dealing with them are well enough known.

A more subtle danger lies in insects which may have been brought in with the documents themselves especially if they have come from a place of bad storage. The principal creatures are : *book worm*—not a worm at all but a practically transparent little insect just big enough to see and of parchment colour ; *silver-fish*—met in nearly all damp, dark places ; and *maggots* which attack leather bindings.

The most sure method is *fumigation* by using *thymol crystals*. The requirements are a cupboard, reasonably air tight but which will take a 100-watt electric light bulb

or other heating appliance. The crystals placed in a saucer over the bulb are vapourized and the affected documents should be left in the vapour for at least 48 hours. In any case where this is not possible or whenever there is reason to suspect danger, a liberal application of *naphthalene* powder is of great value.

STORAGE METHODS

(a) *Shelving*. This will be either metal or wood. The ideal is wood but it is very hard to get and should be of *teak* or other fire-resisting timber. Open steel racking is an admirable substitute provided care is taken over the dangers of condensation. In ten years' personal experience I have never found condensation arising except where other conditions were bad, but if there is a risk of it, all shelves should be covered with a piece of straw-board or leather-board.

(b) *Boxing and bundling*. The smaller documents, deeds, and the like, will usually be kept in bundles (N.B. If you have received original bundles, these should not be broken.), but the time honoured practice of wrapping a bundle in brown paper is far from ideal. Although protecting the documents from dust it is liable to create the dangers of air stagnation and a great deal of time can be wasted repacking and rewrapping. A light leather-board box with full dust-lid and copper staples and with punched air-ventilation holes is to be preferred. These are cheap and can be made to any specification. One firm producing them is E. J. Bradstreet & Sons, Ltd., of Tooley Street, London, S.E.1.

REPAIRS

(a) *General advice*. In repairing, use paper for a paper document and parchment for parchment. Handmade paper (or at least a good rag paper) is essential. Only use flour and water paste to which a small quantity of boric acid and thymol may be added as a preservative. For documents, *never* use sticky transparent paper or chemical pastes or transparent plastic adhesive tape. Where writing must be covered, silk or cotton gauze should be used since this forms a transparent covering and strengthens the original paper or parchment. Waxed paper is an admirable wrapping for all fragile documents.

(b) *Repairing.* Small repairs can be carried out without great experience. Parchment documents should be flattened (use water freely on the back of the document and pull across folds). The edge of the new parchment should be pared to give a good gripping surface and both new and old well pasted before application of the new material. The document should then be left in a press or under heavy weights between waxed paper, blotting paper and straw-board press boards for 24 hours. For paper a similar process is indicated but very little water is required for flattening and in any case application of size (made from simmering parchment scraps and filtering off the liquor) is preferable as this gives the paper back its strength and quality. The piece used for repair should be torn, not cut as the torn edge is preferable for sticking.

(c) *Volumes.* It is unlikely that these can be handled by the local custodian, but do not automatically send a valuable old volume to the local binder—if repair is needed consult an expert first.

(d) *Assistance in repairing.* The Public Record Office, Chancery Lane, London, W.C.2, will always give advice on repair matters and can take a limited quantity of private repair work at a very reasonable cost. Most counties now have a Record Office with qualified staff who may be able to advise, though it is seldom that they could take on outside work. Most of the larger Public Libraries and Museums have specialists who can help.

(e) *Ink.* Ink that is scaling can be fixed by spraying with shellac, but it is unwise to use gallic acid or other chemicals in an attempt to improve faded writing. The result may be good for immediate purposes but almost always leads to the virtual obliteration of the original writing after a space of time. In using an ink for modern records it is worth noting that gall-iron ink is permanent and that Stephens' blue-black ink fulfils this requirement. Many modern inks are very far from being permanent.

ACCESS AND CUSTODY

A real danger lies in the willingness of custodians to lend documents to interested persons. If this practice is allowed then a careful note should be made in a Withdrawal

Register and a regular check taken of outstanding items, otherwise the matter may lapse and the document become lost. This kind of thing is met with constantly in the wider sphere of archives and Friends are not exempt from it. The ideal is consultation of documents on the spot but if this is not possible we must safeguard our records.

