

10 Years Before the Blaze (Part 2)

Newspaper article by Herbert Wood (1912) on ‘Unexplored Irish Treasures’

Edited by Ciarán Wallace¹

“There is a great untilled field awaiting the historical student, and to such we of the Record Office offer a cordial welcome”

— *Herbert Wood*

Editorial Note

This is the second of a two-part newspaper article written in 1912 by Herbert Wood, then assistant keeper at the Public Record office of Ireland, in which he describes the records held in the Record Treasury located within the Four Courts complex. Wood hoped to encourage historians and students to use the wonderful resource which he, his colleagues and their predecessors had been gathering since 1867. In 1919 Wood compiled the only comprehensive guide to the collections. As described in the third instalment of Archive Fever (‘Order from Chaos’), Wood’s Guide to the Records Deposited at the Public Record Office of Ireland is the spine of the Beyond 2022 project, allowing us to digitally reassemble many of the lost records from transcriptions and surrogates in archives around the world. Wood’s two-part newspaper article published ten years before the blaze in the Dublin Evening Telegraph gives a fuller and more engaging description of the PROI’s holdings and conveys the success of the PROI as a modern archive. As Wood says: ‘In former times the Public Records of this country were in a chaotic state!’ It is a pleasure to be able to reprint Wood’s article over a century after it first appeared, and to reintroduce Mr Herbert Wood B.A. (Oxon.) to the reading public.

¹ **Image:** Twiss – Berry scrap book, Royal Irish Academy Library [MS, 23 M 75] p 49.

UNEXPLORED IRISH TREASURES

Awaiting Student and
Historian

In the Irish Record Office.

BY HERBERT WOOD, M.R.I.A.

Mr. Herbert Wood, B.A., of the Public Record Office of Ireland, is a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has devoted a great deal of attention to the unexplored treasures of Irish History which lie in the archives of the Irish Record Office. His article on the subject, of which we published a first instalment last Saturday, will be found a most interesting supplement to that of the Rev. Professor MacSweeney, of Maynooth, dealing with the researches of Eugene O'Curry in unpublished Irish manuscripts.

PART 2.

At this point I should like to make a slight digression. I have mentioned before the great number of Rolls which are in the custody of the Public Record Office, dating back to the reign of King John. Now, it is a curious fact that the authorities of these countries had an especial fondness for this kind of enrollment. In other countries a notarial certificate added to the document was often sufficient to give it the requisite stamp of authenticity; but with us it was frequently necessary, in order to give effectiveness to the document that it should be enrolled in Chancery, whilst all legal decrees and judgments were enrolled in their own courts. Now, these rolls were of two kinds: In one case the document was written on a sheet of parchment, and when this was full another was tacked on, and so on to the end of the year, when the whole was rolled up; or else the various sheets were caught up at one end, and after being sewn up in book fashion, were then rolled up. The merit of this form of enrollment was that the documents, being copied in good ink and excluded from the air, have retained their legibility through centuries. So much stress was laid on this act of enrollment that a special officer, called the Master of the Rolls, was appointed to supervise the process. It was not till the beginning of the nineteenth century that the Master of the Rolls became also a judicial officer.

But there are difficulties in deciphering these old rolls.

The first is the handwriting. Irish writ-

O'Connell, legislators, and men of action of the past. And I think these old wills are more human documents than those of the present day, and reflect more strongly the human passions. There are many curiosities among this collection. I have seen one drawn up on a slate, another was written on the back of a sheet of music. One particularly puzzled me, as I could make nothing of the signature till, by a happy thought, I turned the sheet of paper over, and, holding it against the light, I found that the testator had written his name backwards. In this connection I should like to mention here a little incident which happened lately. The midday postman brought in a letter which he said he thought was meant for our department. It was addressed "De Profundis, Four Courts, Dublin." I opened it, and found it was a request for a copy of a will. I asked the postman how he knew that it was intended for us? "Well," he said, "I knew De Profundis had something to do with death, and that death had something to do with making a will, so I brought it here." The possession of such a headpiece by this postman surely marks him out for distinction. The number of wills proved in old times was not as numerous as now, on account of the objection people had to paying the Stamp Duty. In possessing this large Testamentary collection, we have a great advantage over England, where the wills are kept in different repositories throughout the country, and it is sometimes difficult to know where the will was proved.

