

# Obituaries

## **An Obituary tribute to Eleanor Cottrill, M.A., Keeper of Archives at Leicester, 1937-47**



Eleanor Cottrill, who died aged 88 in June 1991, was only the second professional custodian of Leicester's archives. Her predecessor, Ann Deeley, had been appointed in 1930 when the Archive Office in the Town Museum in New Walk was opened. When in 1937 Eleanor Swift (her name before her marriage in 1940) became Leicester's archivist, the Museum's originally small collection of documents relevant to the history of the county had already been expanded by gifts and bequests from private individuals, many of them members of this Society. Under Eleanor's energetic direction, this expansion became a policy so successful that in 1941 the first (part-time) Assistant Keeper (Joan Lancaster) was appointed 'in view of the large intake of documents'. It was war-time, and the national clear-out for salvage threatened documents of potential historical importance all over the county. At a time when no other establishment in the region could concern itself with this problem. Eleanor made it the business of the Museum's Archive Office. She and her mostly voluntary helpers personally rescued from destruction not only the archives of large and important institutions but also small and obscure collections from solicitors' offices and private persons. In her ten years as Keeper of Archives at Leicester, the documents in the Archive Office multiplied ten-fold; and not only were they saved but also conserved (in a period when record conservation was still in its infancy), listed, and arranged in consultable order.

Local archive repositories had received national encouragement and recognition only since 1924. Leicester, with its Archive Office established in 1930 (as a result of representations from this Society) was among the first. Under Eleanor Cottrill it became a training-ground for archive administration, and was set on the path which led to its becoming the central office for historical records of both the city and the county. Three of those who worked with her in the challenging conditions of World War II and its immediate aftermath, and owed to her a rigorous training for their subsequent careers, have contributed their memories of the influence she had on them personally and on the archive profession: Joan Lancaster (now Joan Lancaster Lewis), at Leicester 1940-43, whose historical and archive expertise took her to the City

Archives at Coventry, the Institute of Historical Research in London, the Library and Records of the India Office (as Assistant Keeper, Deputy Keeper, and in 1972 Director), a tour of official visits to South Asian Record Offices and University Libraries, and in 1978 a CBE: Edwin Welch, whose schoolboy assistance was welcomed, enthusiasm inspired, and historical talents tempered by Eleanor (1944-7), and whose handlist of the Archdeaconry Records (Eleanor's prize scoop from the Leicester Archdeaconry Registrar's Office in 1941) formed the basis of the published list by Audrey Woodcock (now Audrey Erskine) in 1954; his archive career took him to the Southampton Record Office, Churchill College, Cambridge, and to Ottawa and the North West Territories in Canada; and Doreen Slatter, Eleanor's Assistant in the Archives 1946-7 and her successor in Leicester in 1947, whose subsequent varied career was in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, Lambeth Palace Library, the Hampshire Record Office, St Thomas's Hospital in London, Nottingham University Library, the Berkshire Record Office, and Bowood House. All three have done valuable historical work as editors and writers.

When Eleanor went on to Hampshire, as its first County Archivist, she put into effect there the principles formulated in Leicester: that local historical documents should be brought into the protective custody of the Archive Office, conserved, made available to readers, and their publication encouraged; and that records of major importance should be housed in the archive repository of their locality and not diverted to national collections. The notice of her death in the Hampshire Chronicle described her as the founder of Hampshire Archives. In Leicester it was her wish that the records of the city and the county should be in one repository. Despite the apparent setback when the separate County Record Office was established in 1947, this historically and administratively desirable aim was achieved in 1974 (a fortuitous outcome of the Local Government Act of 1972). The size and range of the present Record Office's collections and services fulfil her hopes.

It is not only for her influence on the development of the Archive Office and on the archive profession that she is remembered in Leicester and elsewhere. She was a remarkable person, with a delightful sense of humour and a strong sense of justice and integrity. She made many loyal friends.

A. K. B. Evans

*From Joan Lancaster Lewis, C.B.E., M.A., F.S.A.*

Eleanor was one of the small band of founder members of the archivists' profession in this country and, as such, played a large and significant part in its development. At a time when there was no professional training available her influence was to bear fruit for over half a century. It was exerted in at least four directions. Her deep knowledge of the principles by which archivists are still guided was of inestimable importance, and she spread the word by means of unobtrusive but effective training of her assistants, by diplomatic handling of the local authorities for whom she worked and by always being ready to do battle where battle was necessary. One's first impression was that of a formidable presence but, as one got to know her, one became fully aware of the sympathetic and compassionate side of her nature.

