Rethinking Official Knowing and Its Practices. The British Treasury's Registry Between the Two World Wars.

Abstract: The organization of registries emerged in the First World War as a persistent problem in the British Civil Service. The Treasury's re-organization in 1919 and consequent changes in its Registry in 1920, highlight concern for efficiency and better control over information and practices. Despite lip service to the importance of official knowing in records, models were imperfectly implemented and registries did not establish effective lasting control over written communications. Official records were, by 1940, only a small part of the Treasury's recorded communications.

1. Registries, Records and the Civil Service

A registry keeps the records of an organization and provides services for users, the files, and the information these contain. The concept originates in the Latin noun "res", a thing, fact or act, and the verb "gestare", to accomplish or do. Registration of documents fixes information in an approved form, declares deeds to a larger public and assures continued access. Registries are most closely associated with a type of information defined as records. These are the explicit memory of an organization especially of its work, rights, and obligations. Registries thrive on regularity, controls and completeness. Records accumulated this way underwrite their reliability as authoritative sources of transactional information, which can be used for reference, precedent and if required, for proceedings in court. All of these qualities were particularly important to the Treasury whose business was intricate and long lasting.

While recognizable modern registries existed by the end of the eighteenth century, a registry has no necessary arrangement. In the British Civil Service (BCS), for example, registries differed significantly in their services, systems and record-keeping practices. Every BCS registry, however, undertook certain physical and intellectual tasks in support of their organization's formal business. Registry clerks handled all physical jobs related to the control and movement of files while a registrar, sometimes called the librarian, classified records, controlled vocabulary, and ensured documents and information were ordered for users within the files. Registries defined themselves in procedural control over records, and by a strong ethic of service to the department's principal officers. From the earliest days of the Treasury, its registry regularized explicit knowledge in documents, and protected these over time as a central service.

2. The Treasury and its Registry

Although the Treasury was never in the forefront of change, its unique position in the Civil Service gives its records an unprecedented service-wide perspective on registries while alterations to its own practices and procedures, by implication, comment on what was happening in the larger arena. Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Treasury's role in the BCS expanded to include more responsibilities for its complement and classification, more participation in departmental budgets, and more systematic control over costs and supplies. In 1919 the Treasury was reorganized into three divisions with service-wide responsibilities for finance, supply and establishments. These replaced eight divisions, which had responsibilities for client departments. In 1920, shortly after the administrative re-organization, the Treasury reformed its records and registry to consolidate information services for the Treasury as a whole. The changes of 1919 and 1920 and their aftermath in the next two decades, highlight...
continuing high-level official interest in registries and underscore the role of organizational knowledge in the work of the Treasury.

Prior to 1920, the Treasury operated a central registry service for records and information in the Treasury's building in Whitehall. The Treasury was one of a few departments that dealt with matters affecting the BCS as a whole. It was always cognizant of the potential for precedent when decisions on staffing, classification, pay or purchases were made. Although by 1912, telephones helped officials in deliberations and information seeking of an informal nature, official business with departments and the public was formalized in written communications. All incoming post was opened and registered by the registrar and his clerks. A series of registers were kept in parallel to control the allocation of numbers, the location of records and finally their ultimate disposition. The principle for control was one letter, one file, one number. Letters were affixed to jackets, which officials used for recording directions, notes and minutes. Jackets finally enclosed accumulated papers to keep these clean and in order when they were put away. Once incoming letters were registered and related documents were added, files were sent twice a day to the clerical sections of the division responsible for the department that sent the letter. Clerical assistants to the principal officers established their own controls to track the movement of files in the division. Once matters were dealt with and business was concluded, completed files were returned to the registry where precedents were noted and indexing was done. Copies of outgoing letters were made in letter books and later, on flimsies, which were enclosed as part of a file. Files were stored in a controlled record room and registry staff retrieved wanted files for reference. Chronological register indexes, classified by the major areas of Treasury responsibility, were first prepared in 1850. By 1900 these indexes were substantial and provided the best access to the Treasury's accumulated files.

