

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 General.

The subject of the preservation of Government Records at Gibraltar is one which has cropped up from time to time over the past seventy years. Despite a number of reports and recommendations, the problems of adequate housing and systematic cataloguing of these records (which daily increase in volume) remain unsolved. Furthermore, the question of conservation (i.e. physical repair) of the more historically important documents in poor condition has never been considered. This report is an attempt to persuade the relevant authorities that the matter is important enough to merit adequate attention and funding.

1.2 There has been much talk of late regarding the preservation of Gibraltar's Heritage, and a Society has been formed with that aim in view. Unfortunately, such efforts appear to limit themselves to the preservation of buildings, walls and other artefacts to the exclusion of written records. Yet, as has been said (1), 'Archives are the memory of a nation - and of the communities, families and individuals who go to make it up. Records are the raw material of history without a knowledge of which we would understand much less about our human environment and national identity.' The "national identity" of the Gibraltarians would seem to be of particular importance in the mid-1980's!

1.3 History.

1.3.1 References to the state of Government Records at Gibraltar go back some seventy years. A Royal Commission on Public Records in the United Kingdom, appointed in 1914, extended its attention to the preservation of official documents in the Colonies and Protectorates. The fear was then expressed that documents of

great historical value would succumb to the ravages of insects and climate. In response to a circular from Downing Street, the Governor of Gibraltar, Lieutenant-General H.G. Miles, was re-assuring - the records of the Supreme Court were kept in a properly ventilated strong room, those of the Crown Lands (dating back to 1819 when the Commissioner for settling Titles to Lands granted the present titles to Properties) were in charge of the Government Engineer and kept in wooden cupboards in the Crown Land Office, whilst all other Colonial Official records, old and recent, were kept on shelves adapted to the purpose, in the record rooms of the Colonial Secretary's office.

1.3.2 However, the Government Engineer of the time, J.R. Crook, was not so uncritical! There was no strong Room for storing the Crown Land Records. He also suggested that the War Department, who held pre-1819 records of great interest, should be asked to hand over all records not of strictly Military value. He also referred to other records held in various departments and not in fireproof buildings. Detailed proposals for improvement by the Government Engineer came to nothing, and the matter was allowed to rest for the next fourteen years!

1.3.3. In January, 1929, Downing Street again raised the matter, asking for information in regard to the records of the Government in Gibraltar under the following heads:-

- (a) general condition;
- (b) whether bound or unbound;
- (c) whether registers or other summaries had been kept;
- (d) whether the records were housed collectively or otherwise and in what type of building;
- (e) whether the Record Offices were (i) fireproof; (ii) weather-proof; and (iii) insect-proof.

The suggestion was then made that, if local conditions were unsuitable for the proper preservation of records, these should be removed to the Mother Country.

1.3.4. The Governor of Gibraltar, Alexander J. Godley, re-assured the Secretary of State that the records in Gibraltar were in good condition. Copies of deeds relating to lands, deposited in the SUPREME COURT in accordance with local law, were bound annually, while the records of actions and proceedings in the Court were placed between cardboards and properly labelled. All the material was indexed.

1.3.5. These records were housed in a strong room built of stone and cement fitted with iron shelving and iron window frames, bars and shutters. The room was secured with an iron safe door and, after office hours, the iron shutters were closed. The room was weather-proof and considered fire-proof. The records had not suffered in any way from the ravages of insects.

1.3.6. The general condition of the records of the PUBLIC WORKS AND CROWN LANDS DEPARTMENT was good. Titles to properties were bound between two pieces of cardboard and placed in cedar wood boxes stored in steel fire-proof cupboards. Precis of Deeds relating to Lands, Building Applications and Correspondence were similarly protected, and registers of all records were kept. The entire collection was housed in a fire-proof, weather-proof room, and the records had not suffered in any way from the ravages of insects.

1.3.7. All other official records, old and recent, were kept on shelves adapted to the purpose in the Colonial Secretary's Office. A proportion of the older records were bound and proper registers were kept of all records. Since all records were in good

condition, the Governor did not consider it necessary to remove any of them to the Public Record Office in London to ensure their preservation.

1.3.8. In October, 1936, the Secretary of State issued a circular despatch on the subject of the destruction of out-of-date documents. Concern was expressed that in some territories the procedure for such action was not very clearly defined, and that although in the majority of territories the destruction of records required the authority of the Governor or the Colonial Secretary, it appeared that in some cases only a general approval was required, and that details of documents to be destroyed were not always submitted to the authority in question. Colonial Governments were reminded of the importance of taking steps to secure that, when consideration was being given to the elimination of out-of-date records, careful regard should be had not only to their official utility but to their actual or potential historic interest as well. The destruction of records should therefore require the approval of some responsible authority to which details of the documents to be destroyed should first be submitted.

1.3.9. Earlier circulars on the subject of preservation of records were underlined with the interesting statement that: 'The preservation of its records in a satisfactory state must be regarded as one of the first duties of a Colonial Government, a duty which derives greater urgency from the fact that delay in the institution of suitable protective measures may and does lead to the inevitable loss of documents of value.' (2) Once again, the alternative of transferring documents to the Public Record Office was mentioned.

