

[Paul Rock](#)

'The dreadful flood of documents': the 1958 Public Record Act and its aftermath: part 2: after-effects

**Article (Published version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Rock, Paul (2017) *'The dreadful flood of documents': the 1958 Public Record Act and its aftermath: part 2: after-effects*. [Archives: The Journal of the British Records Association](#), 52 (134). ISSN 0003-9535

© 2017 [British Records Association](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/84279/>

Available in LSE Research Online: September 2017

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

‘THE DREADFUL FLOOD OF DOCUMENTS’: THE 1958 PUBLIC RECORD ACT AND ITS AFTERMATH

PART 2: AFTER-EFFECTS

BY PAUL ROCK*

Part 1 of this double-barrelled article described the genealogy of the 1958 Public Records Act, which was enacted at the very opening of the history of criminal justice upon which David Downes, Tim Newburn and I had embarked and which was still in force whilst we worked. It related how a concatenation of events – a prodigiously increasing accumulation of official papers generated by the swelling bureaucracy of an ever more busy state; the need for effecting economies at a time of austerity; and the application of policies driven by a new organisation and methods team at the Treasury – made it seem imperative radically to control the flow of records and restrict the numbers that were retained. Part 2 describes the implementation of the Act, the reorganisation of the Public Record Office (PRO) and the manner in which concern about what was called a ‘dreadful flood of documents’ continued to press hard on record retention policies.

Keywords: 1958 Public Record Act, record management, ‘weeding’, The National Archives, criminal justice

The 1958 Public Record Act¹

Readers are reminded that this is the second part of an article inspired by the problems encountered by myself, David Downes and Tim Newburn in the course of research into the history of the modern criminal justice system. We identified the source of those problems as the operation of the 1958 Public Record Act and the system of appraisal implemented as a result of the Grigg Report of 1954.²

The Act transferred the management of the public records to the lord chancellor, who, as head of the judiciary, was thought best equipped to assume responsibility for legal records; and a newly-created keeper of the public records (appointed from 1 January 1959).³ They were to be assisted by an Advisory Council on Public Records, who would be required to sift through ‘mountains of records’, and not only decide

*PAUL ROCK is emeritus professor of sociology at the London School of Economics. He is grateful to Elizabeth Shepherd, Hans Rasmussen, editor and the anonymous reviewers of *Archives* for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ The Public Records Act 1958, Chapter 51: An Act to make new provision with respect to public records and the Public Record Office, and for connected purposes.

² See <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/best-practice-guide-appraising-and-selecting.pdf> which states that ‘For over 50 years public records bodies have followed the system of appraisal established by the Grigg Report in 1954.’

³ PREM 11/911, Notes for Supplementaries, draft statement for the Prime Minister, 1 July 1955. The master of the rolls wrote to Sir James Grigg on 29 Nov. 1955 to say that ‘One reason which, I confess, much influenced me (and I think Bridges also) was the position of the Legal Records. It seemed to me that any difficulties of segregation would be best dealt with if the Lord Chancellor were Head of All Records ...’ The decision had been taken against Sir James’ advice. He told the Master of the Rolls in a note of 12 Mar. 1957 that ‘As you know I was not consulted with the Treasury decided to make the Lord Chancellor the Minister responsible for departmental records and I do not agree with the decision’. PJJG10(2) Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge.

which were to be retained but also control what Theodore Plucknett, professor of legal history at the London School of Economics, and a former chairman of the Master of the Rolls Archives Committee, called the officials' 'dangerous power of destruction'.⁴ Closely following the proposals of the Grigg committee, the Act introduced a system of internal departmental reviews to examine which records should continue to be retained, and stated merely, under Sec. 3(1), that

It shall be the duty of every person responsible for public records of any description which are not in the Public Record Office or a place of deposit appointed by the Lord Chancellor under this Act to make arrangements for the selection of those records which ought to be permanently preserved and for their safe-keeping'

provided only that, under Sec. 3(2) 'Every person shall perform his duties under this section under the guidance of the Keeper of Public Records and the said Keeper shall be responsible for co-ordinating and supervising all action taken under this section'.

The transformation of the Public Record Office

Figure 1 chronicles the principal stages in the evolution of the institution between 1951, the year of the Treasury inspection, and 1959, the first year under the new Act. Titles were to change. The composition of the PRO (now known as The National Archives) was to change. The formal head of the organisation was to change, no longer the master of the rolls but now the lord chancellor. Sir Hilary was to go in April 1954, only too well 'aware that changes would come in procedure which he could scarcely contemplate nor wished to do so'.⁵ A more formal, more elaborate structure with a number of new and more clearly demarcated divisions was installed. And one such division, under John Collingridge, the PRO official with whom the Grigg Committee had been able to do business, became responsible in October 1955 for the new and pivotal task of records management.⁶ His role was described to Sir Alexander Johnston as 'the corner-stone of the Grigg recommendations; the officer concerned will have the oversight of all the sifting, reviewing etc. of Departmental records before they are actually transferred permanently to the P.R.O'.⁷ Much later, his obituarist would recall that he thereby assumed the:

leading part in a revolutionary extension of the Office's duties which took it for the first time into the heart of the government machine in search of the records which future researchers would need. With a small and necessarily inexperienced staff Collingridge tackled with vigour the daunting tasks of instilling into the newly appointed departmental records officers an understanding of the Public Record Office and its needs, and persuading them to clear arrears (sometimes of centuries) and to institute adequate control and appraisal systems.⁸

There were strong parallels between the new system in England and Wales and its federal counterpart in the United States. Both represented a response to the problems

⁴ T. Plucknett; 'The Public Records Act 1958' in *The Modern Law Review*, xxii (2), Mar. 1959, p. 182.

⁵ F. Hull, 'The Archivist should not be an Historian' in *Journal of the Society of Archivists* [hereafter *JSA*], vi 1980, p. 256.

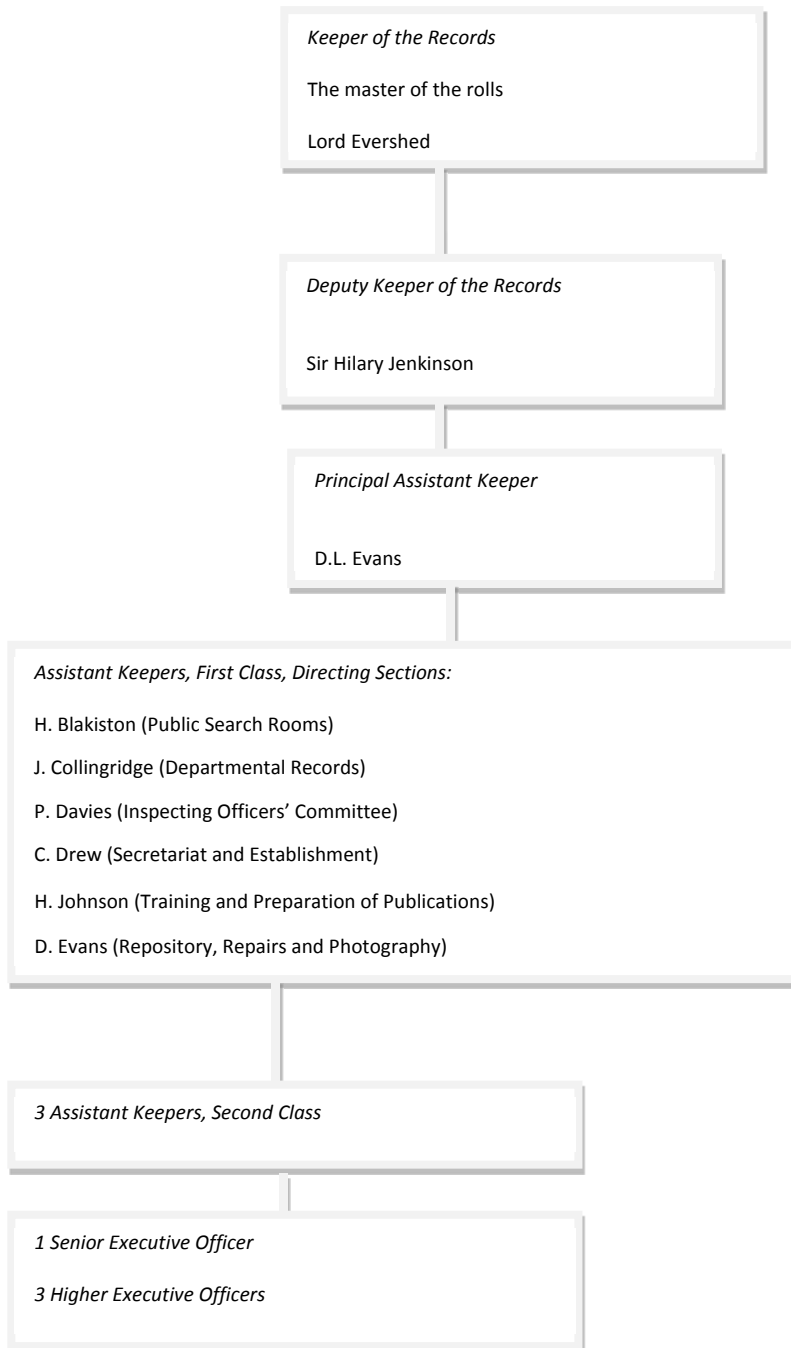
⁶ John Collingridge was described by Kenneth Clucas as a man 'whom he liked'. It was with Collingridge that he had communicated, not Sir Hilary, when the Grigg Committee was at work. TNA, PRO 30/98/18, Visit to Sir Kenneth Clucas, 18 Feb. 1988.