STORAGE SPACE AND DESTRUCTION

Increasingly it will become difficult to find homes for our records and the problem "What can we destroy?" will ever loom ahead. The following list is a brief guide of what should be *retained* in Friends records:

1. Destroy nothing of earlier date than 1850;
2. Never destroy minutes, accounts, title deeds, maps or plans;
3. Never destroy abstracts of registers, births, marriage or burial notes, or volumes of biographical sketches;
4. Never destroy records of "sufferings," ancient or modern, or removal certificates.

DISCUSSION

At the meeting some discussion arose on the question of the desirability or otherwise of depositing Quaker records in a Local Record Office and the writer was severely taken to task by certain Friends for his advocacy of this course in certain circumstances. I give below as impartial an account from both sides as I can, but it should be remembered that as a professional archivist I am bound to be somewhat biased.

The principal arguments in favour of retaining all Quaker records in Friends' custody seem to be:

- (a) that they are more accessible to Friends than at a Record Office;
- (b) that by parting with them we lose part of our Quaker heritage and that we should retain them in order to help in training our children in Quaker thought and practice;
- (c) that once records reach Record Offices they are not easily reclaimed despite forms of "deposit";
- (d) that after all they are Quaker records and of little interest outside the Society.

There may be other arguments of great cogency but those were the ones put to me at the meeting.

In reply I would say this, (1) that if a Meeting is fortunate enough to have the premises and an interested custodian so that records can be cared for and produced with adequate safeguard, then there is nothing against the retention of the records except that the day may come when there ceases to be an interested person who can and will devote the necessary time to the care of records ; (2) that accessibility is a purely relative matter—someone will always find the records difficult to reach—though it is admitted that a monthly meeting area is usually smaller than a county ; (3) that point (b) above is an admirable ideal but how often is it put in effect ? Against the arguments that records will be used if kept by Friends, I can cite a case where the records would never have been looked at had they not been deposited in a Local Record Office, since when various persons have found them of interest and value. (4) It is true that archivists do not like parting with material, especially if they are not sure of the storage to which it will return, but if documents are on deposit they must be returned if required. (5) It is not true that outside persons have little interest in Quaker Records. Don't let us be parochially minded—these are records of a very important facet of religious and social history and should be regarded as a national heritage, not the exclusive preserve of a "peculiar people."

Finally, I only advocated deposit in a local office where accommodation was unsuitable or insufficient and there was real risk, and Friends House could not assist.

CONCLUSION

I advise all interested persons to join the British Record Association (subscription 5s.), making it clear that they wish to belong to the Technical Section—which issues valuable bulletins on repair methods, etc. An enquiry to Mr. I. Collis, County Archivist, Somerset County Council, who is Secretary of that section would, I am sure, be dealt with sympathetically. Make use of your local experts for advice if needed, for there are many skilled and interested persons in the country now, willing to help where help is required.

Useful books :

Jenkinson, C. H., *A manual of archive administration*. New and revised edition. Pp. xvi, 256. Lund, Humphries, 1937. 12s. 6d. (Detailed and thorough.)

Fowler, G. H., *The care of county muniments*. Pp. xi, 79. County Councils Association, 1923. (A useful small volume.)

Plenderleith, H. J., *The conservation of prints, drawings, and manuscripts*. (Published for the Museums Association.) Pp. vii, 66, [3]; 5 plates. Oxford University Press, 1937. 3s. 6d. (Somewhat advanced and technical, but a valuable little book on repairs, etc.)

Accounts for the year 1947 and
Journal, vol. xxxix

	£	s.	d.		£	s.	d.
Balance brought forward	173	0	7	<i>Journal of Friends' Historical Society,</i>			
Subscriptions	35	4	7	volume xxxix	96	0	6
Sales	15	10	3	Stationery	4	1	7
A. Eddington Legacy	25	0	0	Petty Cash	5	0	0
Mills's "Orator's Library"	1	0	2	Balance carried forward to 1948	144	13	6
	£249	15	7		£249	15	7
	£249	15	7		£249	15	7

Examined with the Books of the Society and found correct.

BASIL G. BURTON.

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