As a new graduate, just arrived in Leicester in the summer of 1940 to work as a part-time Assistant Librarian (two days a week) under Rhoda Bennett in the then University College, I first met Eleanor Swift. Since my chosen career was in archives, I

found my way to the Museum and offered to work voluntarily in the Record Office for the remainder of the week. Eleanor welcomed me with open arms and set me down to calendar some seventeenth-century deeds, a good introduction to the general structure of reasonably legible deeds. It was not all obviously work, for a great deal of the training came over in friendly conversation, during which I learned much about archive keeping and a fair amount about Eleanor herself, her background in Preston among descendants of Roman Catholic Recusants, her childhood and her decision at the age of seven that religion was not for her, her innate sense of fun, her nieces and the younger one's perceptive opinion (with which she agreed) that *Through the looking glass* was a much better book than *Alice in Wonderland*, her two years' research on the Battle Abbey documents in the Huntington Library in California where she served on the Manuscript Department staff as well as holding a Commonwealth Fund Fellowship at Stanford University, California (1931-33), the value of her time as Assistant Supervisor of Registry at the BBC which gave her valuable experience of the registration and indexing of modern papers and, not least, the principles she was following in bringing an existing record office up to date and in making it (since there was no county record office for Leicestershire at that time) the repository for the whole county.

Very soon Eleanor had prevailed on the Museum authorities to employ me in the Record Office for three days a week. Four projects stand out in my memory of that period, projects which illustrate the principles on which Eleanor was running the Record Office. The first was the careful negotiations and the acquisition of the Leicester Archdeaconry records, until then housed in a dank cellar covered in soot and cobwebs, followed by the warning that readers however eminent must not be allowed access to original materials without supervision. The second was an initial sorting and arrangement of the materials and labelling the boxes, tasks which introduced one to Archdeaconry Court papers dating back to the sixteenth century, act books and bishop's transcripts, to name but a few. The third was a memorable visit to Ashby-de-la-Zouch to save a solicitor's accumulation from wholesale destruction for the war effort. Our task was to save the valuable whilst allowing the ephemeral to go to salvage, but at the same time came the warning not to 'pick out the plums' for this could help to destroy the significance of an archive. The fourth was visits to solicitors in Leicester and in Lutterworth with the same objects in view. But Ashby was the one which stands out in one's memory - a cold day, with brilliant sunshine, blue skies and wind and the rooks cawing in the elms opposite an old coach-house where the accumulations of years of legal processes had been dumped in crates and trunks and sacks or just dumped. We started with the looser papers, then the containers, discovering unexpected treasures, such as some correspondence with the Spalding Gentlemen's Society, one letter describing the activities of a poltergeist which threw ornaments off the overmantel and was tracked down to a 'servant-girl'. The sadness came when we reached a very wet floor and found parchment reduced to orange jelly for which there was no cure! Eleanor and I worked together getting dirtier and dirtier, only to discover that the office had no hot water. Feeling not at all presentable, we set out to look for lunch only to find there was nowhere except a very respectable hotel.

In all this one learned a great deal 'on the shop floor', for the training was going on unobtrusively all the time. These were very early days in the concept of archive work when the only text-book was Hilary Jenkinson's *Manual of archive administration*,<sup>1</sup> but

1. C. H. Jenkinson, *A manual of archive administration including the problems of war archives and archive making*. Oxford: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Division of Economics and History, 1922; 2nd rev. edn., London: Percy Lund, Humphries, 1937

the timeless principles to be followed by the modern record office came over loud and clear, followed in the Leicester Record Office and delivered unobtrusively to the young assistant who would go on to run his or her record office. They were: the importance of finding original materials and gathering them in if humanly possible to the safety of a record office; the sanctity of the archive group - never splitting a collection because it happens to contain materials relating to another county; the significance of the original arrangement which one should always attempt to identify or restore; the necessity of preparing proper records: receipts to donors, detailed accessions registers, lists and, when possible, indexes; the responsibilities of town and county clerks; and the order of priorities: acquiring, preserving and conserving, recording and making available to the public.

Meanwhile (in 1940) Eleanor had married Frank Cottrill, the Keeper of Archaeology at the Museum, and the two set up house in a flat in Belgrave Gate. Early in 1943 when I was in need of somewhere to live and faced the prospect of being called up into the A.T.S., Eleanor and Frank invited me to share their flat. She was a very good cook and was quick to seize the opportunity of interesting food during war-time shortages, such as when one of the Museum attendants offered her a tame rabbit he was about to slaughter. How good it was stuffed with prunes and roasted!