⁷ TNA, T 222/800, S. Whitley to Sir Alexander Johnston, 27 Sept. 1954.

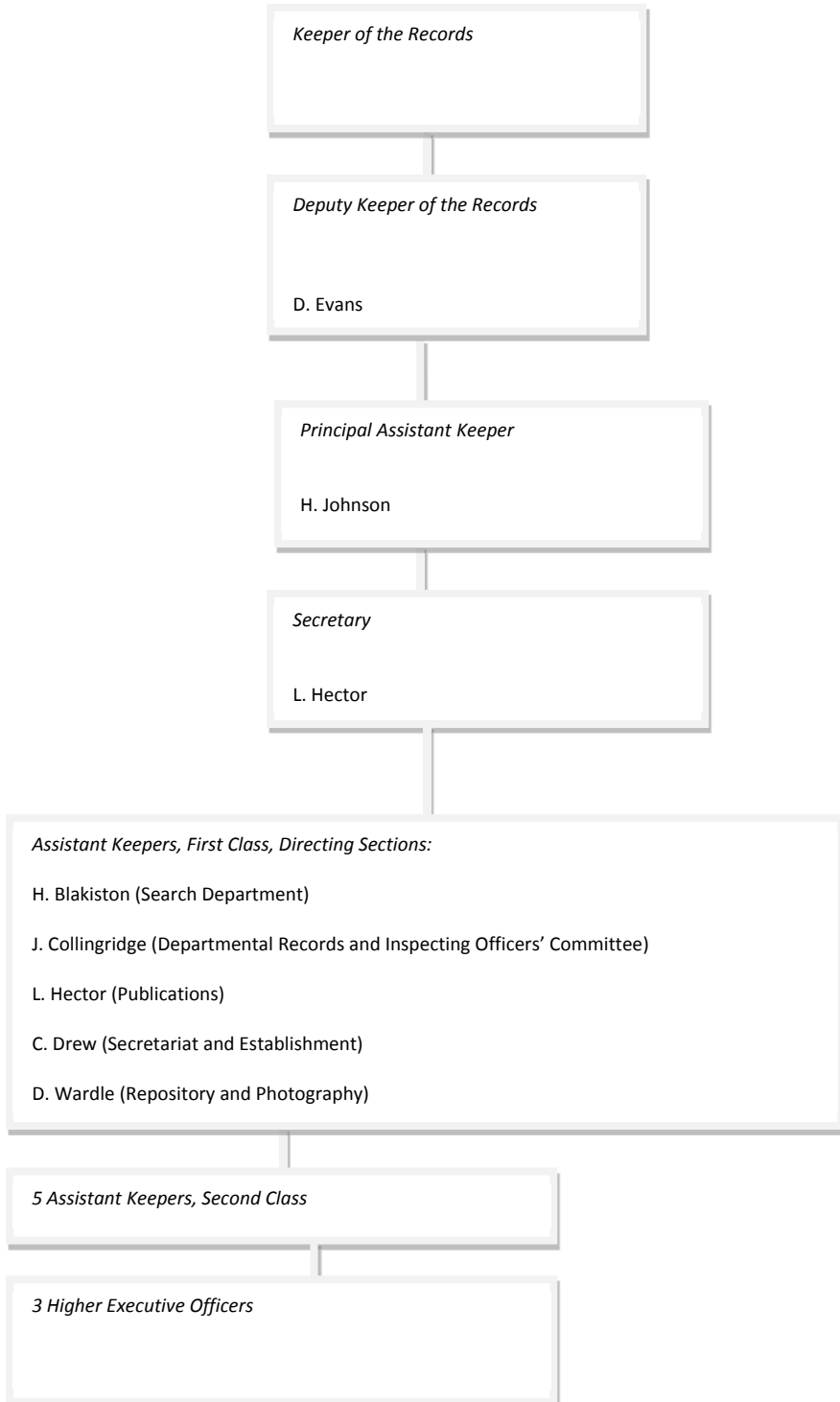
⁸ E. Denham in *JSA*, v (5) Apr. 1976, p. 336.

Figure 1: The Public Record Office in Transition

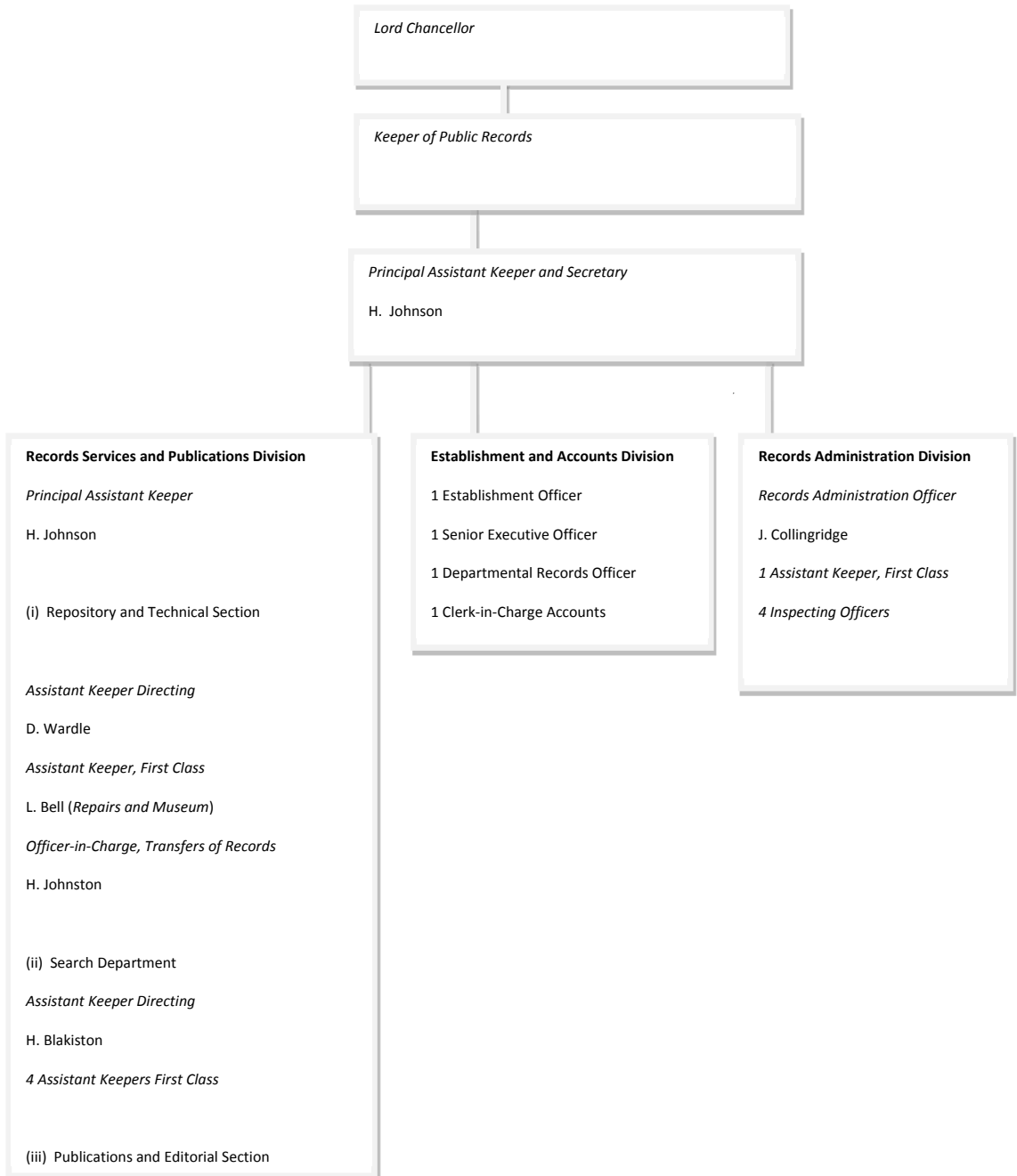
(a) 1951: The Year of the Treasury Inspection



(b) 1956: The PRO in Transition – after the Grigg Report and before the 1958 Act



(c) 1959: The PRO in Transition – after the 1958 Act



The American system was dismissed as insufficiently selective at first review, being staffed by unskilled people who retained files *en masse*, bringing it about that some 50% of the material that was conserved was actually ‘worthless’. The committee, on the other hand, was governed by an imperative to weed as rigorously as possible:

This seems to me to be a most serious objection to the system; and if the Americans have not found a solution to it I think we should be loth [*sic*] to accept their system too readily. I wonder if in fact the figure of worthless material retained would not be higher than 50%. . . . In this country, according to figures supplied by Departments . . . 10% is being retained, though an analysis of these estimates shows that the true figures would probably be about 6%. The difference is one that we cannot ignore.