In connection with ecclesiastical matters, I may mention that we have a large number of Parish Registers of the late Established Church. At the Disestablishment an Act was passed directing that all the Parish Registers of the late Church should be deposited in the Public Record Office, but so much opposition was shown to doing this that an amending Act was brought in and passed allowing the clergy to keep their records if they procured a thief and fireproof safe; but, notwithstanding this, we have the registers of over 600 of the parishes, some going back as far as the 17th century. It seems to me a great pity that the Registers of all denominations are not deposited there. When we remember that of millions of people in this country, the only record of their having lived, married, and died lies in these books, no care that can be lavished on them is too great for such precious mementoes of the past.

Another collection, which is valuable to the historian and genealogist, and would have been more so if they had been properly preserved, is that of the Clerks of the Crown and Peace of the different counties. Here we have all the criminal and civil proceedings of the Courts of Assize and Quarter Sessions; all the judicial and financial acts of the old Grand Juries, the registers of Freeholders, Leaseholders, and Householdors, county maps, and other documents connected with local administration.

were then kept, and destroyed them all. But attempts were frequently being made to secure such valuable documents, and Birmingham Tower was used as a receptacle for many of the Government records, and to this fact we must owe the preservation of the series of Pipe and Plea Rolls. (Birmingham Tower was on the side of the Castle towards Ship street, and not the existing tower, which was then called the Wardrobe Tower). As to the legal records, they were usually kept in the private houses of the officers, which were in great danger of fire through the adjacent houses being of timber. In 1711, fire, the great enemy, was again at work. The Council Chamber and offices, which were situated beside the old Custom House in Essex street, which was on the site of Dollard's Printing Works, was totally consumed by fire, and all the old Council Books and some of the valuable volumes of the Down Survey burned. I should like to read you part of a petition of Wm. Benson, who was Deputy-Usher of the Council Chamber, which throws some light on the methods of extinguishing fire in those old times:—

"The Petition sheweth that your Petitioner, having Lodgings at the Council Chamber, was on Sunday morning, the 15th inst. April, about three of the Clocke, suddenly called up by Sargent Brian Troy, who then had the Command of the Treasury guard, and Samuell Westbrooke, and told that the Council Chamber was on fire. Your petitioner immediately went down into the hall with them, and see thro' the keyhole of the Council Office that the same was on Fire. Your petitioner causd 2 soldiers to force the Door open, and then did see the office all in flames, from whence there issued soe violent smoake and heat that your petitioner had perished if the Sargent, with other help, had not drawn your petitioner from thence into the Hall. And after your petitioner came to himselfe and found it not possible to quench the fire, though he had caused several Pailles of water to be thrown upon it, your petitioner went up into his own lodgings, together with the said Sargent and Westbrooke, and one Coughagan, to take care of his wife and children, and endeavour to save some of your petitioner's goods."

Under the circumstances, it is not to be wondered at that almost all the records were consumed.

In 1750, a Committee of the Lords was appointed to report on the state of the Records, and on visiting the Rolls Office, in the King's Inns, they found several rooms, on two sides of the building, inhabited by very low people. In these rooms were many fireplaces, the hearths of which were narrow and broken, and some of them raised above the floor; there were also there deal partitions, straw beds, and other combustible stuff. They went

Dublin Evening Telegraph, Saturday 10 February 1912

Continued from Archive Fever No. 4.

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But there are difficulties in deciphering these old rolls. The first is handwriting. Irish missionaries carried with them into England the knowledge of handwriting and that the earliest specimens of English handwriting differ but little from the Irish. But after 798, in France, a new school of handwriting was developed, especially in Tours, and this, which is called Caroline Miniscule, became exceedingly popular. It was this handwriting which, for legal and official documents, was introduced into England at the time of the Conquest, and was called the Charter hand. This style continued down to the time of Elizabeth, when it was divided into the Chancery hand, for documents enrolled in Chancery, and the Court hand, for documents in the Common Law Courts; so that to be able to read the records for several centuries you must be acquainted with these two legal and official Chancery and Court hands. Side by side with these existed the literary of book hand, used by educated people. This distinction between the legal and official handwriting and that of the scholars reminds one of Don Quixote, who, when sending Sancho Panza to get his letter to the Lady Dulcinea del Tobosco fairly transcribed, enjoined him to go to the schoolmaster to do it, "Or," said he, "for want of a schoolmaster, thou mayest get the clerk of the parish to do it, but by no means give it to any notary or scrivener to be written out, for they commonly write such confounded hands that the devil himself would scarce be able to read it." And I think, on viewing some of our old Rolls, especially the Court Rolls, all will agree with him.

