THE PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE, KEW

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Since the Public Record Office was established by statute in 1838, thus bringing public records for the first time into the custody of a single authority, it has been faced with an almost constant accommodation problem. The opening in 1856 of the first stage of a new record repository on the Rolls Estate in Chancery Lane brought the public records together on one site, but this and further extensions of the Chancery Lane building during the latter part of the nineteenth century only just kept pace with record accruals. After the First World War it became necessary to store less heavily used records out of London, the first such country repository being a former gaol at Cambridge and the most recent a Second World War huddled hospital at Ashridge, Hertfordshire. More recently accommodation for readers has also become a problem and since 1968 certain heavily used classes have been stored and seen in part of the Land Registry building in Portugal Street. Since 1972 the PRO has also had custody of the British Transport Historical Records at Porchester Road, Paddington. With all this accommodation the PRO was able to accommodate records occupying almost fifty miles of shelving and to cope with over 90,000 visits by readers each year, but the dispersal of records and search rooms was inconvenient and there was no room for expansion on the existing sites (records are currently accruing at a rate of about a mile of shelving each year). Consequently in November 1969 the Government announced its decision to build a new Public Record Office at Kew, which would meet the foreseeable needs of the PRO to the year 2000 with space on site for further expansion thereafter. Work commenced in May 1973 and the new building opened its doors to readers on 17 October 1977.

The new building occupies a Thames-side site to the east of Kew railway bridge and is a few minutes walk, via Burlington Avenue and Ruskin Avenue, from Kew Gardens Station on the London Transport District and British Rail North London lines; rather further away is Kew Bridge Station for trains direct from and to Waterloo. Access by road is from the South Circular (Mortlake Road) and parking space has been provided for over 200 cars.

The public areas are on the first three floors. On passing through the public entrance the reader finds himself in a spacious lounge area, with cloakroom and refreshment facilities adjacent. To progress further he needs to obtain a special reader's ticket which operates the electronic turnstiles and admits him to the staircase to the first floor reading rooms. The two main reading rooms, the Langdale Room and the Romilly Room (named after the Lords Langdale and Romilly, the first two Masters of the Rolls to be also statutory Keepers of the Public Records), each have seats for 250 readers. Adjacent is a separate Reference Room for the consultation of class lists and other means of reference. On the second floor is another reading room for the consultation of maps and large documents. Furniture for the reading and reference rooms has been specially designed and built and air-conditioning and a high level of illumination have been pro-
vided. In the reading rooms partitioned areas have been set aside for the use of typewriters; microfilm readers will be available; and invigilation by PRO staff will be reinforced by closed-circuit television surveillance. To ensure prompt attention to requisitions for documents a small computer system has been installed with keyboard terminals in the Reference Room by which the reader may transmit his requisitions direct to the appropriate floor of the storage area. The computer system also checks, virtually instantaneously, that the document reference is valid and that the document is not already in use or otherwise unavailable and informs the reader accordingly. ¹ When documents have been transmitted to the appropriate floor and the documents have been produced to the reading room, the reader is informed by means of an electronic paging device, numbered to coincide with his seat number, which issues an audible tone and flashes a light when signalled from the control panel. This paging system operates anywhere within the public areas of the building and the reader is not tied, therefore, to the reading room while awaiting his documents.

The remainder of the ground and first floors is occupied by PRO staff and services, including the full range of photographic and reprographic services. The three upper floors, each with a floor area of 7,569 square metres (1.87 acres), are devoted to document storage.²

With the completion of the new record office at Kew it is now possible to concentrate the public records and those who consult them on two sites — Chancery Lane and Kew. To be kept and seen at Chancery Lane are the medieval records and modern legal records (i.e. those classes described in Volume 1 of the Guide to the Contents of the Public Record Office, together with some related departmental records and private collections (PRO 30), State Papers (SP classes) before 1782 and the records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PROB classes). The decennial census returns 1841-1871 (on microfilm) and the non-parochial registers and records will continue to be seen for the time being in the Census Room at Portugal Street, but will be transferred in the near future to the Rolls Room at Chancery Lane. Thus the demographer will find that most of his sources will remain at Chancery Lane. He will, however, need to visit Kew, which is now the Office headquarters, to consult the records of modern departments of state (i.e. most of the classes described in Volumes 2 and 3 of the Guide), related private collections and the British Transport Historical Records. A leaflet giving fuller details of the division of records between Chancery Lane and Kew is available from the Enquiries Desk at either site.

The postal address of the new record office is Public Record Office, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU and the telephone number is 01-876 3444.

NOTES


2. For an account of the technical aspect of the new building see L. Bell, 'The new Public Record Office at Kew' in Ibid. 5(1) (April 1974), 1-7.