‘I hope’, he concluded rather piously, ‘this does not sound too destructive’. What he proposed in answer to their recommendations was a token genuflection to Chambers’ and Habakkuk’s endorsement of the American system. Effect should be given ‘to the spirit of [their] Report, within the framework of British constitutional practice, by making a couple of amendments to the draft [Committee’s] Report as it now stands’.

Chambers and Habakkuk were not prepared to be appeased. Chambers would have preferred a new Public Records Department to play an effective part in the supervision of departments’ arrangements for the preservation of records at first review. He did not approve of the critical comments which Sir James had made about the report’s description of the American scheduling procedure. He was ‘very anxious to get the archivists in on the job of the second review’.⁴³ But it was to no avail. American practice was to be ignored. Kenneth Clucas commented on the final draft of the report that ‘The less the Committee’s proposals can be shown to owe to American experience the more likely are they to prove acceptable to Government circles over here’.⁴⁴

The second attempt to borrow American practice was more consequential.

Schellenberg had set himself up as Sir Hilary’s rival (he had written his own *opus magnum* quite deliberately, indeed provocatively, to supplant Sir Hilary’s textbook, dismissing him an ‘old fossil cited to me as an authority in archival matters’).⁴⁵ It is possible that the deputy keeper’s departure and the reconfiguration of PRO officials, including John Collingridge in his new activist role, could have introduced a new professional receptiveness to a modernising approach so recently adopted with apparent success by another major national archive.

There is a suggestive clue – *almost* a smoking gun – which took the guise of a short, unadorned note of an undated meeting held in an unidentified location between Theodore Schellenberg and unidentified officials (one must presume) of the Public Record Office but perhaps also of the Treasury.⁴⁶ It must have taken place at some point in the last quarter of 1954, *after* the Grigg report had been published and after Sir Hilary had left the PRO, but a year before the projected publication in 1955 of Schellenberg’s

⁴³ TNA, T222/613, Report by Mr. Chambers and Professor Habakkuk on their visit to the United States. Note for the Chairman, n.d.

⁴⁴ TNA, T 222/613, Letter to Sir James Grigg, 19 Dec. 1953.

⁴⁵ Letter of July 1954 cited in J. Smith, ‘Theodore R. Schellenberg’, p. 319. Schellenberg’s *Modern Archives* was in large measure written to contend with the ideas of Sir Hilary and his *Manual of Archive Administration*. See T. R. Schellenberg, ‘Applying American archival experience’, pp. 33–8; and R. Jimerson, ‘Deciding what to save’, *OCLC systems & services: International digital library perspectives*, xix (4), 2003, pp. 135–40.

⁴⁶ TNA, PRO 1/1551, Notes on a conversation with Dr. Schellenberg of the Washington Archives. I would like to thank Anna Towlson, the archives and special collections manager of the British Library of Political and Economic Science for pointing me to this file.

Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques.⁴⁷ Habakkuk had recommended after his earlier visit in 1953 that, 'Whatever the final recommendations of our Committee, I think it would be a good plan to send someone from the proposed Records Department to learn how Angel and his Records Management Division tackle the job'.⁴⁸ And it seems that his advice was heeded.

The note records how Schellenberg described to his visitors the bipartite organisation of the U.S. National Archives and Record Service into the National Archives and the Records Management Division; and then outlined how the former division under his management was responsible for the selection of records for permanent preservation, whilst the latter division was 'concerned [with] controlling the form and number of records currently being produced as well as with surveying accumulations of existing records'. His staff were said to have included trained archivists 'who are graduates, mainly in History, Law and Economics', and their mode of work followed the taxonomy he had been developing:

. . . inventories of the records of the organisation being dealt with are produced by subordinate staff, together with notes on its history and work. The archivists of the . . . section then pick out the records considered worthy of preservation; in the first place selecting those necessary to show how the agency worked, and then considering, with the assistance of external authorities if necessary, which records merit preservation as being useful for research.

Schellenberg was reported to have said that he had been 'very interested in the Grigg Report, particularly because he had been in close touch with Chambers and Habbakuk when they visited the U.S.' The report was, he said, 'halfway between the U.S. system and the pure Jenkinson doctrine', but, in common with other overseas archivists, he also entertained two reservations about its proposals.⁴⁹ Neither would be fully heeded in London:

- (i) the extent to which the power of selection would lie in the hands of departments: this, he felt, was likely to result in indiscriminate destruction of valuable material;
- (ii) the underlying assumption that any very large class of records must necessarily be destroyed. This assumption was not made in the U.S.

It cannot have been inconsequential that officials should have decided to approach Schellenberg, the head of the National Archives Division in Washington between 1950 and 1961, a major authority on records management, and that they had done so just after Sir Hilary had retired, and during the critical interval between the publication of the Grigg report and the preparation of legislation and guidelines. Of course, one must be careful not to make too much of the meeting, but Schellenberg offered what could well have seemed to be timely, practical and concrete advice about the procedures which a new regulatory system should deploy. An official at TNA put it that:

⁴⁷ Hans Rasmussen has pointed that Schellenberg was in Australia between February and early September 1954 (email, 25 Nov. 2014).

⁴⁸ TNA, T222/613, Letter of 23 Oct. 1953,

⁴⁹ A report of the response in an international conference of archivists to a paper presented by John Collingridge on the permanent preservation of records declared that 'Almost everyone subscribed to the theory that the archivist should have a commanding voice in the matter of disposal. Many frowned on the present British proposal to allow administrators a free hand to discard records of no administrative interest after 5 years'. R. Bahmer, 'The third international congress of archivists' in *Am. Arch.* xx (2), Apr. 1957, p. 159.

The facts we do know are that the Grigg Committee Report was published in 1954, T.R. Schellenberg's 'Modern archives: principles and techniques' was published in 1956 and the 1958 Public Records Act came into force on 1 Jan 1959. Therefore I would assume that Schellenberg's principles were applied by government departments sometime during this period i.e. pre 1962.⁵⁰

Those principles revolved very precisely around how the future historical importance of records might be identified by departmental record officers at second review. They would have appeared to resolve the problems posed by the wording of the 1958 Act that, almost by design, was too vague to be practicable.⁵¹ And the elucidation they would have introduced had every appearance of a shift away from 'the pure Jenkinson doctrine' towards the U.S. system. John Collingridge himself remarked that he had waited until he had had 'some "records administration" experience behind us' before drafting the *Guidance*.⁵² He did not refer to Schellenberg. But then he did not refer to any institutional source or personal authority at all. The parallels undoubtedly look as if they are there and, at the very least, it may be said that there is a remarkable convergence between the different schemes.⁵³

Schellenberg's classification *could* have helped to frame the 1958 edition of the *Guide for Departmental Record Officers*. Sherrod East of the U.S. National Archives believed that to have been the case, remarking at the time that the *Guide* 'is similar in purpose and content to the [American] National Archives and Records Service publication No. 50-3 Disposition of Federal Records' of 1949, a publication which Schellenberg had drafted.⁵⁴ It could also have influenced the expanded 1962 version of the *Guide* which explained, in what might have been Schellenberg's own words, that the prime criterion applied in the first, five-year review should be the administrative usefulness of records, although those of 'continuing historical importance' should be retained for the second review.⁵⁵ That second, 25 year review would seek to retain for purposes of research those papers which related to the origins of a department, how it was organised and how it functioned; the department's major accomplishments; changes of policy made evident in reasoned submissions to ministers or senior officials, in the appointment of departmental or interdepartmental committees and working parties and in papers to Cabinet. The next set of guidelines, issued in 1971, additionally

⁵⁰ Email, 15 Sept. 2014.