The second difficulty is that they are written in a foreign language, either Latin or Norman-French till the reign of Edward III., when it was enacted (36 Ed. III., Sec IV.) that all pleas should be pleaded, answered, debated, and judged in the English tongue. , but that all then should be enrolled in Latin. The Statutes, however, continued to be written in Norman-French till the reign of Henry VII., and as to the legal proceedings, they were enrolled in Latin till, by Geo II., all the pleadings had to be in English. The preamble of this Act is interesting. It says: "Whereas many and great mischiefs do frequently happen to the subjects of this Kingdom from the proceedings in courts of Justice being in an unknown language, those who are summoned and impleaded, having no knowledge or understanding of what is alledged for or against them in the pleadings of the lawyers and attorneys, who use a character not legible to any but persons practicing the law etc.," Consequently the knowledge of this handwriting has nearly died out.

The third difficulty is that the Latin or Norman-French words were not always written out in full, but a system of contracting was for long in vogue, which made it very difficult if not impossible for the laity to read such documents. For instance the letter p with a stroke through the tail stood for the Latin word "per" if a curl was written over the "p," it stood for "pre," and if a semicircle was drawn around the long stroke of the "p," it stood for "pro." A stroke over the word signified that some letters were left out, e.g., "aia" equals "anima." This system was well known and adhered to not only in this country but abroad. I have noticed the three great difficulties in reading old documents, because I wish to make a suggestion, viz., that to one for universities a school of diplomatics should be attached to enable students to study for themselves these ancient records. The term "diplomatics" means the critical study of "diplomatic" sources of history, such as charters, deeds, rolls, registers, and all classes of ancient documentary evidence, and the manner of deciphering them. An enormous amount of historical facts contained in these old documents is lying there only waiting for the coming of the research student armed with this knowledge of diplomatics. A school of this kind has only recently been started in connection with London University, but France has long possessed, indeed for almost a century, its famous Ecole des Chartes, attached to the Sorbonne, which has done so much for French History. And I should like to point out that after instruction in such a school, [students] would have the enormous field, not only of our records here, but of Continental archives to work in. As it is, I do not suppose that, apart from the staff of the Record Office, there are a dozen people in Ireland who have sufficient skill to decipher these [old] rolls. Of course such diplomatics would include Irish also, as medieval Irish was also written in a contracted form.

To return to my subject, I will now deal with what I may call local Records, and of [them] the most important is the Testamentary and Diocesan collection. Every diocese had its own ecclesiastical jurisdiction, which included not only its own courts for the decision on disciplinary matters, but also the administration of testamentary and matrimonial affairs. There was also a chief Prerogative officer of the government of the Primate. To a genealogist, a will is a most precious document, as it contains so much valuable information about a man's family. Of these we have many thousands, including wills for all the most prominent people in Ireland dating back to 1536. It makes these people very real to us when we handle the wills of people like Swift and Stella, Daniel O'Connell, legislators, and men of action of the past. And I think these old wills are more human documents than those of the present day, and reflect more strongly the human passions. There are many curiosities among this collection. I have seen one drawn up on a slate, another was written on the back of a sheet of music. One particularly puzzled me, as I could make nothing of the signature till, by a happy thought, I turned the sheet of paper over, and, holding it against the light, I found that the testator had written his name backwards. In this connection I should like to mention her a little incident which happened lately. The midday postman brought in a letter which he said he thought was meant for our department. It was addressed, "De Profundis", Four Courts, Dublin." I opened it and found it was a request for a copy of a will. I asked the postman how he knew that it was intended for us? "Well," he said, "I knew that De Profundis had something to do with death, and that death had something to do with making a will, so I brought it here." The possession of such a headpiece by this postman surely marks him out for distinction. The number of wills proved in old times was not as numerous as now, on account of the objection people had to paying the Stamp Duty. In possessing this large Testamentary collection, we have a great advantage over England, where the wills were kept in different repositories throughout the country, and it is sometimes difficult to know where the will was proved.

