

ART. XXII.—*Cumberland, Westmorland & Carlisle Record Offices, 1960-1965.* By B. C. JONES, M.A.

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THE Joint Committee of the three local authorities of the counties of Cumberland & Westmorland and the City of Carlisle established on 1 December 1960 for the care and management of records of historical interest in the area sprang spontaneously to life in response to a challenge to local pride and patriotism. The issue which brought the three authorities together in this enterprise arose from an offer by Lord Lonsdale to transfer his family and estate archives to a local record office or University library where they could be made accessible for historical research. The offer, however, was conditional upon the record office or University library having sufficient storage accommodation and trained staff to house the records and to provide the catalogue that would be necessary.

In 1960, the only repository in the far north of England capable of accepting such an offer with a reasonable expectation of fulfilling these conditions, was the University record office at the Prior's Kitchen in Durham. This repository had already taken responsibility for the care of similar collections of national interest, in particular the records of Earl Grey of Northumberland and of the Earl of Carlisle of Naworth in Cumberland. The office was well established, had already shewn interest in Lord Lonsdale's archives and had previously agreed to take them if no local organisation for the care of records in Cumberland and Westmorland could do so.

For Lord Lonsdale the matter was an urgent one. For years this vast and historically valuable collection of family and estate records had remained closed to historians and spasmodic attempts at putting the archives in

order had never achieved very much. The situation became more critical in 1956 when, following the sale of the family's west Cumberland properties, the records at the Whitehaven estate office were packed in boxes and trunks and taken to a loft over the estate office at Lowther where they lay in a state of almost total inaccessibility and in very real danger of loss by fire. This was a situation which could not be left to chance for very much longer and there was a growing demand among English and American scholars that some steps should be taken to protect the records from the hazards to which they were exposed. On the surface it looked as if there was no practical solution to the problem to be found in Cumberland, Westmorland or Carlisle, despite a keen local appreciation of the family's importance and often decisive influence in the affairs of both counties and the city in the past. A County Record Office for Cumberland had been established at the Courts in Carlisle nearly 20 years before in 1942, but it had lacked sufficient storage and search room accommodation from the start, and by 1960 the strongroom was full to the point of inefficiency and confusion and all available temporary stores in the cellars of county council buildings in Portland Square, Carlisle, were being used to the limit. Searchers were confined to a small narrow room where consultation of even a limited number of books or papers was a discouraging and frustrating pastime. In Westmorland considerable interest had been shewn in the care of county records for a number of years, but the County Records Committee had never come to the point of establishing a record office at County Hall, Kendal, and even if it had boldly taken the first step of appointing an archivist the impasse facing the Cumberland office would have confronted Westmorland within a year or two.

Carlisle City was in a worse case still, for very little attention had been paid to the problems of record-keeping since the end of the 19th century although at Tullie

House, the Public Library had done what it could within the limits of its restricted storage space and small budget. All three authorities would have been faced with heavy financial expenditure in finding and equipping proper accommodation for the storage of the Lonsdale archives and in appointing staff to sort and catalogue them and neither of the two counties nor the city was in a position to carry the burden alone. The only possible chance of keeping the records in the area seemed to lie in a joint enterprise of two or three of the authorities acting together.

In local government there were precedents for co-operation. Cumberland and Westmorland had run a joint police force for over 100 years and the mental hospital at the Garlands, Carlisle, had at one time been controlled by the city and the two counties. More important still perhaps was the fact that the traditions and history of Cumberland and Westmorland are linked closely together. The diocese of Carlisle had included the bottom of Westmorland from its foundation and the modern diocese extends over both counties; county families like the Lowthers, Musgraves, Penningtons and le Flemings had properties in both Cumberland and Westmorland and their social, economic and political interests were similar. The two counties have shared the same historians and are joined together in our society. Co-operation in the preservation of records and the provision of a regional archives service seemed sensible in the circumstances and a very desirable object to attain, but these associations were hardly strong enough by themselves to bring the organisation into being. The question of the Lonsdale archives and the necessity for coming to a decision reasonably quickly was, however, a spur to action and an opportunity for progress which might not have occurred at all and would certainly not occur again for years to come.