1.3.10. As a result of this Circular, the Colonial Secretary of

Gibraltar, Alexander Beattie, informed all Government Departments that in future no documents were to be destroyed except with the approval of the Governor. Heads of Department would be required to submit to the Colonial Secretary, every three years, a list of documents recommended for the Governor's approval of destruction. When preparing such lists, Heads of Department were asked to pay careful regard, not only to the official utility of documents in their charge, but also to their actual or potential historic interest.

1.3.11. Heads of Department were also reminded of the great importance of preserving valuable records in a satisfactory condition. Where necessary, suitable remedial measures should be taken, both by way of restoration of records in a bad state of repair and by measures for the suitable housing and preservation of these documents in the future.

1.3.12. Other matters then seemed to get in the way of such laudable sentiments. On the 12th. April, 1938, the Colonial Secretary was informed that the matter had been kept pending due to the loss of the key to the strong Room! New keys had now been made, but action on the Secretary of State's circular of 1936 would have to wait until 'we are less busy.' The Second World War (1939-1945) pushed the subject well into the background!

1.3.13. After the War some attempt was made to catalogue the books and documents. In August, 1946, Mr. B.M. Miles, a temporary clerk in the Commissioner for Lands and Works Department, produced a list which is reproduced in full in Appendix A.

1.3.14. Another fourteen years elapsed, during which time little attention appears to have been given to the preservation and proper storage of Gibraltar's historical records. The pressure for office space relegated some of these documents to a basement in Alameda

House, others ended up in rooms at Naval Hospital Hill, whilst many others remained scattered in various offices.

1.3.15. On the 20th. September, 1960, the Attorney-General of Gibraltar informed the Colonial Secretary that he had in his office a quantity of old documents and opinion books, some of them of considerable age, and also probably of some historical value.

1.3.16. He felt that other departments were in a similar position, and he had noticed a number of books and diaries up to two hundred years old, lying in cases in the office of the Civil Engineer. He feared that there might be a considerable loss of valuable historical documents, unless the whole question of the preservation of Government archives was systematically dealt with. He therefore recommended that special accommodation, with adequate storage conditions as to temperature and lack of dampness, should be provided for such records.

1.3.17. He further recommended the employment of a qualified archivist to set matters in order. He concluded by saying that it grieved him to see old papers being destroyed, lost or deteriorating.

1.3.18. Mr. M. McEwen of the Gibraltar Museum was then given the task of examining the old records of the Secretariat to see what should be retained. He subsequently reported that he could not cope with the task! The Attorney General's recommendations were not implemented, and the Government records, some of considerable age, continued to be housed in various Government offices and stores under unsuitable conditions.

1.3.19. The two primary needs remained unsatisfied: (a) the provision of suitable accommodation where the required conditions as to temperature and lack of dampness could be met, and where all documents could be kept together; and (b) the appointment of a

qualified archivist to sort out the documents with a view to destroying what was worthless and preserving what was of value, and indexing the latter to make them available for the purposes of research.

1.3.20. The political events of the early 1960's in the shape of renewed Spanish pressure for the return of Gibraltar highlighted the importance and value of these hitherto forgotten and abandoned documents. Material relating to the Neutral Ground, jurisdiction within and definition of Gibraltar waters, etc. etc. were suddenly required in the preparation of Gibraltar's case to be presented at the United Nations. The task could not be carried out efficiently, given the chaotic state of the papers!

1.3.21. In January, 1966, Gibraltar's Council of Ministers, considering future staffing arrangements at the Gibraltar Museum, suggested that any appointee to the post of Curator might be required to act as archivist as well. By June, the matter of finding suitable accommodation for the records was again under consideration, and efforts were being made to sort out the 'Special Files' at Alameda House and the other old papers at the Naval Hospital Hill store.

1.3.22. It was then left to Dr. Howes, who arrived in Gibraltar in July, 1967, to study the matter and make recommendations to the Government. He suggested that earnest consideration should be given to making a start on the examination and conservation of the documents as soon as possible for two reasons:-

(a) because they might yield material of vital importance to Gibraltar politically, and (b) because of their inherent historical interest and value.

1.3.23. He then made the following recommendations:-

- (a) the period to be covered should be from the earliest times to 1920 (records from 1921 onwards were kept in the Secretariat and were already fully indexed);
- (b) the volume of records in existence should be assessed, and centralisation of them should be considered;
- (c) adequate storage space should be found;
- (d) a preliminary sorting should be carried out and a register prepared of available records suitable for preservation;
- (e) the considerable quantity of loose papers should be sorted out by dates;
- (f) once the preliminary sorting had been completed and a register compiled, a more detailed examination should be carried out with the object of preparing a detailed index. During the course of this examination loose papers, already sorted by dates, should as far as possible be further sorted by subject-matter and collected into files. Letters recorded in letter books should be indexed and cross-referenced as necessary.
- (g) the installation of air conditioning equipment;
- (h) the provision of fireproof safes for the most important records;
- (i) the application of preservatives against humidity and moulds;
- (j) the provision of steel shelving; and
- (k) the provision of metal containers.

