SAFEGUARDING MANUSCRIPT SOURCES OF NATIONAL AND LOCAL HISTORY.

BY THE EDITOR.

In our issue for January, 1927 (pp. 16-19), we took occasion to refer to the protests which had been appearing in the press, against the sale, exportation, and ruthless destruction of historical and other documents which was constantly taking place.

Such protests cannot be too frequently or too strongly emphasised if this disastrous traffic in, and destruction of important sources of our national and local history, which still continues, is to be arrested; and we note with satisfaction that public opinion is at last being mobilised to defend from destruction all kinds of historical documents, including the deeds and other papers hitherto preserved in lawyers' offices, or in private archives.¹

One very hopeful sign is the interest which is being aroused among the members of the Surveyors' Institution. The President of that body (Mr. C. D. Fisher) in his annual address reminded members that in these days of transition, when so many estates are changing hands and being broken up, it often happens that the records of the estates are carelessly dispersed or destroyed, and that it was within their power to render an incalculable service to historical research in the future by persuading the owners of such properties to hand over to the nearest public library, or to the local historical, archaeological or antiquarian society, the deeds, conveyances, and other papers connected therewith, which could be of no further value as evidences of title, but would furnish the historian with valuable information as to the enclosure of lands and open fields, the growth and breaking up of estates, and the fluctuation in the size of farms and rents. Such documents would be of the greatest historical value to posterity, and by placing them in safe custody the present owners would feel amply recompensed if they could be made to realise that the country would benefit by their action.

¹ "History," April, 1929, pp. 48-51, and July, 1929, pp. 121-124.
The President of the Worcester Archaeological Society (Mr. E. A. Barnard) also, has been untiring in his efforts to check yet another disquieting and deplorable traffic in old documents, which are bought, for no other purpose than, that they should be cut up and used in the making of toy drums, tambourines, covers for blotters, lamp shades, and such like fancy articles. The firm making use of these vellum deeds and similar documents, when approached, disclaimed any intention of vandalism. They asserted that the old documents which come into their hands in large quantities are of a common-place character, and that any which appear to be of special interest or importance are not destroyed.

This assurance is not a sufficient safeguard against the possible destruction of documents of great importance, and Mr. Barnard has continued his crusade with the assistance of the B.B.C., by broadcasting talks upon the subject, with encouraging results. One result was that a visit was arranged to a large paper mill, where great quantities of documents and papers of all kinds are pulped, and where, it is to be hoped, Mr. Barnard's warnings and advice will have the desired effect. There are in London from thirty to forty such paper works, where this pulping process is carried on, in the course of which hundreds of tons of papers of all sorts are dealt with to furnish the stock from which much of our modern paper is made. It is not too much to hope that these firms may be induced to arrange for a thorough examination of this material by some one capable of assessing the importance or worthlessness of any documents or papers which it may include, before it is placed beyond the possibility of salvation.

In private hands there are an incalculable number of old deeds, leases, settlements, letters, wills, and other papers, the accumulations perhaps of centuries, which may not have any great value from the point of view of national history, but which are of the utmost importance as local records. Such collections, which may have been temporarily stored, for want of better accommodation, in unsuitable buildings, such as stables and outhouses, where they are likely to suffer irreparable damage from damp and neglect, are frequently turned out by thoughtless executors of estates as worthless lumber, to find its way to the paper-mills.

Such documents form part of the essential source material for the
history of the families and counties to which they relate, and are invaluable to students of our local history and customs, as well as to the ever-increasing number of scholars engaged in this description of historical investigation.

Unfortunately, there is no expert official advice available for this class of material. It is true, that the Historical Manuscript Commission is willing to advise owners as to the care and preservation of collections of documents of national importance such as they are mainly concerned with, but for other classes of manuscript matter no such official guidance is available. If, however, the owners of such collections or the executors and solicitors of estates, which are in process of being broken up, would take the trouble to apply to the Secretary of the local Archaeological Society, he would gladly put them in touch with some member with the requisite knowledge and experience, who would willingly advise them as to what is worthy of preservation.

In this connection it is welcome news that steps have been taken to secure the co-operation of the archaeological societies affiliated to the Congress of Archaeological Societies, by asking them to report upon their experience in this matter of destruction. The results of these reports were to be submitted to the Congress at its meeting in November, and there is little doubt that some plan of action will have been decided upon before the present issue of the BULLETIN is in circulation.

One very important step has been taken in the direction of safeguarding one particular class of such documents by means of a short Act of Parliament, entitled "The Law and Property Amendment Act, 1924," in which the Master of the Rolls is empowered to direct that all manorial court rolls, charters, and similar documents at present scattered about the country should be reported to him. He is also empowered to establish depôts in different parts of the country in which these documents should be deposited for safe custody.

