

NOTES ON THE DEEDS AND DOCUMENTS DEPOSITED WITH THE SUSSEX ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

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THE value of old legal documents dealing with the transfer of lands is well known, and the Council of the Sussex Archaeological Society has been glad all through the years of its existence to be the recipient of gifts of documents of this character. One of the earliest of such gifts was a choice little charter recording the grant by Roger de Frax(in)eto to the Chaplain of the Lepers' Hospital near Seaford of seven acres of land in that neighbourhood. This charter is printed in facsimile in vol. XII of the Society's *Collections* and the original charter was for some years exhibited in the Museum, but it is now more safely deposited in the Muniment Room.

It was, however, not until about 1887 that the first gift of any considerable number of documents received by the Society was dealt with. The gift was made by the Earl of Chichester and consisted mainly of deeds in which property of the Pelham family was concerned. A calendar of these documents and of an important little series of manorial records presented by Mr. Charles Leeson Prince was made by Mr. E. H. W. Dunkin, who was an indefatigable worker at that time on all kinds of Sussex records. The calendar is printed in vol. XXXVII of the Society's *Collections* and it was followed in vol. XXXVIII by a series of documents given by Mr. W. J. Smith of Brighton. A further number of Pelham documents was later obtained by purchase, and occasional small gifts continued to be made to the Society.

In 1917 Mr. A. F. Drake, the surviving member of the firm of Drake & Lee, Solicitors, of Lewes, whose office was directly opposite Barbican House, was retiring from practice, and a chance visit by the writer of these

notes, who was later appointed Honorary Curator of Deeds and Documents by the Society, found Mr. Drake surrounded by a mass of parchment deeds sorted out as not belonging to any existing clients; some little help followed in deciphering a few early deeds and listing others, and in the end Mr. Drake expressed his wish to present the deeds to the Society. Unfortunately he died shortly afterwards, but the gift was completed by his son.

On the termination of Mr. Drake's occupancy of his office, the East Sussex Health Insurance Committee became the tenants, and an arrangement having been made for the renting of the Strong Room attached to the premises as a Muniment Room for the Society's records, the Drake Collection, numbering nearly 2,000 documents, was able to return to its former home.

Another collection which soon found a resting-place in the new Muniment Room was one comprising the muniments of the late Mr. H. C. Lane of Middleton Manor in Westmeston. The existence of these deeds was brought to the notice of the Society by Mr. H. H. Bothamley, who had married Mr. Lane's widow, at the luncheon held in 1922 to celebrate the gift, by Sir Charles Thomas-Stanford to the Society, of Lewes Castle. The deeds, which relate to the estates formerly belonging to the Dobell family of Streat, appear to have had a curious history, having been forgotten or mislaid for upwards of fifty years. To Mr. Bothamley, since deceased—as also is Mrs. Bothamley—belongs the credit of saving this important and interesting collection by the careful work spent upon the documents when they were found in an outhouse in a bad condition from damp and mildew. At Mr. Bothamley's suggestion the calendar of these 825 deeds was printed by the Sussex Record Society as vol. XXIX of its publications.

In 1925 the important Law of Property Act, 1922, came into operation, and, as a result of its provisions for the abolition of copyhold tenure of land and the extinguishment of manorial incidents, the Court Rolls of manors lost their importance as legal records proving

the ownership of lands, while they still retained their great value as historical documents. For the safeguarding of these records they were, by another Act, placed in the charge of the Master of the Rolls, who accordingly recognized repositories throughout the country as places for the deposit of manorial records. The Sussex Archaeological Trust received recognition in this way in 1926 as a repository for East Sussex records. It should be explained that the limitation to East Sussex records does not in any way preclude the Society from accepting gifts or deposits of deeds and documents relating to any part of Sussex; all it means is that from official sources such as the Public Record Office and the British Records Association, to be mentioned later, only East Sussex records are received by our Society, the corresponding records for West Sussex going to Hove Public Library or the recently formed West Sussex County Repository at Chichester.

Shortly after its recognition as a repository the Society received from the Marquess of Abergavenny an important series of court books and records relating to his numerous Sussex manors, and in 1928 Viscount Portman deposited his large collection of deeds from Buxted Park, comprising not only deeds relating to his Sussex estates, but also those concerning the family estates at Hawksbury in Gloucestershire and in other counties, numbering in all over 1,500 documents.