Lord Lonsdale consented to keep the offer of his archives open whilst preliminary meetings were held and

agreement to take joint action was not long in coming. By December 1960 the details of the constitution of the Committee were settled and all recommendations on representation, budgeting procedure and staff had been approved by all three councils. With effect from 1 April 1961 each of the authorities consented to delegate to the Joint Committee the following functions:—

"The safe and adequate custody, care, maintenance and production of records and documents already in, or which may hereafter come into the custody of the three Authorities, excepting, however, such as are required by statute or otherwise to be retained in the custody of a Clerk of the Peace, Clerk of a County Council or Town Clerk as the case may be, or as may from time to time be required for current use in connection with any statutory or customary function, together with any other records and documents which may in the future be handed over from any source to the Committee, and in particular, the making of all such available for the purposes of historical or other research."

Once the Committee had been established the next step was to find suitable accommodation in Carlisle for its headquarters. Various buildings were considered but the one which was eventually secured on a repairing lease from the Ministry of Works, was the Alma barrack block in the outer bailey of the Castle. The building was well situated, large enough and structurally sound; the rooms inside were spacious and arranged so conveniently on the original plan that very little adaptation was necessary to fit them for their new purposes. Plans were laid to renew and overhaul the heating and lighting systems and to decorate a minimum number of rooms for use as stores and office accommodation. These were bare essentials and no one supposed that the adaptations planned for 1961/2 were more than temporary expedients on a shoestring budget.

Slow but steady progress was maintained throughout 1961, but this was momentarily halted shortly after Christmas by the sudden and unexpected death of Mr

Tom Gray, the Committee's first archivist. For a number of years Mr Gray had struggled against discouraging odds to give life to the record office in Cumberland and at the time of his death he was within sight of his goal. He had come to the profession late in life, but his quick and active mind, his knowledge of the history of the county and his skill in teaching and in stimulating others to take an interest in history and historical records, won him many friends and were qualities which outweighed his lack of method and professional training and gave advantages to his successor which more than counter-balanced the difficulties of taking over an office where so much depended upon the memory of the archivist and where so little was written down.

Between Mr Gray's death and the arrival of his successor, a period of six months elapsed and a further three months were to pass before staffing and accommodation problems were overcome; there were unavoidable delays in completing the work of adaptation at the Castle and in appointing an archivist to take charge of the Kendal office, but in the meantime accessions of records were beginning to come in.

Two large family collections which were threatened with dispersal or loss were secured when negotiations for the records of Lady Hothfield at Appleby Castle were opened in April and about the same time the le Fleming manuscripts were rescued from an outhouse at Rydal and lodged temporarily at Levens Hall. From the middle of June onwards the pace began to quicken. Thousands of letters and papers of Catherine Marshall, a prominent suffragette, Fabian and pacifist were saved from a hut the size of a small parish hall at the back of the Hawse End house near Keswick. During August and September preliminary lists were made of part of the Lonsdale archives in the loft at Lowther and of the City's records in the town clerk's strongroom; title deeds and estate records of the Lawson family of Brayton and Isel were

recovered from the obscurity of an attic in Whitehaven and agreement was reached with Sir William Pennington Ramsden to accept records from Muncaster Castle as soon as possible after the move to the new headquarters in Carlisle.

Recognition of the suitability of the new record offices for the storage of public records under the control of the Lord Chancellor and of tithe and manorial documents followed an inspection of the building by the secretary of the Historical Manuscripts Commission in September, and by the end of the year the bishop of Carlisle had approved the office in Carlisle as a diocesan record office for episcopal archives and Cumberland parish records and the office in County Hall, Kendal, as a place of deposit for parish records in Westmorland. Everything now depended upon the speedy completion of the work at the Castle, and preparations were made at the Courts, Carlisle, to ensure that upon the word "go" the move could take place promptly.