⁵¹ It was confessed in a minute of 20 Dec. 1952 that the Grigg Committee been going 'round in circles on this subject of public records' (TNA, T 222/989, Committee on public records: Registration and reviewing in departments). All that had been said in the committee's report at paragraph 60 was that an historical criterion should be applied, and that 'within the margin of error inevitable under any system, the papers which a historian of the future may wish to have preserved will in practice automatically be included among those which Departments find it necessary to keep for more than a short period for their own Departmental purposes'. How that criterion would be applied was left vague: at paragraph 240 it was declared, in the phrasing of John Collingridge, that 'the decision as to what records are to be retained at Second Review should be taken by Departments themselves in conjunction with the Public Record Department'. It was at that juncture, after the Report and before the Act, that the Schellenberg principles might have been introduced.

⁵² J. Collingridge, 'Implementing the Grigg Report' in *JSA*, i, 1955-9, p. 184.

⁵³ Other have thought so too. c.f. E. Honer and S. Graham, 'Should users have a role in determining the future archive? The approach adopted by the Public Record Office, the UK National Archives to the selection of records for permanent preservation' in *Liber Quarterly*, xi, p. 385.

⁵⁴ S. East, review of *A guide for departmental record officers (provisional)* in *Am. Arch.* xxii (3), July 1959, p. 340; see also the review by de Valinger in *Am. Arch.* xiii (3), July 1950, p. 292. Schellenberg's impact on the administrative organisation of Australia's national archive was even clearer: I. Maclean, 'Australian experience in record and archive management', in *Am. Arch.* xxii, Oct. 1959, pp. 387-418; M. Piggott, 'The Australian archival system, 1971-2008: A valedictory appraisal' in *Archives and Manuscripts*, xxxvi (2), Nov. 2008, pp. 189-207, esp. p. 203.

⁵⁵ Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, p. 94: 'In all cases the basic problem is one of value. In the case of transfer to temporary storage, the value is for future administrative, legal, or fiscal use; in the case of transfer to an archival institution the value is for research or other continuing purposes'.

proceeded to list a series of ‘general descriptions of the main kinds of records which are likely to merit selection for permanent preservation at the Public Record Office ...’, and they included papers which:

- 1a. Show the reasons for important actions or decisions
- b. Provide a precedent for future actions or decisions
- c. Are a guide to possible action should a similar set of circumstances arise in the future . . .
- e. Contain important policy decisions . . .
2. Records relating to—
 - a. The setting-up, proceedings and reports of committees, working parties and study groups;
 - b. Important decisions on policy . . .
 - k. Subjects of interest nationally or internationally . . .⁵⁶

It took some time before the system introduced by the report and the 1958 Act was fully working (it first came properly into effect as late as 1983 in the Home Office, the point at which the 25-year review introduced by the 1958 was reached).⁵⁷ The departmental record officers (a term also employed by Schellenberg – as was the title of inspector) were new to the role and their judgment, it was thought, tended to be framed chiefly by what Schellenberg would have called ‘primary’ values.⁵⁸ Many of the PRO’s archivists in post were medievalists.⁵⁹ They were professionally ill-equipped to recognise the ‘infinite complexities of dealing with the records of the twentieth century welfare state’.⁶⁰ And the outcome was that culling in the reformed system was not for a long while considered to be robust enough (although it would have looked substantial enough to the outsider): 5,398 tons, or an estimated 400,000 ‘foot-run’, of ‘valueless records’ were destroyed in 1957; 6,651 tons in 1958 and 7,578 tons in 1959.⁶¹ This was still deemed insufficient. John Collingridge was obliged to complain in 1962 about the application of a ‘generally excessive caution’ which brought it about that ‘much of not truly permanent usefulness or of dubious historical worth was extracted for preservation’.⁶² Stephen Wilson, the second keeper of Public Records, serving between 1960 and 1966, was wont to ask on browsing through the repository transfer registry ‘What sort of rubbish has been brought in?’ It was he too who, writing anonymously, cautioned officials against being too liberal in their methods of selection in the foreword to the 1962 edition of the *Guide for Departmental Record Officers*, and it was there that he introduced what had every semblance of a vital yardstick, the need to

⁵⁶ Reproduced in P. Hennessy; ‘Whitehall guidelines on preservation of documents are made public’, *The Times*, 7 Mar. 1978.

⁵⁷ Record management services first review guidelines, Home Office file RS 93 0179/0181/001.

⁵⁸ Schellenberg observed that ‘record officers . . . are mainly responsible for judging the primary values of records. [They] keep records for their current use – administrative, legal, and fiscal – and are therefore prone to judge their value only in relations to such use’, *Modern Archives*, pp 27–8.

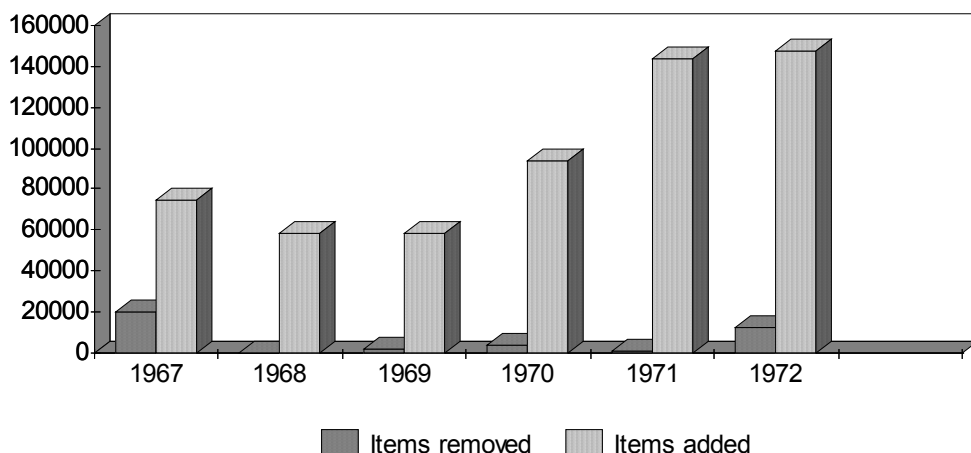
⁵⁹ Lord Evershed called them ‘all scholarly men, chosen now by a special board as archivists’ (HL Deb, 16 Dec. 1957, ccvi, 1147–81). An early letter discussing a possible candidate for a post insisted that ‘A knowledge of Latin is an absolute necessity for anyone who wants to do well here . . .’, TNA, PRO 30/98/18, K. Stamp to Mr Marsh, 27 Sept. 1926.

⁶⁰ J. Cantwell, *The Public Record Office 1959–1969* (Richmond, 2000), p. 7. Hans Rasmussen did comment in his email of 25 Nov. 2014 that ‘the PRO inspecting officers who would work with departments came from the executive class of the civil service. The decision to appoint that grade to these jobs was made in September 1956, so the PRO wasn’t in a completely disadvantageous situation when it began its adventures in modern record management’.

⁶¹ See *119th report of the deputy keeper of the records* (HMSO, 1957) 11; *1st annual report of the keeper of public records on the work of the Public Record Office* (HMSO, 1959), 6. A 4,388 foot-run of records intended for permanent preservation was transferred to the PRO in that last year.

⁶² J. Collingridge; ‘Record management in England since the Grigg Report’ in *JSA*, ii, 1960–4, p. 243.

Figure 2: Total volume of items added to, transferred or otherwise removed from the custody of the Public Record Office



Based on successive annual reports of the Keeper of Public Records.*

*Starting with *The Ninth Annual Report of the Keeper of Public Records on the Work of the Public Record Office and the Ninth Report of the Advisory Council on Public Records* (1968), HC 276, London: HMSO.

reduce the 100 miles of material produced each year by Government to the one mile which could be retained permanently by the Public Record Office.⁶³ The *Guide* went on to re-affirm that goal on p. 12, saying that 'it is particularly important to ensure that the maximum quantity of paper is discarded at the first review. For the 'double review' system depends for its effectiveness on narrowing as far as possible the field to which the historical criterion must (at the second review) be directly applied'.

