

PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE.

In 1800, in consequence of representations made, a Select Committee of the House of Commons was appointed "to inquire into the state of the public records of the Kingdom, and of such other public instruments, rolls, books and papers as they shall think proper, and to report to the House the nature and condition thereof, together with what they shall think fit to be done for the better arrangement, preservation, and more convenient use of the same."

The Committee divided their report into three parts: 1. Measures of former times; 2. Their own proceedings; and 3. Further measures recommended.

1. It appears from the report that the greater part of the public records had been preserved then (1800) for more than 700 years, that is now (1881) about 800 years, though many had been lost or destroyed during the reigns of Stephen, John, and Henry III, a period of 137 years (1135 to 1272) between which dates these reigns were included and the wars between the Houses of York and Lancaster, known in history as the Wars of the Roses (1455 to 1461).

By the Act 46, Edward III. (1473), the public records were considered as the people's evidence, and it was ordained that they should be accessible to all the King's subjects.

In Elizabeth's Reign (1559 to 1603) an inquiry was instituted concerning the records of Parliament.

James VI. I. (1617) projected a State Paper Office, and an office for a general remembrancer for all matters of record. A Commission was issued by Charles I, for searching after all records belonging to the Crown. The Civil Wars, ending in the setting up of the Commonwealth, broke down the provision for the safety of the public records, and Charles II, after his restoration, took some steps to remedy this state of things, but nothing effectual was done till the time of Queen Anne (1702 to 1714) when as one result of the investigation, *Rymer's Fœdera*, was published, a compilation of State papers and records, chiefly relating to the foreign transactions of the country. Then an inquiry was instituted regarding the domestic records connected with the internal laws and government, which was prosecuted without intermission through the reigns of Anne and George I, to the beginning of George II (1727).

Examinations seem to have been made concurrently by Lords and Commons, the former having made a report of their proceedings between 1703 and 1728; but in 1731, in consequence of a fire at the Cottonian Library, the House of Commons set on foot a more extensive and effectual inquiry, and its Committee reported in 1732 that, under their directions, some of the principal record offices had compiled a table of the records of the Kingdom, digested in a regular series of time, distinguishing the repositories in which the several records were contained, and adding: "that they had laid the foundation for a very necessary and noble work, which must be of singular advantage to particular persons; an honour to the nation; and bring to light many valuable remains of antiquity which, for want of an easy and proper access to them, have long been concealed from public notice."

Thus far, adding, however, the dates, I have followed the report; but from other sources it would be easy to trace from the middle of the thirteenth century (about 1250) down to the present day the steps taken to preserve the records. The object, however, of this part of the report is, to show by the one instance of Great Britain, the importance attached to such documents, since every European nation has been, and is now, engaged in the same task, and it may be necessary to bring this strongly and clearly before those who are so deeply engaged in making the all important history of the foundation and building up of the Dominion, that they are apt to think lightly of the task of having that history recorded, or the records preserved from being scattered and destroyed. The details of the work done, which I propose giving, will be found, I believe, to be not merely an interesting historical study, but to be of essential service as a guide to proceedings of a similar kind here, should such be determined upon.