The first of six furniture van loads of records left the Courts on 26 November 1962. Each instalment was stacked on the floor of the large room which is now divided in two, to form a search room and exhibition room; here the worst of the dust and dirt was brushed and dusted off and the boxes, parcels and rows of books were then carried upstairs and arranged on shelves. Where there were lists, these were checked as far as possible, but the main task was to get the records installed where they could be produced if required. By Christmas the worst was over, although the limited character of the first adaptations at the Castle meant that much of what had been carried and stacked would have to be moved twice or three times again before finding a permanent place in the strong-rooms; in fact the game of general post will not be played out finally until the autumn of this year.

Throughout 1963 and the following year, the installation of a fire detecting system throughout the building,

a large shelving scheme carried out in two stages, interior decoration and a score of minor adaptations and alterations improved the security and efficiency of the building and completely transformed the appearance of the spare and cheerless barrack block in to which the records were moved at first. All these structural alterations and adaptations were done throughout a period of massive accessions of new record material which could not be refused or delayed for long. Many of the city's archives had to be moved from scattered offices in Fisher Street before the opening of the new civic centre and there were equally good reasons for getting in records from the diocesan registry, Muncaster castle and the Lonsdale estate office. At the same time the number of occasions on which records were produced for students rose from a mere dozen or so a month to over 500 in the year.

The services of fumigation for mould infected documents, bookbinding and archive repair and photography which could only be managed on a small scale in 1963 are now expanding in range and scope, as money for the purchase of equipment and machinery becomes available this year. Displays of documents and work with schools in the area have become easier at Carlisle since the opening of the exhibition room: they are still difficult to arrange at Kendal because the office is small and very restricted for space. Lack of time and to a lesser extent limited display equipment have ruled out the possibility of large-scale public exhibitions, although for two summers past there have been displays at the Moot Hall in Appleby.

Work on records has not been entirely confined to documents deposited in the record offices. In Westmorland survey lists are being prepared for family collections at Levens Hall and the Biggins, Kirkby Lonsdale and for borough records at Appleby and Kendal, and in both counties a survey of parish records has been started, although progress tends to be slow. Records of the Dean

and Chapter in the Fratry, Carlisle, were put in order and listed during 1963 by an archivist who was appointed by the Chapter temporarily for a year. At the end of her term she joined the staff at the Carlisle Office and since then by arrangement with the Chapter Librarian, the Record Office has promised to accept some responsibility for the care of the records, especially for their production and return and for supervision of searchers as occasion demands. In general this means producing records for study in the search room at the Castle. By a more formal agreement with Lord Egremont the Joint Committee have also assumed responsibility for the organisation and listing of family and estate records at Cockermouth Castle. These records will remain in the muniment room where they are safely stored, but arrangements to consult them will be made through the Record Office at Carlisle. For the time being this involves bringing records from Cockermouth to Carlisle and some notice of intention to search is required, but as progress is made in sorting and listing the collection it will be easier to arrange search room facilities at Cockermouth. A base of this sort in the middle of the county would help to overcome some of the problems of making records accessible to people living in towns and villages from which Carlisle is remote.

The Carlisle office of the Joint Committee began with room to spread and it was built upon a firm foundation of the work done between 1942 and 1946 by Cumberland's first county archivist, Miss Madeleine Elsas, which had fortunately survived the vicissitudes of nearly twenty years. In Westmorland, however, there had been no one to lay the foundations and the office has had to do the best it could within the limitations of accommodation available at County Hall. Before the service began, everything possible had been done to encourage the preservation of County records threatened with loss or destruction and the strongroom was already a place of deposit for tithe maps, bishop's transcripts of registers

and some family and solicitor's collections, but plainly there were limitations to what could be achieved spasmodically and on a spare-time basis.