Another large collection that has been placed in the custody of the Society comprises the muniments of Viscount Gage. These were examined and reported on by the Historical Manuscripts Commission in 1872, when they were at the offices of Lord Gage's solicitors in Lewes; later they were removed to Firle, and a series of the earlier charters were calendared at the British Museum. In 1922, at Lord Gage's request, the writer, on behalf of the Society, overhauled the muniments and calendared the contents of most of the boxes, and when this work was completed it was arranged that all the documents of earlier date than 1800 should be placed in the custody of the Society at Lewes. This collection,

like that of the Portman deeds, comprises a considerable number of deeds relating to counties other than Sussex; no less than 1,100 concern Gloucestershire and Monmouthshire, where the Gage family had considerable estates, formerly part of the Forest of Dean. This property was sold to the Commissioners of Woods and Forests in 1817, but the earlier documents were not handed over on the sale, and now, according to the generally accepted view, they should not be separated from the rest of the family muniments. Of the Sussex records, Court Rolls of various manors form an important feature of this collection, including those of the Manor of Alciston from 1275 to 1689 and a fine series of Bailiffs' Accounts of the same manor.

At the Annual Meeting of the Society on 12 March 1932 the Society was honoured by the presence of Lord Hanworth, the Master of the Rolls, who visited the Muniment Room in company with Lord Gage, some of whose deeds he inspected. In the course of Lord Hanworth's remarks at the afternoon meeting, when he gave a talk on the Preservation of Ancient Documents, he expressed his approval of and commended the arrangements made by the Society for the custody of the documents in its possession.

With the establishment in 1932 of the British Records Association under the Presidency of the Master of the Rolls a great step was taken towards the co-ordination of the work of all institutions like our Society, and the Sussex Record Society, interested in the custody and preservation or publication of records. The particular activity of the Association to which we would refer concerns the collection of deeds lying in the hands of solicitors and others, of no value from a legal point of view, and therefore in danger of being destroyed, and the distribution of such documents to the localities to which they relate. This special work had been undertaken for a short period by the British Record Society, mainly a publishing society, and our repository benefited to the extent of about 100 documents from this source. From the work of the British Records Associa-

tion since its establishment our advantage has been on a much larger scale, upwards of 1,500 documents having been received.

One other recent acquisition deserves special mention, namely, the gift by the late Mr. W. A. Raper, of Battle, of over 2,000 deeds, plans, &c., concerning the estates of the Fuller family of Brightling; to this collection the deeds of the Vinehall Estate in Mountfield, presented earlier by Lord Ashton of Hyde, since deceased, form a useful supplement.

It will be realized that receipt by the repository is only the first step towards making the records available for the use of present and future generations of searchers. The next step is the arrangement of the documents—not always an easy matter and dependent to some extent upon the arrangement or absence of arrangement at the time of receipt—and the making of a calendar consisting of a précis of each document, in which all matter of topographical or genealogical interest is carefully recorded, and some indication is given of the parishes concerned, pending the compilation of a full index of place-names. The making of an index of personal names is an ideal to be aimed at, but difficult to accomplish owing to the large number of names to be dealt with.

So far we have only referred to documents *received*, but the work of the repository also includes from time to time the placing of records relating to other counties in repositories for the localities concerned. In this way, before the British Records Association became a useful clearing-house, parcels of deeds were sent on behalf of donors to Reading and Exeter, and a collection of Assize records made by the late Sir William Grantham was distributed among several county repositories; deeds have also been sent to Yorkshire. An effort on a larger scale was more recently undertaken in dealing with about 7,000 deeds, the property of a deceased collector, which related to nearly every county in England, and some in Scotland and Ireland. A large proportion was distributed personally in the name of the Society, and

the help of the British Records Association was invoked in regard to the remainder.

In conclusion, we are pleased to be able to report that, with the exception of a few modern deeds and drafts, practically all the documents in the custody of the Society are fully calendared; the place-names in a limited number of the calendars are indexed, and, thanks mainly to the zeal of one worker, Mr. C. H. Ridge, the personal names in a few collections are also indexed. In addition to dealing with documents in the custody of the Society, advantage has been taken of opportunities kindly offered to calendar collections of deeds remaining in private hands. In this way we have been able to deal with the important collection of deeds at Ashburnham, the property of Lady Catherine Ashburnham, numbering 1,320 documents, and several smaller collections, including also a series of De La Warr documents at Knowle, calendared by the late Mr. Ernest Straker, F.S.A. All these calendars are available for the use of searchers.

In the early days of the repository two of our members, Mr. A. W. Furlong and Mr. Harry Storey, gave valuable assistance in the calendaring and indexing work; Mr. Furlong has left Eastbourne, but Mr. Storey's work has continued. Mrs. Merivale kindly checked the Portman deeds, and Miss Marten has expended much time and labour in the preparation of index slips. The help thus afforded is gratefully acknowledged.