A new master of the rolls, the chairman of the Advisory Council of Public Records, Lord Denning, was invited by the lord chancellor the following year to chair a committee that would once more review the preservation of legal records – a review that was introduced as 'the latest in a long story'.⁶⁴ He returned to the necessity of narrowing the field and the 1/100 ratio when he repeated to *The Times* the apparently accepted maxim that the continuing flood of government records demanded 100 extra miles of shelving a year, although the space actually available amounted to only one mile, and the perennial 'simple question' was 'What can be disposed of?'⁶⁵

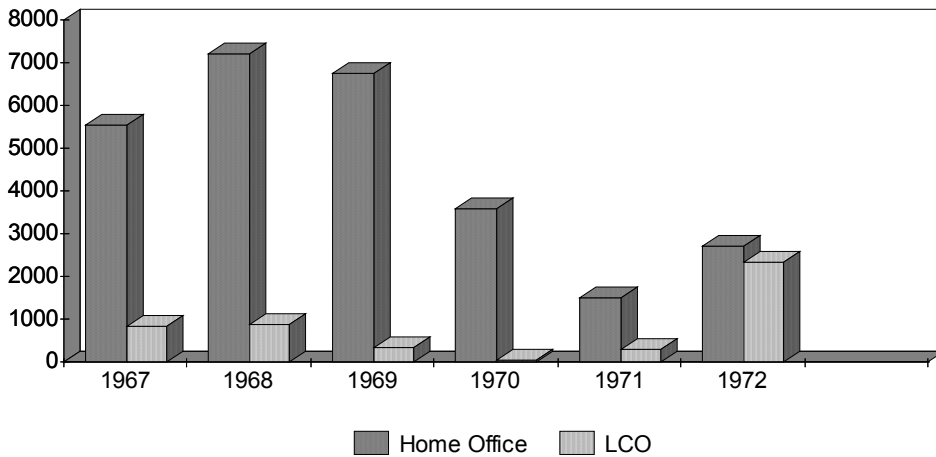
Figure 2 shows that there was a continual amassing of hundreds of thousands of records during a specimen run of six years, the first for which there are such data; and Figure 3 shows further that only a modest number of those items were received from the Home Office and the Lord Chancellor's Office. Although the latter half of

⁶³ Cantwell, *Public Record Office*, pp. 60, 62. *A guide for departmental record officers (revised)*, where the foreword on p. 1 reads 'Experience suggests that the P.R.O. should expect to receive each year for permanent preservation about 1 mile. The problem is how to reduce the 100 miles to 1 mile of material worth keeping'.

⁶⁴ His letter of invitation from Sir Ian Bancroft of the Civil Service Department stated on 27 Feb. 1978 that 'We have concluded that the best course would be to set up an Inquiry into the working of the present system. As we see it, the system adopted after Grigg is, in principle, satisfactory, though a number of occurrences lead us to think that the administration of that system is capable of improvement. . . .' (TNA, LCO 27, 4/14); *Report of the committee on legal records*, Cmnd. 3084, (1966) p. 1.

⁶⁵ 'Hard Pruning for British Records', *The Times*, 9 Jan. 1963.

Figure 3: Items Received by the Public Record Office from the Home Office and the Lord Chancellor's Office



the 1960s formed a crucial period in the evolution of the criminal justice system, the 'foot-run' of shelving occupied by materials from the Home Office amounted to no more than 5,000 feet by 1969, and from the Lord Chancellor's Office, a mere 100, and *they* included the some 250 files of the 1966 Royal Commission on Assizes and Quarter Sessions.⁶⁶

The practical response to Lord Denning's simple question, 'What can be disposed of?', tended always to be phrased in the horticultural language of weeding and pruning (the words 'weeding' and 'weeded' were employed twice each in a single paragraph composed by John Collingridge in 1958 and 'weeding' appears formally elsewhere, as a subject heading in the PRO's own 1983 *Manual of Records Administration* under 3.6.16 and in ministerial briefings and the papers of the Grigg committee).⁶⁷ The Denning Committee's more precise answer to that simple question about what should be done to legal documents – many of which were dismissed as largely 'valueless . . . uninformative and incomplete', 'massive accumulations, forests of documents . . . [in which there] may be hidden . . . a small quantity of useful information' – was itself to be just as simple. Are 'records likely to be required in the future for practical purposes . . . or as a guide to possible action in the future, or to throw light on conditions in the past? If so, they should be kept; but otherwise they should be destroyed.'⁶⁸ *The Guardian* predicted a great bonfire of the official papers.⁶⁹

It is evident, again from Figure 2, that weeding was in fact carried out, albeit unevenly and on a relatively small scale, by the PRO (and, presumably, more energetically, and at an earlier stage by government departments and the courts) during the six-year period – although it signally failed to make much of an impact on the overall volume

⁶⁶ J. Cantwell, *Public Record Office*, pp. 142, 143.

⁶⁷ Collingridge; 'Implementing the Grigg Report', pp. 180–181. 'Weeding in Whitehall', the historian A.J.P. Taylor remarked much later, 'now meant pulling up the prize specimens and leaving the weeds', *Sunday Express*, 26 Dec. 1993.

⁶⁸ *Report of the committee on legal records*, pp. 2, 5, 8. To be sure, as a reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper has reminded me, what was actually under scrutiny was the 20,000 feet of shelving of civil cases, transferred to the PRO between 1875 and 1935.

⁶⁹ See 'Lord Denning calls for bonfire of legal records', *The Guardian*, 26 Aug. 1966.



Life with the weeders,
who throw our our
unwanted secrets.

*Courtesy of Times/
News Syndication*

of items which climbed ever steeper, and there is no record at all during this time of any materials from the Home Office or Lord Chancellor's Office being transferred or removed from the PRO. And the PRO main building in Chancery Lane was all the while filling up.

There was yet another crisis when, on 12th July 1975, *The Times* published a photograph of 'jolly civil servants' hurling unwanted files into a wastebin under the headline, 'Life with the weeders, who throw out our unwanted secrets'. Historians were reported to be horrified and 'Unease about weeding practices, already expressed in private . . . inside the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council on Public Records, came out into the open thanks to the picture and the merry quip'.⁷⁰ Weeders were now being described as 'too ruthless'.⁷¹ One of those who complained was Margaret Gowing, the co-author with Sir William Hancock of the official history of the British war economy, later to be the first professor of the history of science at Oxford, a former member of the Grigg Committee and a member of the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Council.⁷² She reported that the present, ostensibly reformed, system remained 'profoundly unsatisfactory': 'responsibility for departmental records is very diffused; there is little coordination of experience and methods; and no regular methodical training of staff'.⁷³ She proposed at a meeting of the Advisory Council on 17th March 1976 that there should be an enquiry into the working of the 'Grigg system', and the Council endorsed her recommendation.⁷⁴

Yet another committee of inquiry was accordingly established in 1978 under Sir

⁷⁰ P. Hennessy; 'Saving the building blocks of history from the weeders' wastebin', *The Times*, 29 Aug. 1978.

⁷¹ M. Moss, 'Public Record Office: Good or bad?' in *JSA*, vii, No. 3, Apr. 1983, p. 157.

⁷² W. Hancock and M. Gowing, *The British War Economy* (London, 1953); *ODNB*.

⁷³ 'Preservation of the British Archive', letter to *The Times*, 27 Apr. 1977.

⁷⁴ TNA, LCO 27, 4/14, Letter from the chairman to the lord chancellor, 15 July 1977. In that letter, he did take pains to indicate that 'Whilst there is a considerable volume of opinion to support our views, we do not wish to associate ourselves with some of the extravagant remarks made in the Press that departments deliberately destroy embarrassing material . . .' What the Advisory Council sought, but did not manage to obtain, was a thorough inquiry into the Grigg system: they had proposed at their meeting in Oct. 1977 that the committee should 'review the workings of the Public Records Acts of 1958 and 1967, in the light of subsequent changes in the scope and nature of the records of public Departments . . . ; and] to consider whether a comprehensive public archival service would contribute to the more efficient preservation and management of such records . . .' The response of Lord Bourne was that what was envisaged would be too costly in terms of manpower and staffing problems (TNA, LCO 27, 4/14, letter to Lord Denning, 10 July 1978).