3. Business, Work and the War

After 1870, new responsibilities for government added more business to the offices of the BCS. Registries were expected to keep up their services for more documents to ensure that the files and their information were accessible to officers that needed them. Statistics on the amount of work undertaken by clerks and copyists were not consistently kept; therefore, we have no way to independently verify what was widely believed in the late Victorian Civil Service - that more was required to be done and at greater speeds than were assumed to be normal. Periodic statistics confirm a general growth in business and written work. Certainly throughout the pre-war period, the complement of the BCS and its many registries grew on the justification of need because of the demands of work. This increase continued after the war despite efforts at retrenchment. Between 1914 and 1940, the complement of the BCS increased from around 200,000 to over 350,000. Each department experienced different rates of growth in size and in the amount of its written business. However, beginning in 1890, a number of departments made changes to their registries to meet the increasing demands for records services and for information. A clear example of increased business is the growth of Foreign Office written communications from 18,000 in 1876, to 63,000 in 1904, and then to over 300,000 in 1920.

The Treasury and its registry shared in this general growth, quadrupling its pre-war complement, registry staff and its official written communications by 1921. However, the Treasury, politicians and the public were concerned less with the increase in work in the BCS and more with the prospect of continuing additions to established staff. Public interest in public offices and their business, personnel and resources was, in part, a function of the change in the role of the BCS from regulator to administrator of large public service agencies with wide social functions. Royal Commissions and parliamentary committees who examined the operations of the civil service as a whole before World War I recommended more methodical approaches to the tasks of public business and records. Despite this interest and an accumulation of special expertise in records services, there was no baseline for establishing the ideal complement of
registries nor were there agreed ways for evaluating their work. Changes were often made without clear data to support the normative statements of interested participants. Effective service, and efficient processes were measured by the level of satisfaction of officers who used the registry. This was an unstable measure - satisfaction diminished during the war and never returned to the presumptive high level of earlier times.

World War One strained peacetime practices by increasing work at the same time that those most experienced left for war service. The coherence of registries broke down under pressure. *Ad hoc* practices, new methods, and an increase of staff to meet the emergency, swelled the registry with new people and unprecedented amounts of records. The Committee on Staffs, appointed in 1918 as part of the effort to return administration to peacetime conditions, studied all departments, their responsibilities, operations and complements. Collectively, their reports established, for the first time, a central informed view of the BCS, its workings, complement and needs. The Committee on Staffs, in reviewing registry practices in all offices, recommended reforms to procedure, staffing and records. The Treasury was doubly affected by its recommendations - as central agency for the BCS and as local host for a registry.

One result of the work of the Committee on Staffs was the emergence of a consolidated "view" of registries and their services for the BCS, which was embodied in the publication, *Notes for the Use of Registry Branches*. This booklet discusses the concept of the registry, in abstract, raising issues of principle and suggesting models for organizing jobs and classifying business for retrieval. It consolidates many questions about information work current in the BCS after the War. What should be the form for precedents and their notation? What was the best way to build a working and complete index to the files, correspondents, locations and subjects? What was the best way to control movement of file among units, which were now dispersed in several physical locations in Whitehall? What system would affect a union between chronology and subject? What method would allow tracking of due process and provide access to subjects? The models in *Notes for the Use of Registry Branches* crystallized experiential learning in registry work over the previous thirty years. The booklet guided post-war registries on many issues.

The Treasury restructured its registry in 1920 into distinct services for finance, supply and establishments, mirroring the recent re-organization of the Department. The established principle of one letter, one file was replaced by the principle of one subject, one file. War experiences coupled with the re-organization of the Treasury based on cross-service functions, emphasized the importance of subject access to a record's content. Subject term lists were established. Additions to it were controlled by the registrar. New card indexes to the files by geography, department and correspondent replaced books, which had been used since at least 1850. Registry staff was expected to identify subjects upon receipt of official communications instead of classifying and indexing records at the conclusion of business when papers were filed away. A new system of jacketing, transit and internal arrangement of files was undertaken to re-new system and consistency in procedure, which had broken down during the War. Careful and immediate registration and numbering of files was re-emphasized.