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Of the Miscellaneous Records (many of which are not public records in the true sense of the term, but have come into the possession of the Public Record Office through purchase, or have been deposited there for safety) I can give but a brief survey. Perhaps of this collection the most ancient and interesting are the Deeds belonging to Christ Church Cathedral. They contain Papal Bulls and ordinances, conveyances, grants of indulgences, pious and charitable foundations, account rolls, municipal and Parliamentary documents, civil and ecclesiastical pleadings, and many other deeds of a mixed nature connected with the old Priory of the Holy Trinity. The earliest deed is one of circa 1174, by which Earl Richard (Strongbow), on behalf of the King, grants to Hamund, son of Torkill, Kannsalech and the adjacent lands held by him before the arrival of the English. Amongst them is an old Account Roll (1337-46) which some years ago Mr. Mills, the present Deputy-Keeper, was editing in the annual volume of the Royal Society of Antiquaries. On the back were scribbled some words of an exceedingly difficult character to decipher of the period of the middle of the fifteenth century, but with great perseverance he succeeded in clearing up the mystery, and found that it was an old Morality play, which some clerks had jotted down on the back of the roll. It possesses considerable literary merit, vigorous style, and dramatic power, and as no title was found on it, it has been called "The Pride of Life." Such an expert as Dr. Henry Morley is of the opinion that it is the earliest known Morality play in the English language, of which no other copy is forthcoming.

Then there are the couple-beggar registers, which were purchased from the late Mr. Samuels, into whose possession they had come. The "couple-beggars" as Swift termed them, drove their trade for many years throughout Ireland, coupling together all and sundry in the bonds of matrimony. These volumes in our possession only cover the period 1797-1844, when the Marriage Act of that year made their operations illegal. It will probably surprise many people to learn that in these 27 volumes there are about 40,000 entries of names of people who were coupled in this irregular way, and they are only the record of marriages performed in two

houses in Dublin, viz., 9 Haymarket, near the Bluecoat School, and Annville, Ranelagh. In these two places a succession of clergy of the Established Church, who had no benefices, managed to eke out a livelihood by coupling people in an irregular way, viz., without banns or marriage licence, for usually very meagre rewards. The fee was often a few shillings, and the class of persons who resorted of being married may be imagined from the fact that in one case the bride ran off with the ring (kept specially for the purpose), and that in another some members of the party ran off with the parson's boots. If in these fifty years about 40,000 people were thus joined together in Dublin, the number of people who were so married in Ireland must have been enormous.

We have the Census Returns of 1821, 1831, 1841, and 1851, which have been in such requisition for Old Age Pensions, but there is a return of householders in Dublin for 1798, which was made under curious circumstances. In that year of the Rebellion the Mayor of Dublin made an order that on every door should be exhibited a notice containing the name of the head of the house. Dr Whitelaw, the rector of Saint Catherine's, and well known as an historian of Dublin, conceived the idea of preserving all these names, and with the aid of a body of assistants he has recorded in two large books the name of every householder in Dublin at that date, with his occupation, the state of the building, and the number of members of his family and servants. It is a most valuable record, and has given much assistance to the Georgian Society. Besides these, the records of the Huguenot churches, the documents of several of the old Dublin guilds, proceedings in the old Memorial [Manorial] Court of St Sepulchres, the MSS. of Sir Thomas Phillips, was purchased at the Southwell sale, dealing with the latter end of the seventeenth and commencement of the eighteenth centuries; the copies of the Carte Papers, made by Dr. Russell and Mr. Prendergast, and many others, have found a place of rest in the Record Office, we will hope, for good.

I should like to point out some of the reasons why our records, though numerous, are not ten times as great; and the reason is to be found not only in the depredations of time, but in those caused by fire, pillage, and carelessness. In the reign of Edward I., the Exchequer was situated in Colletts Inns, outside the Castle, where George's street is now situated. One day, when the Deputy and a great part of the garrison were away on one of their numerous little expeditions, a band of Irish from the Wicklow Mountains descended on the city, found it unprotected, and plundered the Exchequer and burnt the records. In the same reign, a fire broke out in Saint Mary's Abbey, and all the Chancery Rolls save two were utterly consumed. Coming down to a more recent period, in the reign of Henry VII., O'Neill attacked the Castle of Trim, where some of the Records were then kept, and destroyed them all. But attempts were frequently

being made to secure such valuable documents, and Bermingham Tower was used as a receptacle for many of the Government records, and to this fact we must owe the preservation of the series of Pope and Plea Rolls. (Bermingham Tower was on the side of the Castle towards Ship Street, and not the existing tower, which was then called the Wardrobe Tower). As to the legal records, they were usually kept in the private houses of the officers, which were in great danger of fire through the adjacent houses being of timber. In 1711, fire, the great enemy, was again at work. The Council Chamber and offices, which were situated beside the old Custom House in Essex street, which was on the site of Dollard's Printing Works, was totally consumed by fire, and all the old Council Books and some of the valuable volumes of the Down Survey burned. I should like to read you part of a petition of Wm. Benson, who was Deputy-Usher of the Council Chamber, which throws some light on the methods of extinguishing fire in those old times:-