Duncan Wilson (with Margaret Gowing again as one of its members) to review how records could be saved rather than destroyed. It reported in March 1981, broadly endorsing the Grigg Report, but criticising what it called (under paragraph 53) the ‘large scale and perhaps indiscriminate destruction’ of records, and the competence and poor supervision of the record officers who were described as too junior, uncommitted and inexperienced to perform the work they were charged to perform under the 1958 Act.⁷⁵ Somewhat naively, perhaps, it talked in paragraph 68 of a Treasury-induced bias to misrepresent the Report’s emphasis on preservation by implying that ‘the thrust of the Grigg Committee’s views was in some sense counter to the policy of preservation of “worthy” records under the Public Records Act, whereas in fact that was their primary objective’. It deplored under paragraph 78 how few departments, including, it seems, the Home Office and the Lord Chancellor’s Office, had issued detailed guidance for the selection of records for preservation, contending that ‘it is more common to give no written guidance at all and rely on “experience”, “expertise” or “oral instruction”’. It said further, and for reasons that should now be transparent, that ‘There is no evidence that departments [including the Home Office and the Lord Chancellor’s Office] consult academic bodies likely to be interested in their records’. Instead, it continued under paragraph 82, departmental record officers made ‘day-to-day judgments about the historical value of material’ without meeting historians or other readers who might be affected by their decisions. The ‘general impression’, conveyed in paragraph 119, was of ‘selection arrangements that have become established with difficulty in an unfortunate climate of staff constraints, low priority and a general lack of interest or support . . .’

One outcome was the introduction and application in the 1980s and 1990s of the *Manual of Records Administration* whose key principles under 3.6 of the first, 1983 edition, again broadly resembled the Schellenberg model. What should be preserved, it reiterated, were records that bore on ‘The history of the department, its organisation and procedures; The formulation of policy and legislation and, more selectively, its implementation and interpretation; Notable events or person when the records add significantly to what is already known; Major events, developments or trends in political, social, legal or economic history’.⁷⁶

I alluded to the fact that the 1958 Act effectively came into force in the Home Office when a first assessment of its record management practices took place in 1983, 25 years after the 1958 Act. It does seem that for decades there had not always been a close adherence to the recommendations of the Grigg Report. The assessment opened by observing that:

Up until 1982, Home Office registered files were not subject to a first review. Files were closed by registrars at random and sent to the Hayes repository when no longer needed. The vast majority of these files were not reviewed until they were at least twenty-five years old. In 1982, first review was established as an initial step towards adopting a uniform records administration policy within the Home Office.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ *Modern public records: Selection and access, report of a committee appointed by the lord chancellor*, Cmnd. 8204, (1981).

⁷⁶ ‘The National Archives appraisal policy: Background paper – the ‘Grigg System’ and beyond’, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/background_appraisal.pdf (accessed 13 Apr. 2017). We are grateful to Nick Pinto of The National Archives for his guidance in this matter.

⁷⁷ Record management services first review guidelines, Home Office file RS 93 0179/0181/001

It went on to say that the guidelines in force up until that time had laid down that files touching on routine, administrative work and those ‘considered to have lost all significance’ could be ‘destroyed without examination in five years’ (and they included speeches and materials for the preparation of speeches; correspondence of what was called ‘current, but not long term interest; and copies of committee papers ‘if no work done on file’). In future, files should be retained ten years after examination when divisions so advised, (unspecified) legal requirements existed, and where they might still be ‘required for reference’. They should then be selected for second review when they touched on a change of policy in the Home Office or any ‘milestone’ in ‘any area of Home Office work’, legislation and papers or minutes by very senior grades (and they included major policy files; committee papers; and *causes célèbres*). Those files are, it was noted, ‘usually important for historical reasons’.

Yet the Home Office Records Management Service still continued thereafter to be unsure that it had got matters quite right. Ten years later, no guidelines at all were said to exist for a number of divisions. A note from an official of 17 September 1993 reported, for example, that ‘I am not sanguine about the prospects of securing guidelines from the prisons service due to their officers’ tendency to balk at the talk of files getting destroyed’. Only 2% of records in storage were, it was said, being ‘accessed’, and ‘our present retention periods are too generous’.⁷⁸

The Ministry of Justice, whose earlier incarnations were the Lord Chancellor’s Office, the Lord Chancellor’s Department and the Department for Constitutional Affairs, was the other major department of state that lay within our field of interest. It had a broad and growing responsibility for a range of areas within and around the criminal justice system, including the crown court, the Public Record Office, defence legal aid and, in time, the prisons and the magistrates’ courts, and that evolution forms part of our history.⁷⁹

Much is familiar enough. Following the 1958 and 1967 Acts, it was laid down that, after first review, files should be retained if their contents were still required for operational reasons (that is, if they had been recently referred to and/or could still be regarded as holding information of current importance, or if the information held within the file had ‘the potential to be transferred to TNA or another archive for permanent preservation’).⁸⁰ The guidance then proceeded to cite TNA’s own criteria for the preservation of files, and at that point, it will be recalled, the papers under scrutiny would have originated 30 years ago, in our core period of the mid-1980s.

TNA’s principal objectives were said to be the preservation of ‘the ‘national memory’ in order to document government decision-making activities and processes and so to promote historical interest and research; . . . to extend educational opportunity for all ages and people of all backgrounds; [and] To document the state’s interactions with its citizens and with the physical environment’. In turn, and akin to the Schellenberg taxonomy, it reported that the value of records resided in two elements: ‘their

⁷⁸ Olakunle Ola, Record management services, to Mr Pridmore, Registry: Disposal schedules, 17 Sept. 1993, Home Office file RS 93 0179/0181/001.

⁷⁹ The sifting process was also covered by fairly detailed instructions about the perusal of documents that might contain sensitive information or required redaction, but we were not ourselves aware of such matters affecting anything that we examined, and the examples given fell largely outside our sphere of interest. They included information about the awarding of honours; the involvement of the palace; the medical condition of named individuals; and the security services. Redaction was defined as ‘the separation of disclosable from non-disclosable information by blocking out individual words, sentences or paragraphs or the removal of whole pages or sections prior to the release of the document’. (Ministry of Justice, Record management services – policy file review (PFR) team. I am grateful to the Ministry’s departmental record officer, Carole Burry, for showing me copies of these and other documents.

⁸⁰ ‘Ministry of Justice – Record management: Instructions for first review – paper files’.

“primary” value to the organisation (business value) and their “secondary” value to society, providing a resource for historical research to a wide range of future users (archival value).⁸¹ More precisely, value in the domain of criminal justice could be identified when files touched on the:

- ‘Policy and administrative processes of the state
- ‘Formulation of policy and management of public resources by the core executive
- ‘Administration of justice and maintenance of security
- ‘Formulation and delivery of social policies’.

It may now be useful to take stock. The prime thrust of policy behind the 1958 Act had been to destroy as much paper as possible. The contested idea of retaining records for purposes of scholarly research, although it did come to serve as a clear goal, crept in somewhat later as a secondary priority, and there were engrained doubts about the viability of the methods by which it could be realised and the role, if any, which historians might play.⁸² Indeed, it was only when guidance had to be prepared to enable departmental record officers to recognise historical value that attention was given to the formulation of the exact criteria by which the task could be done. The result has been a continuing, substantial cull which goes some way to explain the gaps and omissions which I reported. No precise tally has or ever could be taken of how much documentary evidence disappeared during the latter half of the 20th century, but it is almost certainly larger than the 50 to 90 per cent predicted by David Evans (Sir Hilary’s successor as deputy keeper of the records). Departmental record officers have long been encouraged to aim high (the Wilson Report noted that ‘even in some high policy departments, staff felt that they were failing in their job if they did not [dispose] of over 90 per cent of the paper coming to them for review’). The informal figure accepted by the staff of The National Archives in 2014, described internally as the ‘favoured estimate’, was 90-95% (although ‘some government departments select higher percentages’), and by the Home Office and Department of Justice as 98%.⁸³ Earlier estimates were even higher: 99% was the number cited in paragraph 114 of the 1981 Wilson Report (based once more, it seems, on the demands imposed by that totemic shelving ratio of 1 mile/100 miles). Three years later that figure of 99% was again tendered by Alexandra Nicol, the liaison officer of the Public Record Office, and she pointed once more to that self-same shelving ratio.⁸⁴

Those are all broad approximations that reflect procedures and outcomes that changed over time. More useful by far is an exact record of the work of the Home Office Records Management Service covering two periods, the last three quarters of 1988 (the period when such figures first became available in the particular form set out) and the entire year of 1989.⁸⁵ This does confirm the looser estimates.

⁸¹ Ministry of Justice, ‘Record management services – policy file review (PFR) team: The second review process’.

⁸² And those doubts continue to be aired. See M. Moss, ‘Where have all the files gone? Lost in action points every one?’ in *Journal of Contemporary History*, xlvii, No. 4, Oct. 2012, pp. 860–875.

⁸³ 95% is the figure given in recent TNA guidance: see *Records Management: Acquisition and Disposition Policies*, (Richmond, 2000), p. 1. I was told that Home Office policy files made up some 40% of ‘file holdings’, and that 95% of them are not retained.

