

Can the experience in Britain help? REED's sources

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European colleagues often ask me, 'How did REED do it?' 'How were you able to organize a team to do *all* the records of Britain?' Trying to imitate REED is unlikely to be fruitful in 2007 and beyond. Project's like REED were possible in the mid 1970s. Whether such a project is viable in 2007 is questionable. However, smaller scale archival research is a very real possibility anywhere in Europe. But every jurisdiction is different, every state and principality has its own method of record keeping, its own system of government, its own archival system. For this reason there can be no one-to-one comparison of the classes of documents or where they might be found across Europe. What I hope to do in this paper is sketch how archives are organized in Great Britain so that you will understand how REED has been able to gather our records and then list the *kinds* of records that we have found provide information about entertainment in the middle ages and the renaissance. I hope this will serve as a guide to those of you who wish to do archival research at whatever level.

Archive Organization

1. Public archives.

a) The major national archive in Great Britain has long been called the Public Record Office but has now changed its name to the National Archives. These records were first stored in the Tower of London (that great square tower) and then, in the nineteenth century, moved to Chancery Lane and in the late twentieth century to new very 'high tech' quarters at Kew, west of London. This collection

contains, for the purpose of people working in our period, the royal records, the records of parliament (including the records of the Court of Star Chamber), material that came into the possession of the crown at various times (such as the dissolution of the monasteries in the mid sixteenth century) and the records of such jurisdictions as the Duchy of Lancaster that came into the royal house with the marriage of John of Gaunt to Blanche of Lancaster in 1359. In Britain, history triumphs over logic (at least for the moment) and neophyte researchers are often baffled about what is where. On the whole, it is best to search the catalogues of the major central repository before moving on to smaller local collections. You never know what quirk of history or politics has resulted in the depositing of one set of archives in one library and another in another.

b) County Record Offices

Since the Second World War, the British government has put major resources into the establishment of county record offices in the county seats. Gathered there are all the local records of the municipalities, parishes, civil and (often) ecclesiastical courts and many family papers. These are organized according to pre-1974 county boundaries – the year that counties were ‘rationalized’ to the annoyance and often bewilderment of the populace. This can be another trap for the unwary. For example, in 1974 the northern half of Berkshire became part of Oxfordshire but the records of all the parishes in historic Berkshire remain in the Berkshire Record Office in Reading. European jurisdictions may have had similar ‘up-dates’ that have resulted in illogical divisions. In Britain, the ecclesiastical court material is to be found in the county record office only if the see or cathedral of the diocese is in the county. Today the diocese of Oxford comprises Oxfordshire, Berkshire and

Buckinghamshire. When I realized this I thought my research into the ecclesiastical records of Berkshire would be simple. Far from it. All the records of the diocese of Oxford since its creation in 1542, are in the Oxfordshire Record Office but before 1542, Oxfordshire was in the diocese of Lincoln as was Buckinghamshire. Berkshire was in the diocese of Salisbury. All the ecclesiastical court material for Berkshire from our period is in the records of the Diocese of Salisbury in the Wiltshire Record Office in Trowbridge and all the Buckinghamshire records and Oxford pre 1542 are in the Lincolnshire Record Office. Similar shifts and changes have undoubtedly happened in European jurisdictions – always check where the *historic* records are kept, it may not be the obvious modern repository.

2. Semi-public Records

These documents are often very valuable but require more careful planning and patience. These are made available to scholars but not as freely as the public archives. Letters need to be written and academic ‘bona fides’ produced. Many of these collections have trained archivists but they are not as prepared for academic researchers as the public archives. We must remember that we are allowed to see these documents by permission, not by right.

a) Ecclesiastical records.

Since all the religious houses in Britain were suppressed at the reformation, their records were either destroyed or scattered. Some records survive in the National Archives and in county record offices. Where religious houses have a continuing history they may still hold their own historic records. We have found that the Abbot’s Accounts or the Prior’s Accounts often record payments to players in the

male houses – not the nunneries. Cathedrals (such as Yorkminster, Canterbury, Westminster, Worcester) tend to hold their own records in Britain.

b) Schools and Universities

Perhaps because most were originally religious foundations, the situation in Britain for the records of schools and universities is much the same as with the cathedrals. Most hold their own records. These are often a rich source since, especially under the Humanists, drama was part of the curriculum.

c) Guilds and Confraternities

Britain did not have the extensive web of Confraternities that existed on the continent and the religious confraternities were suppressed at the Reformation. Again, their records have scattered. However, craft and mercantile guilds flourished, often with a confraternal wing. The modern Merchant Adventurers of York (the lineal descendants of the Mercers) still keep their own records (with all the details of the play of Judgement in the York Cycle). The Liveried Companies of London, although they have deposited them in a central place, retain jurisdiction over their records. This situation may also exist on the continent and again courtesy is required in requesting access. These are private records and, in Britain at least, there is no obligation on the owner to allow scholars access.