The policy of the Joint Committee has been to store Westmorland records in Westmorland as far as possible. There was never any intention of centralising the Committee's holdings at Carlisle, although the necessity for keeping the records of the diocese (with the exception of bishop's transcripts and tithe records), probate records and some family collections which crossed the boundaries of both counties entire and undivided was understood and recognised from the start.

In 1962 the one strongroom available at Kendal looked full but this was partly an illusion created by haphazard arrangement, shelving that was clumsy and wasteful of space and storage in the strongroom of a large quantity of printed books, such as volumes of statutes, spare copies of printed Council minutes; law books and the like. There was also a formidable series of old county council papers which with time and patience could be reduced in bulk by the systematic elimination of scores of duplicates, blank forms and papers of a particularly trivial or ephemeral kind. If the Committee's policy with regard to Westmorland records was to mean anything at all, it was essential that every inch of space in the strongroom should be saved as quickly as possible. Money was provided and plans were made to accomplish this in 1963 by finding alternative accommodation for the printed books on open bookshelves in the archivist's room nearby, boxing the loose and disordered collections, reducing the bulk of the old county council papers and most important of all, reshelfing the whole room to use the limited space to the best advantage.

Steel shelving was chosen in two sizes to fit the record boxes it was intended to use and the many books and ledgers which made up the bulk of the records of the old Poor Law Unions, and preference was given to a type

of shelving which could be easily adjusted on clips to save space vertically. Part of one wall was reserved for cantilever or spur-type shelving for large-scale maps made up in rolls. As a result of the reorganisation and re-shelving, the strongroom which looked full at the outset has been found capable of storing some of the new accessions with a small reserve of shelving for future additions, but it has involved playing an elaborate game of fitting a quart into a pint pot whilst the shelving work was done, and it has not entirely succeeded in making provision for all the records which have been received in the interval.

For the time being until further accommodation becomes available at Kendal, bulky collections like the Hothfield manuscripts from Appleby Castle or some solicitors' records which had to be moved in a hurry, are stored at Carlisle. Here they are being cleaned, sorted and listed by the Carlisle staff and if in the meantime they are required for consultation in Westmorland, they can still be made accessible at Kendal at reasonably short notice. The Joint Committee which has given this flexibility to arrangements for storage and production has also allowed Westmorland to expand its archive service rapidly and economically, by sharing some of the burdens of sorting and listing collections with Cumberland, and by making use of the services of fumigation, repair and photography at Carlisle whilst retaining the undoubted advantages of running a local office.

During the last two years the flow of new accessions of records at both offices has been increasing and it is likely to continue at the present high level for some years to come. There is a need to work quickly to save records from destruction or to prevent their steady deterioration and decay in the places where they are now stored. Whole series of books and papers which since their rescue have proved their value to the historian were in fact recovered, occasionally in the nick of time, from such unlikely holes

and corners as a loft where pigeons roosted, a coal cellar, a barn floor, a roof void and a lobby, lying hidden and forgotten behind a panel on the stairs of an office. Catherine Marshall's papers, mentioned above, were found scattered knee-deep across the floor of the hut at Hawse End intermingled with rubbish of all kinds. The hut floor was rotten in parts and the walls leaned out at a crazy angle; the windows were broken, and a gaping hole in the wall at one end let in the sheep as well as the rain. While these conditions last in conjunction with a formidable backlog of work in sorting and listing official collections of the three authorities, the simple hand list or schedule as a finding aid is all that can be provided as a means of reference for the user.

More detailed calendars and indexes will come in time, but meanwhile the hand list is sufficient to ensure that even new accessions can be made available reasonably quickly. It is hoped that the services which the Joint Committee offer now can be extended and developed steadily in the years to come, and that the work of the Carlisle and Kendal offices will help to stimulate new studies in geography and the social sciences as well as in history, and that schools, training colleges, local history groups and the individual searcher ploughing a lone furrow, will all benefit as much in this area as they have done in other parts of the country wherever local record offices have been established.