Security in an English Archives

by EDWIN WELCH

Churchill College archives (Cambridge) was established in 1966 to care for the papers of Sir Winston Churchill, his immediate family and certain contemporaries.[1] This departure from the British archival tradition was modelled to some degree upon the American Presidential Library system. By the time the first archivist was appointed in January 1967, the College had already received a number of collections of papers, but in the absence of qualified staff almost nothing had been done about storage or sorting. The largest collection, Sir Winston's own archives, was then being sorted at the Public Record Office, London. No consideration by the College had been given to the problems involved in dealing with large quantities of very recent papers.

The immediate problems faced were those of restrictions on access and the security of the papers. Since many of the documents acquired were official government papers, they were liable to restrictions under both the Thirty Year Rule and the Official Secrets Act. While the first restriction automatically ends thirty-one years after the date of the document, the latter continues until an item is declassified. In addition to this, many of the donors themselves imposed restrictions which ranged from a desire simply to know who was consulting the papers to a complete closure for a period of years. Many individual documents had a high monetary value and there was considerable risk that these papers, for which the College was a trustee, might be stolen unless adequate precautions were taken. Most of the planning of the Archives was based on these considerations.

Fortunately, the Library had a storeroom available with most of the advantages of a strongroom for archives. The room was dry, oblong in shape with but one door and no windows. It was also near the Library reading room where for the first few years readers would consult the archives. A quick survey revealed that almost all modern political papers were on foolscap files (8½ inches by 14 inches) or in volumes with similar dimensions. Consequently, boxes were designed for convenient and suitable storage. The files were to be stored horizontally on the shelves. Each box was 18 inches long, to allow for repaired files to be lifted out easily, and only 3 inches deep to avoid damage to files at the bottom. The width of the boxes, 11 inches, was dictated by the need to use standard shelving. Three

1 In Britain a clear distinction is usually drawn between the archives building (the record office) and the actual archives, but Churchill College is one of the exceptions to this rule. In this article "Archives" is used for the building and "archives" for the records contained in the building.

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boxes fitted on a 36-inch shelf, leaving room for easy removal. The box lids were loose and also 3 inches deep. A material called *Pressboard* (apparently unavailable in North America) and aluminium rivets were used in the construction of the boxes. *Pressboard* is acidfree and very durable. Since the average life of a box appears to be at least 50 years, the considerable cost of re-boxing papers every few years would be avoided.

Standard shelves, 36 inches by 18 inches, were used and caused no problems. The shelves and supports were of fire-proofed wood, which is safer than the metal shelving normally in use in Britain. Nine boxes could be fitted on each shelf without causing problems of jamming. Although the boxes were designed to hold files, they proved adaptable to most other archives. A collection of small volumes of Lord Esher's correspondence was arranged very economically in these boxes. Later, when the correspondence of Lord Randolph Churchill, Sir Winston's father, arrived bound in very large volumes, wider boxes which fitted six rather than nine to a shelf were ordered. Wherever possible, volumes and other material were placed in boxes, thereby improving storage conditions and saving space at the same time. It was necessary to allocate only two or three shelves to awkward and oversize items.

Because all the records were stored in boxes, it was possible to use a mechanically-operated mobile shelving system. This was *Bruynzeel* shelving (also currently unavailable in North America) which is operated by compressed air. Only one corridor is required between the shelves and it is opened by a piston which is activated by a button at the end of the row of shelves. One defect of the system at Cambridge was that the compressor had to be located in the strongroom itself. It would have been more convenient to have it elsewhere and to pipe the compressed air into the strongroom. The *Bruynzeel* system of shelving incorporates a virtually foolproof safety device operated by a metal strip at the bottom of the shelving to prevent persons or archives being crushed by accident.

A sturdy fireproof door with a large notice calling for carbon dioxide extinguishers to be used, guarded the strongroom. The entire Library block was already protected by a smoke detection system (the *Minerva*). The door had a combination lock which was particularly valuable for security because the numbers could be changed in less than five minutes. The combination was altered regularly, or when it might have become known to persons not on staff. The burglar alarm system for the storage and office space was installed later. Consequently, it could work only on door contacts and concealed wiring. This non-integrated system is not as effective as one using sound detectors or light beams. Despite a considerable number of false alarms for fire and theft, the two systems seemed to work well since they had a "fail-safe" capacity. No flood alarm system was installed because there was little risk of the strongroom being flooded as it was on the second-floor level.