3. Private collections

In Britain some great families retain their records and one – the dukes of Rutland – refuse to allow any access. Most, however, are willing to accommodate scholars but it is often necessary to work around the few hours that a part-time archivist is available. The financial records of the great houses have been a major source for REED in determining the routes of the travelling players.

Kinds of Records

There are so many possible places where references to performance may appear that the task sometimes seems impossible to accomplish. Our experience has been to ‘follow the money’. Two things we know for certain – if a group of people performed, they incurred expenses for costumes and props; if a group of people patronized players they incurred expenses for payments. Therefore, first place to look for evidence is in financial accounts. The payments for costumes and props often appear under a ‘catch-all’ category such as ‘Necessary Expenses’ and payments to players most often appear under the personal expenses of the mayor, the master of the guild, the head of the religious house etc. Once you have established that there *was* performance activity in a town, parish or monastery, if there are any other records surviving from that jurisdiction you may find further and more discursive evidence there. If there are no financial accounts and you have no other evidence that there *are* performance records, my advice would be to set those records aside for the time being. Some researchers plod doggedly through the records that are unlikely to yield any results somehow holding on to the hope that something will appear. In my experience, go for what you can get and publish articles as you go along.

In Britain, we have found evidence of performance of one kind or another everywhere from the smallest parish to the court. It seems that wherever people worked in community they found ways to celebrate community through performance. It also seems that people were hungry for entertainments from the outside world and were prepared to pay players. A person trained as a literary scholar often finds the pursuit of documents bewildering. Seek help from your historian colleagues. In Britain, the major cities – York, Chester, London, Bristol, Norwich, Exeter – were all incorporated in our period with mayors and councils and properly kept chamberlains’ accounts. These are an

important source of performance records. The crown also held the power to incorporate smaller market towns towns that often became the county seat. Before a town was incorporated it existed in an administrative limbo that can be hard to sort out. The situation on the Continent may be entirely different but one of the things you must establish is what the records mean. For example, the town of Reading was not incorporated until 1542 after the dissolution of the great Benedictine Abbey that was the lord of the manor. Until then the records that are apparently records of the town are, legally, the records of the Guild Merchant. Similarly, unincorporated municipalities without a strong Guild Merchant were legally boroughs and governed by an entirely different system under Burgess Courts presided over by the local lord of the manor. They did not keep the detailed accounts that incorporated towns were required to keep. Sometimes when the parish and the town were co-terminus, we find quasi town accounts in the parish accounts. Persevere. People, however organized, living together in towns often either produced plays themselves or paid travelling players.

In Britain, a major (and unexpected) source of information has come from parish records particularly the churchwardens' accounts. I don't know what these officials were called in the many jurisdictions on the Continent but these were the lay managers of the parish, responsible under canon law to maintain the fabric of the church east of the chancel. In Britain, these were the parish fundraisers and frequently sponsored seasonal celebrations such as church ales where much ale was drunk and music, dancing and frequently playmaking were part of the festivities. Robin Hood plays, morris dancers and many other 'folklorique' activities were sponsored by the parishes during the festive season (May and June) as fundraisers. In Germanic areas, such activities may appear more often at Shrovetide. Many parishes also sponsored religious plays – Passion Plays,

saints plays, single episode or serial Biblical plays or Easter plays some of which were moneymakers and the records appear under 'Receipts'. But others were performed as act of piety and charges for the costumes and props appear under 'Expenses'. Parishes often banded together and pooled their resources to produce very large plays.

Legal records are more difficult to survey. Again, the difference in jurisdiction makes it hard to direct researchers on the Continent to the right place. In England, the system of parallel ecclesiastical courts survived the Reformation. These courts tended to try cases that were very close to parish life such as adultery cases. If a woman in the parish had borne a bastard, the parish was anxious to prove paternity because if they didn't they were responsible for the upbringing of the child. Similarly cases involving the breaking of the increasingly strict sabbatarian rules with dancing and other festive activity also came under the jurisdiction of these courts. These cases are rarely catalogued and anyone launching into them must be prepared to read an enormous amount of material that, though interesting, is irrelevant. Such courts may not exist on the Continent but a researcher should determine where the regulations concerning the use of church property were enforced and he or she may find similar records. Cases tried in the civil courts (courts of Quarter Session presided over by circuit judges) concerning players tend to be better known. In England, there were two murders connected with Queen Elizabeth's troupe the Queen's Men neither of which resulted in a conviction. Civil courts have been more frequently used by other kinds of historians and are often better catalogued and indexed.