1.3.24. In September, 1968, the possibility of the Museum Curator taking on responsibility for the records was again raised. It was suggested that the Museum Committee "and such voluntary helpers as may be able to recruit (e.g. from the Gibraltar Society and perhaps some teachers)" might set to work on the task. (3).

1.3.25. There followed a report by D.C. Devenish, Curator/Archivist of the Gibraltar Museum (reproduced in full at Appendix B). Once again the recommendation was made that adequate space for the storage of the archives ought to be provided: a large floor area of over 1,000 square feet was suggested. Regarding the material itself, once more the need for sorting, indexing and cataloguing was stressed.

1.3.26. One new area of work for any potential archivist introduced at this stage was "helping students and answering enquiries." (4)

1.3.27. There was a departure from earlier comments concerning STAFFING. "It is obvious that the work involved is far too much for part time or voluntary work. It is clearly a full time job for one, or preferably, more than one person permanently." (5)

1.3.28. A further interesting comment followed: "There seems no good reason why archives should come under the Museum." (6) On future development, it was also suggested that the archives might in time also house an adequate reference library.

1.3.29. The Permanent Secretary's observations on the Devenish Report were that:-

(a) the position was not as bad as it sounded in that much of the material alluded to was available in the Commonwealth office records and in the Public Record office, although there were still "a lot of things to be done before we can be in any way satisfied that we are doing all that we should to preserve and store our archives"; (7)

(b) the Curator of the Museum could not be expected to take on archives as well;

(c) the Commonwealth Office might be asked to send someone to

Gibraltar to look at the problem on the spot and advise as to what should be done.

1.3.30. It was subsequently decided that the idea of bringing someone to Gibraltar to advise should be deferred until at least some progress had been made in sorting out the material available, particularly that stored at Naval Hospital Hill.

1.3.31. At the beginning of 1969 Council of Ministers agreed that a temporary archivist should be appointed. The Museum Committee, when consulted, agreed that other matters, such as accommodation, future staffing arrangements, expert advice, etc., should be considered at a later stage.

1.3.32. When the post was advertised, on the 31st. January, 1969, the main duties of the temporary archivist-designate were stated to be "to sort out and list, in the first instance, a large quantity of old documents and Government records which are at present lying in various offices and stores." Mr. J.W.V. Cumming, a retired Civil Servant aged 61, was subsequently appointed to the post, which was later made permanent. Premises in the Convent Yard were provided for the new archivist.

1.3.33. Mr. Cumming held the post until 1985, and during his tenure of office the nature of the work changed from that originally called for. The primary duty of sorting out and listing documents remained largely undone, the reason given for this being the lack of suitable storage space. However, a Staff inspection report in 1980 attributed the main factor for the delay to the way that the post had moved away from its original purpose of sorting and listing to work of a broadly advisory nature such as providing assistance to researchers, students and other persons seeking historical information about Gibraltar.

1.3.34. Thus most of the loose papers and some bound volumes remained in the store at Naval Hospital Hill gathering more and more dust! On a more positive side, material stored at the City Hall, relating to the Board of Sanitary Commissioners and the City Council of Gibraltar were added to the collection at the Convent Yard. These very important documents had at one stage been subjected to flooding and bad storage conditions. Other important volumes, scattered in various offices, were also gathered together and housed in the Convent Yard premises.

1.3.35. The same Staff inspection report concluded with the recommendation that the post should be withdrawn, custody of the records and responsibility for answering enquiries and similar work being passed to the Museum Curator/Archivist.

1.3.36. It seems that this Report was not submitted and matters continued as before until 1982 when consideration was given to the matter of Mr. Cumming's retirement and the appointment of a successor. Once again the idea that the archives should come under the Museum Curator was mooted, though it was also questioned whether he would have the spare capacity to take over the additional work. Another suggestion made was that the Mackintosh Hall Librarian might assist in the matter of cataloguing. The issue dragged on for a further two years!

1.3.37. In September, 1984, the post was advertised with a new job description which encompassed a wide-ranging set of duties, some of them impossible to achieve given the lack of facilities, staff and available space! (Appendix C).

1.3.38. Mr. T.J. Finlayson, a History Graduate with twenty three years teaching experience, was appointed to the post in September, 1985. Since then, the new Archivist has turned his attention to

the mammoth tasks of sorting out and listing the volumes in the Convent Yard premises, wading through the thousands of loose papers in the Naval Hospital Hill store, conducting some research into the history of Gibraltar, and at the same time attempting to deal with the enquiries which come into the office from time to time, both from local sources and from overseas.

1.3.39. In the summer of 1986, the Archivist attended an eleven-week course at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts on 'The Conservation of Archival and Library Materials'. This was followed by attendance at the Society of Archivists' annual conference for Conservators, held in Edinburgh, and by a two-week attachment to the Public Record Office.

1.3.40. This Course opened up a whole new area of potential development in the conservation (repair) of paper documents and highlighted many of the shortcomings which have been allowed to persist in the Gibraltar Government Archives. The report which follows has been largely influenced by the experiences of the current Archivist during these three months.