⁸⁴ A. Nicol, ‘Archives in the 80’s – Overview II’ in *Archives in the Eighties*, ed. A. Norton (Birmingham, 1984), p. 16.

⁸⁵ Documents and records: Preservation and destruction. Record of files examined. Home Office File RS 84 0023/0028/001

Figure 4: Statement of Work Levels for Quarter Ending:

	<i>Feet</i>	<i>Percentage*</i>
30 June 1988		
<i>First Review</i>		
Home Office policy files		
Destroyed	123	33.4
Retained for second review	90	24.5
<i>Second Review</i>		
Destroyed	380.5	95.6
Selected for PRO	15.5	3.9 (3% of total files)
30 September 1988		
<i>First Review</i>		
Home Office policy files		
Destroyed	59	18.6
Retained for second review	59	18.6
<i>Second Review</i>		
Destroyed	340	92.1
Selected for PRO	3	0.8 (0.75% of all files)
31 December 1988		
<i>First Review</i>		
Home Office policy files		
Destroyed	65	28.6
Retained for second review	21	9.3
<i>Second Review</i>		
Destroyed	149	94.9
Selected for PRO	8	5.1 (3.6% of all files)

*The figures are a percentage of a larger volume of files that include, for example, Prison Department policy files.

The aggregate figures for the next year, covering all of 1989, showed that 1,379 feet of files had been examined at first review, 370 of which – or some 27% – were destroyed, and 225 feet, or 16% were retained for second review; 1202 feet of policy files – or 95% – were destroyed, and 35 feet – or 3% – were selected for the PRO at second review.

It might have been possible simply to conclude that between 1 and 10% of official records have been retained at various periods in England and Wales, and that that proportion had been fixed by Stephen Wilson more or less roughly to reflect the shelving capacity of the PRO. It would be a neat and satisfying answer to the problem of understanding how official papers disappear. But several qualifications must be introduced. Papers have from time to time been destroyed *en masse* and without proper oversight. The majority of Private Office papers are never released.⁸⁶ Many files have been ‘lost in the system’, ‘booked out’ to officials who did not return them because they had left their post, mislaid them or elected informally to dispose of them. And departmental record officers and archivists do not mechanically and routinely shed a fixed proportion of the materials that came before them. They are set no quantitative targets for retention, only for the longevity of the files awaiting disposal, and other considerations have clearly been in play, chief amongst them an adherence to the criteria laid down by the guidelines flowing from the 1958 Act.⁸⁷

Most important, the kinds of reform stemming from the Grigg Committee were not peculiar to England and Wales. They were part of a much greater and widely-discussed reorganisation of practice taking place after the Second World War in a number of important national archives. Hans Rasmussen observed that ‘every industrialized country was facing the same dilemmas at this time and were aware that others were as well, which made cross-border communication a certainty, although specific influences remain hard to pin down’.⁸⁸ The staff of national archives across the world experienced, and *knew* that they experienced, such common problems as an ever-increasing accumulation of records; limited storage capacity; the need to accommodate the interests of posterity and the need to impose economies.⁸⁹ There was a collective plight. Sir Hilary had certainly known it from an early stage. In 1943, he had told Dorsey W. Hyde, Jr., the special assistant to the archivist of the United States, that he had prophesied to his students in the 1920s that ‘when an organised Archive service in your Country came to tackle American Archive problems we should find

⁸⁶ Officials at the Ministry of Justice, for instance, are instructed to preserve only copies of Ministers’ official diaries and notebooks. Everything else, including ‘events correspondence’, private secretaries’ notebooks and electronic correspondence was to be destroyed, usually within one or two years of the last entry (Private office directorate: Record retention and disposition schedule).

⁸⁷ In the case of the Ministry of Justice, the departmental records officials are obliged primarily to manage the retention and disposal of vast numbers of court and trial documents emanating from the courts, the jury summoning bureau and the courts recording and transcription unit. Each type of document tends to have its own record retention and disposal schedule specifying whether it is automatically to be preserved permanently or destroyed after a certain length of time.

⁸⁸ Email, 25 Nov. 2014.

⁸⁹ So it was that Marjorie Jacobs wrote at the time in an Australian journal that ‘At a time when arrangements for the preservation of departmental records of permanent value are under review in Australia, the recent Report of the Committee on Departmental Records in the United Kingdom deserves careful consideration’. She then continued by producing a lengthy examination of the history of record-keeping in England and Wales, the crisis that engendered the appointment of the committee, and its principal recommendations. M. Jacobs, ‘A new approach’, p. 113. For a review of problems in the United States that appear very similar to those that had launched the Grigg Committee and the 1958 Act, see J. Bradsher, ‘A brief history of the growth of federal government records, archives, and information 1789–1985’ in *Government Publications Review*, xiii, 1986, pp. 491–505. An American committee, reporting on those problems in 1985, could well have been produced by any of the U.K. government committees of the period: Committee on the records of government, *Report* (Washington, D.C. 1985). See also J. Caswell, ‘Archives for Tomorrow’s Historians’ in *Am. Arch.*, xxi, No. 4, Oct. 1958, pp. 409–417.

it facing difficulties very similar to our own'.⁹⁰ And the collective character of the profession was reinforced by continual conferring across national boundaries (just as PRO representatives had discussed record management with Theodore Schellenberg, so, rather earlier, Emmett Leahy, the man who was about to reorganise the National Archives in the United States, had met with Sir Hilary to discuss practice in England).⁹¹ They shared interlocking histories; common stocks of professional knowledge; very similar policies and procedures; and in consequence, and most importantly of all, very similar retention rates.⁹² There has, in short, been such a pronounced diffusion and borrowing back and forth of ideas and methods, such a growing harmonisation of practice, that it cannot be contended that what occurred in the PRO was *sui generis*.⁹³ The figure of 1 mile of space to 100 miles of records so frequently quoted in its inception may have been a useful organising image – a necessary local condition, as it were – but it is not the only key needed to explain disposal policy. Other countries with other histories, priorities and space requirements⁹⁴ – Australia⁹⁵ and Canada⁹⁶ are instances – also claim systematically to have destroyed very much the same proportion

⁹⁰ Draft reply to a letter of 5 Apr. 1943. Dorsey W. Hyde, Jr. had told Sir Hilary in that letter that 'I can tell you that your book has been widely cited in various publications and in university courses, in-service training classes, and the like. Training courses for archivists have been or are being given at Columbia University, New York, and American University, Washington, and the students taking these courses make constant use of your text'. University of Aberdeen, Special Collections Centre, Papers of Sir Hilary Jenkinson, MS 2786/1/15; and see O. Holmes, 'Sir Hilary Jenkinson, 1882–1961' in *Am. Arch.* xxiv (3) Jul. 1961, p. 345.

⁹¹ The then archivist of the United States, Robert D.W. Connor, had written to Sir Hilary on the 1 May 1939 to introduce Emmett Leahy, then associate archivist, saying that, 'As you know we are just beginning to develop The National Archives in the United States, and are thus faced with numerous problems in which the experience of European archivists will be of invaluable assistance to us'. University of Aberdeen Special Collections, MS 2786/1/15.

⁹² Like Sherrod East, Marjorie Jacobs notes the similarities between the scheme introduced by the Grigg report and the organisation of federal record-keeping in the United States, 'A new approach to Departmental Records', p. 120.

⁹³ See M. Duchein, 'The history of European archives and the development of the archival profession in Europe' in *Am. Arch.* lv (1), special international issue, Winter, 1992, pp.14–25, esp. p. 23.

⁹⁴ In the United States the National Archives had at the same time 1 million cubic feet of records, whilst the PRO had 200,000 cubic feet; E. Drewry, review of the Grigg report in *Am. Arch.*, p. 74, in the papers of Sir James Grigg, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, PJGG10(2).

⁹⁵ There may have been differences only in language rather than in practice between the policies of different Commonwealth national archives. Thus the Lamb Report (*Development of the National Archives: Report*, Department of the Special Minister of State, Canberra, 1973 (http://www.naa.gov.au/Images/Lamb_Report_tcm16-49445.pdf accessed 13 Apr. 2017) talked on p. 15 about how 'Indications are that the need for storage space in records centres will increase fairly steadily, and unlike the headquarters building the centres, which may be placed outside high-land-value areas, should be designed with expansion in mind. Initial capacity should provide for expected demand over a period of 15 or 20 years'. And an explanatory document of the time talks about how 'Steps must be taken to ensure the preservation of all records of national significance' (although it does not describe how that significance can be identified), 'A national archives system: A background document' in *Archives and Manuscripts*, v (5), 1973, p. 107. Nevertheless, there are storage constraints in Australia as there are everywhere else (Rod Covell of the agency service centre of the National Archives of Australia emailed me on 13 Oct. 2014 to say 'Like the UK National Archives, the National Archives of Australia NAA is also experiencing storage limitations for physical (non-digital) records. Last year our Director-General sent a letter to all Commonwealth government agencies identifying this storage limitation'). It is striking that, in fact, destruction still took place on a huge scale which was very similar to that of England and Wales. Between 1950 and 1955, for example, more than 700,000 'running feet' of government records were destroyed, whilst only 80,000 (or 10.26%) were retained, of which 35,000 (or 4.5%) had passed the equivalent of second review (White, 'The development of the commonwealth archives programme', p. 291).