Theirs was a happy and contented marriage, sharing the chores as well as their common interest in closely related profession: something one was able to experience both then and later, on visits to Winchester where, very fortunately, after Frank's appointment in 1947 as Curator of the Winchester Museum, Eleanor became the founding archivist of the Hampshire Record Office where she shaped its development until she retired in 1970. It was a great sadness when Frank died unexpectedly in 1984; then Eleanor's health deteriorated and their son, Michael, helped her to join him in Shropshire. After a fall, she was admitted to hospital in Bishop's Castle where my husband and I were able to visit her and take her out for a drive and a picnic pub lunch. The same innate sense of fun was still there shining through excessive weakness and a roguish delight in telling my husband (an Anglican priest) the story of her decision at the age of seven, because the nuns at her convent school said that she must wear a hat to talk to God, that religion was not for her.

All who knew her would say - a great archivist and scholar, a great influence on the development of the profession, both through her work in Leicester and Winchester and in the principles she passed on to those who assisted her and who went on to run record offices in various parts of the country.

*From Edwin Welch, M.A., Ph.D., F.S.A.*

I first met Eleanor Cottrill in July 1944. I was then a schoolboy who had just been told that he would be completely deaf in a few years (a diagnosis which mercifully proved very wrong). My headmaster found an excuse to send me to talk to the Director of the City Museum, who was very deaf. It was typical of Eleanor that the Director did not introduce me to her - they only communicated by means of notes at that time - but it was Frank Cottrill, having decided that I was not the material for a field archaeologist, who led me into his wife's presence. As so often over the years, she was ready to advise me about my future. I was handed a copy of Jenkinson's *Manual of archive administration* (the first edition) to read and urged to get some practice during the school holidays.<sup>2</sup>

2. Jenkinson, *Manual of archive administration*, as n.1

I began by making parcels of the register transcripts which were being sorted by parishes. The boards, the paper, and the tape were all meticulously prescribed. Even the knots and bows had to match her exacting standards. In the intervals I heard about other archivists, some approved and some despised, and her own experiences at the Huntington Library. My conduct must have been approved because from parish register transcripts I was promoted to making a card index of induction mandates, an index which still seems to be in use.

I know now that I was exceptionally fortunate in my early training. She was the first person to teach me the importance of being precise and always giving references for each piece of historical information. I also acquired from her my first knowledge of document conservation: an unusual piece of expertise in those days. In other ways she was not such a good example. Her desk, one of the largest in the Museum, was always covered with mounds of paper, and she boasted that she knew where everything of importance could be found - on her desk. It was much like an archaeological site. A small space in the middle was kept for the document then occupying her attention and the inevitable ashtray. To our great delight one day she announced her economy campaign. While lighting a cigarette she informed us that *they* had decided that Frank should give up smoking. Like Queen Victoria, she was not amused by our laughter. In cataloguing too, a science then still in its infancy, she was not ready to innovate. Both at Leicester and in Hampshire she continued to use the accession number for each collection, which was very inconvenient when a depositor brought in records over several years, but this was the system used by many others then.

The establishment of a Leicestershire Record Office in 1947 was a disappointment to her. Her plan for a joint office was not to become a reality for almost 30 years. She welcomed the new County Archivist, and was ready to transfer at least some of the county records which she had rescued. Here we realised which were her favourite collections. Neither the Archdeaconry nor the Quaker records were to go: the Charnwood Forest Enclosure Award, a monstrous volume, was offered but rejected. The county already had a copy. The Archdeaconry records had been recovered from a lawyer's cellars before I knew her, but she spoke with glee of the discomforts of removing them, and the uniformed attendants who had threatened to resign rather than return for a second day.

It was a sad day when she followed Frank to Winchester. He had been appointed Curator of Winchester Museum, and seeing one day on the railway station platform a Leicester man who had been in prison for theft, was moved to make enquiries and found that he had been offered the position of Hampshire County Archivist on the strength of forged diplomas. The upshot was that Eleanor was offered the position, and remained there for the rest of her career. Family links with Southampton enabled me to remain in touch with her, but it was not until 1958 when I moved to the Southampton Record Office, that I began to see her more frequently.

Encouraged by a Southampton alderman, all the Hampshire archivists were brought together in an Advisory Council for mutual support and encouragement. For a time I believe that she was in the chair and I acted as secretary. When another archivist was about to join the Council, she called me in some concern about what she had been told of him. I tried to reassure her, and heard the typical response, 'I shall invite him to lunch. I always believe in *starting* in a friendly fashion.' It is pleasant to recall that they were soon very friendly, and she enjoyed the occasions when he told her she was wrong.