Once an archive group had been sorted and listed, it was placed immediately in boxes and moved to its permanent location with provision in each box for the extra space required when the papers had been repaired and bound. For all the large archive groups, special box labels were provided with the record group reference in bold type, such as:

CHURCHILL COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE

DRBK

The series and item references were completed by hand. This was the only information on the outside of the box, which greatly enhanced security because any unauthorized person in the storage area would be unable to identify restricted or valuable documents without consulting the finding aids. The noting on the outside of a box of classified material is undoubtedly a convenience for potential thieves.

The boxes were placed on the next available shelves in one of two areas. If there were few or no restrictions, and therefore the material was likely to be used frequently, the area closest to the door was used. Restricted collections were kept at the far end of the strongroom. This simple device not only reduced time spent in finding documents for readers, but also provided an indication of restrictions on a collection.

Each corridor was assigned a letter of the alphabet and each bay of shelving in the corridor a second letter. The shelves were numbered from top to bottom (the alternative of bottom to top would have been used if the bays had been of uneven heights). The reference BK4, for example, described the location of nine boxes. For obvious reasons this information was not included in the finding aid. It was available only on a card index kept in the strongroom. These cards were arranged alphabetically by call numbers and indicated restrictions as well as locations:

SWNL	EC 6 & 7	Permission of owner required
Acc. 113	ED 1 & 2	Thirty Year Rule to 1991.

A card was prepared immediately on receipt of each archive group, and as the group was processed, the card was amended appropriately. Cards could also be easily changed if the boxes had to be moved.

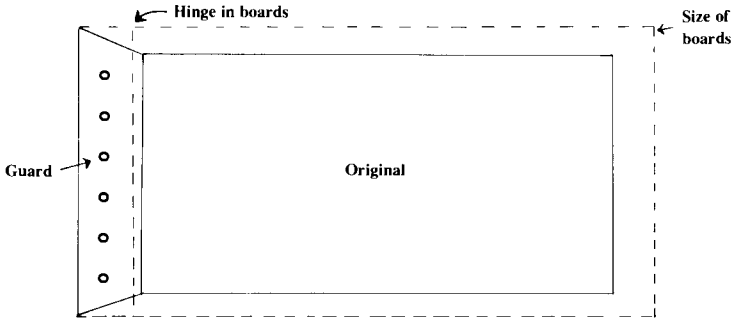
The finding aids (one for each archive group however small) were standardised. Each file, volume, or item was described in a brief entry, for example:

WEIR
14/6 1932 Ottawa Industrial Committee minutes.

All the information required by readers could be found in the preliminary pages. The introduction included a brief description of the papers and their arrangement, as well as a non-specific warning that there were restrictions on use. A brief bibliography was also provided with a chronology of the person or institution involved. These finding aids were distributed widely: one set was kept in the strongroom for ready reference; others were placed in the reading room; and copies were lent by mail as required. This proved to be a convenient method of answering many enquiries which would otherwise have required a letter.

On arrival at the Archives for the first time, readers completed a standard application form which recorded such information as the name of the applicant, degrees, addresses, telephone numbers, and subject of research. The reader was also required to sign a statement on the form agreeing to abide by rules in force at the institution. A copy of the current rules was stapled to the form and left with the reader. A card was prepared giving name, addresses and the permissions which he held to see collections. If possible this was compiled beforehand from correspondence with the reader; otherwise, it was typed immediately after the first visit. The dates of the researcher's visits to the Archives were recorded on the back of the card. No register of visitors was kept and little attention was paid to references or letters of recommendations, for these were found to have little value and were difficult to verify. The two card indexes permitted a rapid check to determine if a reader was allowed to see a particular file. The only difficulty encountered was that the card index of readers had to be kept near the telephone in the office, whereas the card index of collections was in the strongroom. To overcome this separation of information it was proposed that the reader card index would be transferred to a computer when warranted by the number of researchers. The information could then be available at more than one point in the Archives. The same computer system could be used to answer queries about the archives. About half the inquiries concerned a specific group of archives and could usually be answered by the loan of the appropriate finding aid. The remaining inquiries sought information about specific subjects which might be located anywhere in the collections. Instead of calendaring all the files, it was proposed that they be indexed directly using a computer key word system thereby limiting a search to record groups which were generally open or to which the reader had acquired access permission. This computer index would help prevent the accidental showing of restricted papers.