Despite overwhelming evidence that changes were warranted, the reformed registry never operated as smoothly as its designers anticipated. Subjects were difficult to identify in practical situations whose contingent implications were not transparent from the first. The reforms raised the level of knowledge in classification and indexing expected for registry staff. Accuracy and completeness could be compromised by inadequate knowledge on their part and by independent administrative officers outside the registry. Moreover, intellectual work and physical duties were split further to meet practical needs. Retrieval of records and files and the tracking of precedents were not handled by the Registry, which classified and indexed records, but by the clerical sections of each special division. The registry was also hampered by limitations in the physical space of the offices it served. The Treasury remained dispersed through offices in Whitehall after the War. No single space or combination of available places was amenable to all functions of the
registry. These were divided, sometimes arbitrarily according to the availability of rooms and sometimes as a result of planning that considered services and the users needs.\textsuperscript{18}

Manpower and an appropriate level of skill for staff were keys to a successful registry. Despite many reports acknowledging the importance of the registry to the office, reforms were never implemented with the levels of support recommended. Under staffing compromised the full affect of reforms. Rather than strengthening the Registry as an information service, the changes between the wars blurred the lines between the registry, clerical sections and divisional officers. Compliance rested on custom, not on enforcement through audit and as a consequence the balance between registration, indexing and clerical services was always a problem.

None of these elements was addressed adequately in the reforms after the War. Perhaps the most important aspect of registry operations was the working relationship between clerical staff and the divisions they served. The arrangements put in place in 1920 foreshadowed their independence by dividing files and services by specialized sections. Sub-registries, in effect, emerged with caches of records and uniquely knowledgeable clerks. However, the central registry was expected to continue a central service for indexing and classification. Separating the work of searching, pulling and filing from classification and indexing effectively removed an internal check on usefulness of terms and locators.

Dissatisfaction with the reformed registry prompted further reviews in 1924, and again in 1927, in 1932 and 1938.\textsuperscript{19} All reviews concluded that the system was inherently sound but that it had been imperfectly implemented. Several adjustments were made to redress recognized problems. The card indexes, for example, were difficult to work and unable to stand the heavy reference made to them. These were abandoned in favour of loose-leaf binders in 1931.\textsuperscript{20} Control of the clerical sections was also revised to involve the registry more completely. By 1938, those seconded to review the registry acknowledged that additions to responsibilities of the Treasury might never stop. As a result, continuing change in divisional structures was becoming the norm rather than the exception. The restrictions of space, once considered to be a temporary state, were probably going to be permanent. The registry, as a result, would always in a state of flux.\textsuperscript{21}

4. Conclusion

After 1890, knowledge transmitted by shared experience among junior and senior officers was no longer able to meet the detailed demands of Treasury work, which required continuing control of knowledge and access to it by all officers. Wholesale changes in staff, especially during wartime, exposed the weakness of oral networks and underscored the importance of official knowing in writing. System tied more closely to rules, it was thought, would make the registry more resistant to informal modifications; consequently official knowing in records would be more stable and their information could freely circulate as the "life blood of the office.\textsuperscript{22} Clarity in forming files and consistency in records-keeping were essential to policy and more so to administration. However desirable these features, explicit systems were unable to replicate the nuanced knowing implicit in the accumulated experience of seasoned officers.

Concern for system and with the systemic development of solutions to the problems of office work, entered the BCS with businessmen seconded to the service during the war. However, the claim of "scientific" for the examination of office work and registries is difficult to justify from contemporary evidence. The Committee on Staffs, for example, was guided by general questions focused by the experience of the investigators. But they had no agreed method for applying their scrutiny.\textsuperscript{23}

Measures for effective performance of various registry tasks were difficult to create. A number of studies of the "letter", its phases of formation and production, undertaken first in the 1920s and renewed again in the 1940s, were unable to develop principles on which to base measurements.\textsuperscript{24} While continuing high-level interest testifies to the importance of the letter as a genre in formal communications, no methodical analysis produced a useable calculus because
the processes of written communication were largely social and not strictly mechanical. While the role of the registry was never directly questioned, its effectiveness as a central information service was undermined by change in the Treasury's business from rendering decisions to providing central consultation through more frequent informal contacts within and without the BCS. By the end of World War I, and continuing into the 1920s and 1930s, the informal phases of business generated more records than official decisions. By differentiating work into official, semi-official and unofficial categories the Treasury, along with other departments of the BCS, adopted a flexible way to manage business communications and registry work.25 A similar view of records was a natural response to informal ways of initiating business which entered the service as it grew in size. It had the added advantage of recognizing limits on the amount of records that could be fully controlled by the registry.