⁹⁶ See W. Smith, 'Archival selection: A Canadian view' in *JSA*, iii (6), 1965, pp. 275–280. I am grateful to Jon Fotheringham, the intellectual capital holdings advisor at Library and Archives Canada, who informed me in an email of 3rd Oct. 2014 à propos an enquiry he had submitted about 'all information resources identified as being of business value to the Government of Canada over the latter half of the 20th century, a basic rule-of-thumb holds that approximately three per cent will have enduring value. Of course, this ratio will vary from one GC [Government of Canada] institution to another, depending primarily upon the nature of their respective institutional mandates; but, overall, our experience has instilled a fairly high degree of confidence in that ratio. As to the impact of space constraints, like any other collecting institution, Library and Archives Canada faces such constraints. However, our experience has been such that space constraints have proven not to be the determining factor in the identification and selection of IREV [information resources identified as being of enduring (archival) value]'.

of their official records at very much the same time.⁹⁷ The birth and aftermath of the 1958 Act must, in short, be placed in the context of a much larger mid-century global reformation of the archivist's work.

It is the view of the small team who ran the official history programme and who had considerable experience in the management of departmental archives, that although the departmental review process, based on central TNA guidance, will inevitably lead to the destruction of the vast majority of records, these would by definition have been ephemeral and, or, trivial in nature and therefore of no great loss to research. But important and interesting papers have nevertheless vanished, particularly in the earlier years, including those touching on what the departmental guidance called 'the setting-up, proceedings and reports of committees, working parties and study groups'.⁹⁸

It is perhaps no wonder, then, that Booth and Glynn should have complained in 1979 that,

Destruction of files . . . is a cause for concern. In a substantial review which made considerable use of Home Office papers, Colin Holmes has identified the very loose principles and procedures which govern the destruction of and access to departmental records. This apparent lack of firm guidance has led to a wide variation between departments on their procedures for dealing with non-current papers of possible historical interest.⁹⁹

Two years on, that same historian, Colin Holmes, lamented how 'official papers have been disposed of through ignorance and the lack of historical training and perception on the part of government weeders'.¹⁰⁰ Little by little, the review process may have become more rigorous, orderly and professional.¹⁰¹ Yet doubts not only about the standing of archivists and records managers but also the clarity of the central guidance under which they worked, lingered on throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the period that concerns us most.¹⁰² It is equally clear that departmental record managers and others have never ceased to face conflicting, and perhaps not quite reconcilable demands. On the one hand, they have had to conserve what was deemed valuable for present and future social and political scientists, legal scholars and historians. That is their prime function. It is presumably why archives exist at all (The National Archives currently proclaim that 'Our 21st-century role is to collect and secure the future of the government record, both digital and physical, to preserve it for generations to

⁹⁷ See T. Cook "'We are what we keep; we keep what we are'": Archival appraisal past, present and future' in *JSA*, xxxii (2), 2011, p. 174.

⁹⁸ There has also been a squeezing of space driven by the relatively new and burgeoning demand for genealogical records.

⁹⁹ A. Booth and S. Glynn; 'The Public Records and Recent British Economic Historiography' in *The Economic History Review*, n.s. xxxii (3), August 1979, p. 307. The article to which they allude is an extended book review of D. Rumbelow; *The Houndsditch Murders and the Siege of Sidney Street* found in C. Holmes; 'In Search of Sidney Street' in *Society for the Study of Labour History Bulletin*, xxix, 1974, p. 77. In 2014, Colin Holmes was an emeritus professor of history at the University of Sheffield.

¹⁰⁰ C. Holmes; 'Government files and privileged access' in *Social History*, vi (3), Oct. 1981, p. 341.

¹⁰¹ See the report by P. Hennessy ('Whitehall "weeding" to be improved', *The Times*, 21 Sept. 1977) which records how Sir Douglas Allen, the head of the Home Civil Service, had begun instituting reforms to improve the procedures by which departmental record officers were recruited and trained. The very first, 1983, *Manual of Records Administration* talked at section 2.2. about the training of departmental staff which should consist of a series of 'short, concentrated periods of training' touching on the role of the PRO, record procedures in general, first review guidelines and the like. Those should be succeeded by a full day seminar on second review procedures. Dummy exercises involving a perusal of ten specimen departmental files were supposed to be part of the training, as would visits by departmental staff to the PRO. According to a research consultant in TNA it was about that time, the 1980s, that selection processes became more professional.

¹⁰² See the observations of K. Smith in 'Sampling and selection', pp. 50-51. See also M. Bonsey, S. Hughes, D. Thomas and V. Traylen, *Scrutiny of the Public Record Office: Report*, (London, 1990) i, p. 7.

come, and to make it as accessible and available as possible').¹⁰³ But, on the other hand, records managers have for decades confronted such an overwhelming volume of materials that they have had continually to resolve ways of getting rid of as much as they can – and what they have achieved has never been considered enough. As late as in 1990, for example, a principal of the PRO still felt obliged to repeat to his colleagues the old warning that 'An excessive retention of records is proving expensive in staff, time, space, and equipment'.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

For the historian, there is little sign of excessive retention. Some of what was disposed of in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the years in which we have a prime interest, was valuable and it can never be recovered. Time and again we have stumbled on *lacunae* which foiled our work. Indeed, the staff of The National Archives themselves confessed to us that they were occasionally bemused at how a number of important items had failed to pass review during that era.¹⁰⁵ There are, for example, no files on the decision taken in 1929 to appoint a select committee on capital punishment, and none on what government made of it; none on the decision to appoint the Wolfenden Committee, and none on what government made of it. Copious papers survive for the Fisher Inquiry into the investigation into the death of Maxwell Confait and the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure that succeeded it.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless strategic material that would explain the Home Secretary's decision to support an appeal against the conviction of three young men for his murder has been lost, as has material on the decision to establish the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure that stemmed from the appeal, and on the decision to establish the Criminal Prosecution Service that flowed from the Royal Commission (although in this, and other instances, there were supplementary sources in private and public archives).¹⁰⁷ However the criteria emanating from Schellenberg may have been applied, it is evident that the goal to stem the dreadful flood of documents has on many occasions succeeded in overriding their historical importance.

¹⁰³ <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/press-release-digital-transfer.pdf> (accessed 14 Apr. 2017).

¹⁰⁴ K. Smith, 'Sampling and Selection', p. 51.

¹⁰⁵ I have chosen to focus on the history of record management at TNA but it should be noted that other collections have also been depleted or scattered. For instance, the Home Office library, a once impressive collection of holdings of the annual statistics relating to crime and justice, publications of the Home Office Research Unit and relevant criminological studies from both the UK and overseas is now only a shadow of itself. We were told by the head of the Home Office Knowledge and Information Management Unit that the creation of the Ministry of Justice in 2007 saw its criminal justice material being transferred to that Ministry's library. Two years later, and following what was called a restructure at the Home Office, it was decided to move to an electronic library service with a range of online material being made available to staff through their desktop computers. A small hard copy collection of departmental publications was also retained in the Information Services Centre at 2 Marsham Street. Other material, it was said, was transferred to the British Library, National Archives and the Ministry of Justice.

¹⁰⁶ *Report of an Inquiry by the Hon. Sir Henry Fisher into the circumstances leading to the trial of three persons on charges arising out of the death of Maxwell Confait and the fire at 27 Doggett Road, London SE6* (HMSO, 1977). Original documents relating to criminal charges in the Confait case and of the Fisher Inquiry itself are scattered through a number of record series held at TNA and can be identified via the online catalogue.

¹⁰⁷ There were, for example, published and unpublished accounts offered by the principal campaigners for an appeal in the Maxwell Confait Case (see C. Price and J. Caplan, *The Confait Confessions* (London, 1977); Hull History Centre Archives U DMP/40, Christopher Price papers; and Christopher Price's personal papers.