The security of papers at Churchill College was facilitated by a policy of systematic repair and binding of all loose papers. An order of priority for repair was established reflecting the anticipated amount of public use. Each collection in turn was completely repaired and all loose items were bound. The binding of files was of the type used by the Public Record Office in London and known there as "guarding and filing". A strip of linen-backed paper (the guard) was attached to the top of each original sheet and holes drilled in it:



The contents of each file were then fastened between cloth-covered boards by passing a lace or strong cord through the holes in the guard and the boards, as shown above. A different colour of cloth was used for each large collection facilitating the location of misplaced files. Only the call number of each file was placed on the spine and front board. Once again, no other information was given on the outside of a file.

Although this system of total repair and binding may appear to have been extravagant, it produced several economies. Documents could not be removed from such a file accidentally and it would be very difficult to do so feloniously. Material could be retrieved and returned to storage easily. The system also helped the conservation assistant to organize his work systematically over a period of several months. The length of the guard permitted photocopies to be made without removing the document from its file. When a document was required for an exhibition it was a simple matter to cut the lace and replace it temporarily with a photocopy.[2]

Additional precautions taken at Churchill College precluded the loss of whole files or volumes. A metal trigger was imbedded in the cover of every repaired item to activate one of the library detection systems. The College

2 Subsequently the same method of repair was used with equal success for the eighteenth century archives of Cheshunt College, Cambridge.

proposed that when a new building was erected, the detection device should be located at the exit through which all readers would leave. To avoid the possible removal of an original paper from a file, it was suggested that files be weighed immediately before and after circulation to readers. This, if done in public, might provide at least a useful deterrent. However, the policy of repairing documents and an insistance upon the enforcement of security measures without allowing any exception, was found to be very beneficial by itself. When the staff was obviously concerned for the safety of documents, most readers were equally careful.

For each file, document or other unit in the finding aid, the reader was required to fill out the following carbon-loaded request form:

CHURCHILL COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

REQUEST FOR DOCUMENT			For Official use only.	
Collection	Number	Sub-number	D	Shelf
			PR	OS
Only one document should be entered on each form.				

Name..... Date .....

Please write clearly

The first copy was kept in the search room, alphabetically by the reader's name. The second copy was placed in the box from which the original file had been removed. To simplify the task of recovering this copy, the form was placed in a coloured holder about twelve inches long. When the file was returned the reader was given the top copy as a receipt. The second copy was recovered when the file was replaced and was then kept as a record of use. The requests were kept chronologically in bundles with the ultimate intention of feeding this information into a computer when warranted by the number of readers. This system of control made it virtually impossible for documents to be misplaced or lost, and the number of documents in use

could be identified exactly at any time. On several occasions this system facilitated the checking of readers who appeared to be careless.

Other security measures discussed for Churchill College Archives included the use of closed-circuit television in the search room and the use of photocopies for certain particularly vulnerable documents. Even a dummy television camera has a considerable deterrent effect, but it is different to conceal its non-operation from the public. Photocopies were used principally in collections being damaged by heavy use, and because these were also the documents most likely to be stolen the added advantage of having another copy in case of loss accrued from this copying. Few readers complained about this policy.

Many of the security devices and policies detailed above are used in Archives in Britain and in other countries. Churchill College was unusual because its security problems demanded a very tight system. It would be pleasant to be able to record that there were no losses of papers, but unfortunately, a number of documents were lost. Losses were quickly detectable, which is not the case in all Archives, and immediate corrective measures could be taken. It seems impossible to outwit completely the determined thief.