This division was more than a pragmatic solution to a problem of volume: it also reflected the transformation of records from being strictly legal conclusions to tracking the processes leading to these conclusions. Semi-official and unofficial documents were crucial participants in the deliberative side of Treasury business and were seen as reliable sources of information; however, their volume was too great for the assigned resources and established system of the registry. In retrospect, changes to the Treasury's central registry after 1920 narrowed its focus to concentrate on a sub-set of its recorded communications. Although the balance of the Registry's staff was shifted from mechanical duties of copying, filing and transit to more skilled intellectual services of classifying, indexing, and searching, the full implications of the transformation in the nature of recorded communications on a comprehensive central registry service for all records were imperfectly understood by contemporaries and these were, perhaps not surprisingly, imperfectly implemented.26 By 1940, official records were only a small part of the Treasury's official knowing and satellite registries for divisions were established as practical alternatives.

Notes
1. Public Record Office (PRO), Records of the Treasury (T) Class 1, Registered Files, 1952-1920, 12334/2800 is the editorial and production file for Notes for the Use of Registry Branches. Also see PRO, T 1, for reports on the registries in many departments by the Committee on Staffs. Differences among registries had been noted earlier in the century in the report of the Cartwright Committee, PRO, T 1, 10369.
2. In addition to the class PRO, T 1, there are pertinent files on registries in PRO, T 199, Establishment Officers Branch Files (EO), PRO, T 222, Organization and Methods Division (O&M), and PRO, T 162 Treasury Establishment (TE).
3. PRO, T 162 (TE), 59/e5083.
5. PRO, T 1, 12618/24961 and PRO, T 199 (EO), 91 e088/01, "Treasury Re-Organization of Registry - New System of Registration, 1921-1944". The new system came into effect June 8, 1920. It is outlined in "Establishment Office Memorandum 52/20". Details of the old and new system are in PRO, T 199 (EO), 90 e088/01, "Treasury Reorganization of Registry. "New System of Registration, 1919-1925."
6. PRO, T 1, 8227a, "Directive on papers", 25 May 1870.
7. PRO, T 222 (O&M) 918 "Correspondence and Costing."
9. PRO, T 162 (TE), 446/e13876, "Staff of Government Departments, 1913-1935."
10. PRO, T 1, 10369/22406 (1905).
12. PRO, T 1, 12286/8431, "Committee on Staffs 4th Interim Report, Plus annexes, February 1919." T 1, 12408/48324, 12 November 1919 "Minute on Treasury Arrangement of Office Files". Also see
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PRO, T 1, 12291, for the Committee on Staffs commentary on the Registry of the Ministry of Pensions. This provides a good example of the affects of new people who had no training in the BCS on existing systems.

13. The Committee on Staffs reports on departments, ministries and registries are found in PRO, T 1, 10165, 12261, 12262, 12263, 12264, 12291, and 12460.

14. PRO, T 1, 12334/23800, "Notes on Registry and Copying Branches 1919".

15. PRO, T 199 (EO), 90, eo88/01, "Treasury Re-Organization of Registry. New System of Registration, 1919-1925."

16. Ibid.

17. PRO, T 199 (EO), 43, eo88/129/03 "Committee on Registry and Departmental Clerical Sections (Curtis Committee) Report, 1938".

18. Dispersal of offices began during the war. Accommodation, like the registry, was a topic of general concern throughout the service after the war. See PRO, T 1, 12203/38087, 4 October 1918 "Memoranda on Treasury Accommodation" and 162/949 Pt 1. "Storage of Treasury Records, 1925-1927."


20. PRO, T 199 (EO), 93, eo88/127/02, "Treasury Registration System, Introduction of Loose Leaf Indexes, 1930".


22. PRO, T 199 (EO), 93, eo88/127/02, "Treasury Registration system, Introduction of Loose Leaf Indexes, 1930".

23. PRO, T 1, 12334/28000, "Notes on Registry and Copying Branches, 1919".

24. PRO, T 162 (TE), 112/e14972, discusses comparative costs of registration in 1925. T 222 (O&M) 918, "Correspondence Costing" and 442, "Staff and Workloads - Registries, 1945-1949" and 734, OM234/2/01 "Work Measurement."

25. PRO, T 162 (TE), 79/e8027.