The highest court in the reigns of the Tudors and the Stuarts was the Court of Star Chamber which was a manifestation of the Privy Council meeting in a different place (a chamber decorated with stars – hence Star Chamber) and in a different configuration.

Cases were referred to Star Chamber both directly and as appeals from the lower courts. Matters that have little to do directly with performance often turn up in Star Chamber because the crime or contested event happened in the context of a performance such as the decision of the Chester City Council to perform the Whitsun Play in 1575. The case had little to do with the play itself but much to do with the freedom of the city to control what took place within their jurisdiction. There is also the long and detailed description of the Wells May Game that concerned two individuals. If such courts existed on the Continent they may be catalogued and provide a gateway into unexpected activities.

The remaining categories of documents are all one way or another household documents – Cathedral records are often the accounts of the resident Dean and Chapter, Monastic records are clearly household accounts closely related to the records of the schools and universities. Evidence is most often found in the records of the dean, abbot, provost or master or in the records of the Bursar. Other household accounts rarely yield any performance records. The record of private households are harder to be precise about. Once the presence of travelling entertainers has been established, however, fascinating detail can be deduced from such accounts as those for the Pantry or the Stables where the number of meals served to man or horse can determine the number and often the nature of the visitors. Royal accounts and the accounts of such royal officials as the Masters of the Revels are a world unto themselves and have, in Britain at least, been well researched. If the records of Continental kings, princes and dukes have not been examined for performance records then someone should take up the challenge right away. Costly cultural display was a way of life for princes in the late medieval and early modern period and their records should reflect that.

I have been speaking up until now about records that have either remained where they began or have been collected into public archives according to their place or origin and classification. But, of course, documents don't always stay 'put'. In Britain many have migrated to the national libraries – the British Library and the National Libraries of Scotland and Wales. Many have also found their way to the libraries of Cambridge and particularly Oxford. Anyone working on records material must at some point survey the catalogues of such major libraries. REED was lucky enough to be able to do that and each editor is provided with a lists of mss that might be relevant or his or her research area the the major repositories. Manuscripts that came in to private hands at some time are frequently sold at public auction and, in Britain at least, have frequently been bought by the British Library. This is what happened to the register of the York Cycle – the text of the plays as we now have it. As far as we can piece together the provenance of the ms, it seems that at the time the play was called in by the Ecclesiastical Commission of the North it passed in to the hands of the member of the Fairfax family who was then on the Commission. Pen-trials appear in seventeenth century hands all naming the writers as members of the Fairfax family. It then apparently disappeared to reappear in the possession of the earl of Ashburnham in the nineteenth century. It was still in his possession when Lucy Toulmin Smith prepared the first edition of the yext in 1885 but when that library was broken up it was bought by the British Library. Other non-literary ms were also brought in to public libraries and, in some cases, documents that are now lost were copied by antiquarians anxious to preserve the past. The Bodleian Library in Oxford is particularly rich in antiquarian material that is now the only witness to performance in some places. Do not ignore antiquarian copies of mss now lost!

Finally, there may be, in any jurisdiction, special collections that fit none of the above categories. The best example of this in Britain is the mss collection at Hatfield House, the home of the Cecil family, the present dukes of Salisbury. William Cecil, first Baron Burghley and his second son Robert, first earl of Salisbury were first ministers to both Queen Elizabeth and James I. The Cecil correspondence, a goldmine of information for these two reigns, is still in Hatfield House. We would not know about the Maying customs of the youths of Oxford if they had not caused a riot in Pembroke College that caused the then Chancellor of the University, the playwright Thomas Sackville, Lord Buckhurst, to send a letter to Cecil about the matter hotly followed by a defence from the Mayor and Council. Be alert to the possibility of such a source.

Archival research – especially archival research that involves external evidence of playmaking – is detective work. You begin with a clue – a place, a name, a performance date and follow any lead that presents itself. In the work of REED we have had adventures and through the accumulation of many small pieces of evidence we have been able to provide an external context for the few play texts that have survived the religious and cultural revolutions of early modern Britain. The Continent is far richer in texts. The French *fatistes* preserved the great Biblical texts ; the Chambers of Rhetoric in the Low Countries generated and preserved a remarkable body of dramatic material. I suspect the Continent may also be richer in external evidence. It is there to be discovered. We know the art form was international. What can be found in individual state or private archives will help to fill in the picture of late medieval and early modern drama that SITM was founded to explore.