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Under the circumstances, it is not to be wondered at that all the records were consumed. In 1730, a Committee of the Lords was appointed to report in the state of the Records, and on visiting the Rolls Office, in the King's Inns, they found several rooms, on two sides of the building, inhabited by very low people. In these rooms were many fireplaces, the hearths of which were narrow and broken, and some of them raised above the floor; there were also there deal partitions, straw beds, and other combustible stuff. They went on to say that the inhabitants of these rooms were generally such as drunkenness and other vices had rendered necessitous. Since then fires have frequently occurred, and as late as 1891 the Cork Courthouse was burned, and all the valuable collection of the Clerks of the Crown and Peace utterly consumed.

Such were the dangers to these precious memoranda from fire, but the carelessness of officials was quite as dangerous. In 1739 a Committee of the House of Lords reported that the Public Records, which concern the property of the whole Kingdom, were liable to be distrained for rent, and that upon the death of the officers they must for a time be entirely in the power of their representative, who, should they prove corrupt or negligent, might in a few hours destroy or mutilate them. A hundred years ago a Clerk of the Peace reported that in one instance the Records of a county had been thrown out of the dwelling of the late Clerk of the Peace, in a heap, by his landlord, and so received by his successor. In another case, the officer mentions that the records are in the possession of a person who purchased them among some MSS. of his late guardian, during his minority. While, in another case, some officers stated that they had never received any records from their predecessors.

In 1810, the Chief Examiner in the Court of Chancery complained that there was not room enough in his office for the writing clerks, and that records had to be taken away by the common writing clerks to their lodgings. On one occasion the copyist was found drunk in a public house, in the Liberties, with the record in his pocket, greasy, torn and worn.

As an instance of the distance that records, when not properly guarded, will travel, an old Plea Roll was found in an old castle on the banks of the Rhine. Ultimately it was sold by auction, and bought by Sir B. Burke.

But, though fire, pillage, and carelessness had had much to do with the loss of valuable documents, another factor, though to a much smaller extent, is to be found in a certain temperament, which, however charming at times, has sometimes disastrous effects. A Registrar of one of the Diocesan Courts complained that some of the clergy at the annual visitations did not bring with them their copies of baptisms, marriages, and burials performed by them during the year. He said: "They promised to send a copy, which some have done and others have neglected to do and I did not choose to say anything of it, for if I did I must make an enemy for ever of such person, which is what I endeavour to avoid as much as possible."

Then we have to deplore the various circumstances under which many valuable documents have left these shores. As I mentioned before the Lords Lieutenant had the habit of taking the papers concerned with their administration away with them, and other collections formed by private people have gone the same way. Thus any student of Irish History has to consult the Harleian, Cottonian, Rawlinson, Lansdowne, and Clarendon collections in the British Museum, the Perrott MSS. in the Bodleian, Lord Orrery's Library in Christ Church, Oxford,

besides the numerous documents in private libraries (as the work of the Historical MSS. Commission has disclosed), and the large collection in the Public Record Office.

I have attempted to give in this all too rapid sketch to give the reader some idea of the great store of valuable material which has been collected together in the repository of the Public Record Office. I have only been able to hint at many classes, which would require special treatment themselves, but if I have succeeded in drawing your attention to a Department in Dublin, which, concealed in a corner of the Four Courts, is rather a backwater, and has not been noticed by those carried along on the rapid current of life's stream, if I have been able to arouse in you a curiosity to examine these mementoes of the past, I shall be satisfied. The spirit of research is abroad; to the spirit of historical research the Record Office offers materials which will well reward all the trouble taken in its examination. In the eighteenth century there was a movement to write the histories of all the counties in Ireland. The only result was Smith's Histories of Waterford and Cork. Much is now being done: the Royal Society of Antiquaries and kindred local societies are doing good work, but the original sources of history are not being sufficiently used. We cannot all be historians: the important judgment, the sense of proportion, and the critical faculty needed are found in few; but we can all do spade work. There is a great untilled field awaiting the historical student, and to such we of the Record Office offer a cordial welcome.