

the State—the title being Master or Keeper of the Rolls or Records—the occupant of the office taking the precedence of all the legal dignitaries but two, the order being : 1. The Lord Chancellor ; 2. The Lord Chief Justice of England ; 3. The Master of the Rolls. The office, I may add, has been filled, to take only the latest Keepers of Records, by Lord Lyndhurst, Lord Cottenham, Lord Langdale, Lord Romilly, and the present keeper, Sir George Jessel. The deputy keepers are always men of distinguished ability, and the qualifications and attainments of many of the assistant keepers are little, if at all, inferior.

The absolute necessity of such an Act as that just referred to was evident, and as there is a risk in the course of years of our own records getting into the same condition, I beg to ask your attention to the statements.

The records of the Queen's Remembrancer, it was discovered, were stuffed into 600 sacks in a most filthy state, and to disinter a document, known to exist somewhere in these heaps, was a work of a most disgusting nature. The report of the Committee of the House of Commons of 1836 gives the evidence of Mr. Henry Cole, as to the state of the sheds in the King's mews, containing these records. He says : "In these sheds 4,136 cubic feet of national records were deposited in the most neglected condition. Besides the accumulated dust of centuries, all, when these operations commenced, were found to be very damp. Some were in a state of inseparable adhesion to the stone walls. There were numerous fragments which had only just escaped entire consumption by vermin, and many were in the last stage of putrefaction. Decay and damp had rendered a large quantity so fragile as hardly to admit of being touched ; others, particularly those in the form of rolls, were so coagulated together that they could not be unrolled. Six or seven perfect skeletons of rats were found imbedded, and bones of these vermin were generally distributed throughout the mass ; and, besides furnishing a charnel house for the dead, during the first removal of these national records, a dog was employed in hunting the live rats which were thus disturbed from their nests." The extract, though long, is only one of very many that might easily be brought forward, and I give it as a striking illustration of the danger to which I have alluded.

The only exception to the "shocking state" of the documents, is in the case of Scotland, of the Record Office of which the Committee spoke in these terms : "Collected together in one central, ample, commodious and safe building in Edinburgh placed under the custody of most competent and responsible keepers, they appear to be kept in a state of perfect arrangement, and ample information as to their contents supplied by full calendars and indexes."

This was the general condition of affairs which the newly constituted office had to face, and Mr. Thomas, in the introduction to his valuable Handbook to the Public Records, published thirty years ago, gives a very clear account of the steps taken to get the work done, but I think it unnecessary to do more than refer to the Handbook.

It was not till 1850 that the foundation of the present Record Office was laid. It stands between Chancery Lane and Fetter Lane, on the old garden belonging to the Roll's House. The description and plans, kindly furnished me by Mr. John Edwards, the Secretary, show that the most anxious care has been taken to assure its safety from fire, and from any conceivable accidents ; the building being not only fireproof throughout, but being also furnished with complete fire apparatus internally and externally ; men on guard in the building day and night, besides the police on service, constantly patrolling the building. The duties of all the officers and men are minutely specified.

In prosecuting inquiries as to the manner in which the Records, State papers, &c., were transferred from the Courts of Law, and the various Government offices (Colonial, War, &c.,) to the custody of the Keeper of Records, Mr. William Hardy, the Deputy Keeper, furnished me with a memorandum from the late deputy keeper, Sir Thomas Duffus Hardy, approved by the Master of the Rolls, and addressed to the Treasury, on the subject of the accumulations of records. The memorandum dated the 20th November, 1875, shows that in spite of the great size of the building, its capacity was already overtaxed. A great part of this was due to accumulations of large masses