Eleanor Cottrill was the first person to encourage me in my career, supported me by letters and interviews, and urged me to take the Liverpool archive diploma. I never knew what she wrote or said, but I suspect that it was far beyond my deserts, and I was not the only person who received the same encouragement and help when it was most needed.

*From Doreen Slatter, M.A., B.Litt., F.R.Hist.S.*

When Eleanor Swift was appointed in 1937 to succeed Ann Deeley as Keeper of Archives at Leicester Museum, neither the archives profession nor the system of local record offices to which we are now accustomed was in existence. She joined a small number of determined people, responsible to authorities of various kinds, who were convinced of the importance of local and private records and anxious to confront the dangers to their safety, especially serious since the Law of Property Act of 1922 had made large numbers of title deeds redundant. An Amendment to that Act in 1924 had given the Master of the Rolls the superintendence of manorial records and the power to designate offices suitable for their deposit and preservation. Leicester had a tradition of interest in local history. The Literary and Philosophical Society had been associated with the Museum since its opening in 1849. The Leicestershire Archaeological Society, led by the distinguished local historian, G. F. Farnham (1859-1933) and Alderman Charles Squire had pressed for the nomination of a manorial repository in Leicester. A muniment room was thus included in the extension to the Museum designed by Albert Herbert: it was opened by Lord Hanworth, then Master of the Rolls, in 1930.

Eleanor's education and experience made her peculiarly fitted to undertake work which became increasingly important upon the outbreak of the Second World War. She had been a Founder's scholar of Royal Holloway College, University of London, and went on to take an M.A. degree with distinction in 1929 with a thesis on medieval manorial administration based on the Winchester Pipe Rolls. She was awarded a Commonwealth Fund Fellowship to Stanford University and the Huntington Library, California, where she worked from 1931 to 1933, and did research on the estates of Battle Abbey. Her two articles on the Abbey's administration reveal both an archivist's observation of the physical appearance of the documents and an ability to deduce the organization that created them.<sup>3</sup> On her return from America, she took a post as assistant supervisor of the registry of the B.B.C. It is an interesting coincidence that 1937, the year of her appointment at Leicester, also saw the publication of the revised edition of the *Manual of archive administration* by her mentor, Hilary (later Sir Hilary) Jenkinson.<sup>4</sup> This book, embodying his practical experience in the Public Record Office, in his own research and as one of the joint secretaries of the British Records Association (founded in 1932), was the invaluable tool of all early local archivists.

At the time of Eleanor's appointment, the muniment room at Leicester already held some important records, notably an incomplete group of bound papers of the Corporation of Leicester (including most of the Hall Books, bound Hall papers and

3. 'Obedientary and other accounts of Battle Abbey in the Huntington Library', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 12 (1934), pp.83-101; 'The obedientary rolls of Battle Abbey', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 78 (1937), pp.37-62

4. Jenkinson, *Manual of archive administration*, as n.1

volumes of Chamberlains' Accounts to 1775, deposited in 1932);<sup>5</sup> the records of the Trinity Hospital and of the Wyggeston Hospital of Leicester; and the valuable collection of books and papers bequeathed to the Museum by G. F. Farnham. By her personal enthusiasm, sending circular letters and organizing publicity, she succeeded in increasing the number of documents in the muniment room to more than ten times the original figure before she left in 1947. The outbreak of the war had brought awareness of the dangers to records from possible enemy bombing, 'salvage' drives for waste paper, and the requisitioning and sale of country houses. An appeal in the Museum *Bulletin* of July 1942 is a good example of her initiative and of her incisive use of words and directness of approach: 'Paper is a munition of war. It is indeed a munition of two wars, and one of them is the war against ignorance ... [The record] is the raw material of our culture; only by preserving knowledge of what is past can we illuminate the future'.

In the Museum, by 1947 the more important collections occupied the muniment room proper, which had shelves and also stacks over the ground floor and a gallery above. Less important material was stored in a room with high shelving on the further side of a central office and reading room. When a rapid flow of documents was being received, a straight-forward system of accessioning, cataloguing, indexing and storage had to be employed. Eleanor devised a system that was based on museum practice. Specialist firms of archivists' suppliers did not then exist but she had the advantage of the expertise of her Museum colleagues, and the assistance of the technical staff. She used to speak warmly of the support given by the distinguished Director of the Museum, Dr E. E. Lowe (who retired in 1940). Practical help came from voluntary and part-time assistants but progress depended to a great extent on her individual effort. An archivist at this time had to be prepared to manhandle material of all kinds, to improvise ways of cleaning and repair, and not to be afraid of dust: fumigation to counteract mildew was achieved in a metal trunk, with an electric light bulb and a saucer of thymol crystals. After the war she had a full-time Assistant, but work continued to be affected by practical difficulties. In the very cold winter of 1946-47 the Museum staff did their work in their coats with hot-water bottles to warm their hands. Owing to the power shortage, the Muniment Room had to get special permission to use a reading lamp.

Frank Cottrill came to Leicester Museum in 1938 and was the first full-time archaeologist to be appointed there.<sup>6</sup> He and Eleanor were married in 1940. His scholarship matched his wife's; they worked in fields that complemented each other to record and preserve the history of Leicestershire and then Hampshire, where he became Curator of Winchester Museum and she the first Hampshire County Archivist. Their interest in historical matters continued in retirement, as did their hospitality in Winchester for friends and former colleagues until Frank's sudden death in 1984. Successive assistants in Leicester and Winchester owe them a great deal.

Eleanor inspired interest, loyalty and affection in her assistants, who responded to her stimulating conversation on professional and non-professional matters and to her encouragement and concern for their personal progress. She was proud of the length of time they stayed with her and of their subsequent achievements in the profession and in published contributions to local history. In this way they spread her influence

5. Further deposits of the borough records were made in 1951 and 1952: see the introduction by Mrs A. M. Woodcock to *The Records of the Corporation of Leicester*. Leicester Museums and Art Gallery, 1956

6. For an appreciation of his work at Leicester and Winchester, see *TLAHS*, 59 (1984-5), pp.93-7

on the development of archive-keeping. The Archives Diploma course at London University was not set up until 1947. After that students from this and other diploma courses came to the Winchester office, providing another channel for her influence to spread. In both the Leicester and the Winchester offices, she welcomed and nurtured the interest of non-professional volunteers who gave assistance with cataloguing at a time of pressure on a small staff. At Leicester, Mr A. B. Clarke, in particular, did much valuable voluntary work on the records of the Leicester archdeaconry, for Eleanor and also for her successors.<sup>7</sup> Her gift for establishing good relations extended to people of all ages and circumstances. For instance, she became a friend of an elderly amateur genealogist (A. W. Read), who remembered seeing Queen Victoria open the Manchester Ship Canal; and inspired a schoolboy (Edwin Welch) with so great an interest in records that he afterwards became an archivist himself, and an officer of the Society of Archivists.

In 1947 Eleanor Cottrill left Leicester for Winchester, to establish a County Record Office for Hampshire. Her success in attracting collections was so rapid that within a year she moved from the Record Office in 82 High Street to more ample premises in the basement of one of the older county buildings. Further moves were necessary as the collections continued to expand, the staff to increase, and conservation and photographic facilities were provided. The conversion of St Thomas's church into a separate record office soon after her retirement in 1970 was the result of her diplomacy and determination. Retirement did not affect her active interest in archives (from 1970 to 1976 she reorganized the archives of the Drapers' Company in the City of London) and in the affairs of the Hampshire Record Office. She followed with special attention the present plans for the erection of a new purpose-built record office near the railway station.

The important collections deposited both at the Leicester and Winchester offices attracted scholars from all parts of the country and from overseas. It was Eleanor's conviction that local record offices should be national centres for historical research. At the same time she never forgot local interests and gave the same care and attention to enquiries from professional historians and non-professionals. Her own scholarship attested her fair-minded pursuit of truth and balanced judgement. At the annual Anglo-American Conference of Historians in London at the Institute of Historical Research, she kept in touch with current historical work. In an active administrative career the time to produce scholarly publications of her own was limited. An article on 'A Ferrers Document of the Twelfth Century' appeared in this Society's *Transactions* of 1937-8, which also contained the obituary of the eleventh Earl Ferrers. From 1969 to 1974 she was one of the joint editors of the *Proceedings* of the Hampshire Field Club and helped revive the Hampshire Record Series, editing the first volume of the new series (published by the Hampshire County Council) in 1976: *Sir Henry Whithed's Letter Book, 1601-14*; out of her favourite period but containing much of administrative and social interest, since Sir Henry was sheriff of the county in 1610.

In her later years, Eleanor Cottrill courageously faced disability due to cataract trouble and replacement hip operations, and in 1984 the shock of her husband's death. She moved to Shropshire to be near her son, Michael, and died at Bishop's Castle on 22 June 1991.

7. His assistance was acknowledged by Mrs Woodcock in *Handlist of Records of Leicester Archdeaconry*, Leicester Museums and Art Gallery, 1954 and the *Handlist of Leicestershire Parish Register Transcripts*, Leicester Museums and Art Gallery, 1953.