Unfortunately, the powers vested in the Master of the Rolls does not authorise him to order manorial documents to be placed in the approved local depository unless, in his opinion, they are not being properly cared for. He may, however, institute such inquiries as he shall think fit for the purpose of ascertaining whether any such documents are being properly preserved. Yet, it remains for the lord of the manor to decide whether or not he will transfer his records to
a public institution, where they would be readily accessible to him or to any student who might wish to consult them.

At the request of the Master of the Rolls, this library has undertaken to act as the approved depository, under the provisions of the Act, for the counties of Cheshire and Lancashire. And in order that the objects for which the Act was framed may be achieved, we intend to prepare a register of the manors within the two counties, with a view of inviting the lords of such manors to deposit with us all the manorial documents which are no longer in current use.

In the early part of last year the Master of the Rolls was able to report steady progress with the register which he had established, and which at present includes particulars of over 9000 manors either existing or obsolete, but it is far from complete, since it is estimated that there are in England alone from 18,000 to 20,000 manors, of which 12,000 are extant.

Another very disquieting aspect of this traffic in manuscripts is the large collections of valuable sources of our national history which are constantly being transported to America. It may be that many of these papers cannot be regarded as State property, but they are of such national importance that under no circumstances should they be allowed to leave these shores.

Italy set us an example we might well follow, when her Government ordered all objects of first-rate importance to be scheduled, and provided that the State should have a right of pre-emption before any idea of exportation could be tolerated. Some of the treasures so scheduled were under no circumstances to be exported. It was under this wise provision that the most important of the Medici archives were saved for the country a few years ago.

As Sir Charles Oman has pointed out the class of our national treasures which call for some such stringent action are manuscript papers which are obviously state property wrongly appropriated by long dead delinquents. It seems to have been the practice throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for state officials to remove important state papers to their own homes, regarding them as the perquisites of office, in utter disregard of their successors and subsequent administrators in office, to say nothing of the claims of the historian. Many of these state papers, mixed with genuine family papers, have passed into the possession of American libraries in quite recent years,
such as, for example, the Battle Abbey Charters, a collection of documents from Stowe House dating from 1170, muniments of the Earl of Huntington and the Earl of Ellesmere, all relating to English history, against the exportation of which some state embargo should have been imposed.

A number of very important royal wardrobe books and other similar documents were saved from the disaster of exportation a few years ago, at considerable expense, by the Governors of the John Rylands Library, and are now in their safe keeping.

The Institute of Historical Research is rendering a very useful service in undertaking to record the migration of manuscripts which pass through the sale-room, by means of a register of such sales and of the subsequent migration of the items.

There is still another class of historical records which calls for prompt action if they are to be saved from destruction through careless and thoughtless neglect. We refer to the Parish Registers of the country, many of which are in a shocking state of disrepair from want of reasonable care, whilst others that have come under our notice have completely perished, and have been allowed to become little better than bundles of rags, and even of pulp.

The "Parochial Registers and Records Measure" (19-20 George V., no. 1) which was passed by the Church Assembly and presented to Parliament for the royal assent, is now in force, and is in time to save many of the registers from the process of disintegration by which they are threatened from want of care, if the Bishops will exercise without delay the powers which are vested in them.

Under this measure the Bishops are empowered to establish diocesan record offices in which any register not actually in use, and any deeds or documents of value as historical records may be deposited by the minister concerned.

We have not yet heard of the establishment of such a record office for the diocese of Manchester, or that the registers and other parochial documents have been inspected with a view of determining whether they are being properly cared for. The whole matter is permissive as far as the Bishop is concerned, but his orders, once given, may be enforced in the county court.

We would venture to express the hope that the Bishops will without delay direct that a systematic inspection, by competent officials,
be carried out in the various dioceses, with a view of determining whether the registers and other parish or church muniments are properly cared for, and are readily accessible for purposes of consultation, under the necessary safeguards. In their report the officials should be instructed to indicate what is the condition of the various registers and other documents, and in cases where there are evidences of decay from mildew or other causes, or of disrepair from careless handling, to call attention to the need for immediate action, in order that the necessary repairs or treatment may be applied so as to arrest decay, and prevent further disintegration. The parish chest, or safe, in which the registers and papers are often stored are not infrequently the cause of the trouble, for damp and vitiated air are amongst the worst enemies of such manuscripts, since like human beings, they require fresh air and light.

In cases where the parish does not possess appropriate and safe accommodation for their records, especially for those which are no longer in current use, they should be ordered into the safe custody of the episcopal registry or record office, or of some public depository, where at all reasonable times they will be accessible for consultation.

That brings us to the purpose we had in view in calling attention to these matters, which is to renew the offer we have made from time to time in these pages, of any help within our power in the form of advice, and of our willingness to take charge of any such collections as may relate to the North of England, more especially to the counties of Lancashire and Cheshire.

Many collections have already been entrusted to our care, in response to our previous offers, and now find an appropriate resting-place in the charter room or the manuscript rooms of this library, where they are readily accessible to any student or reader who may wish to consult them. We undertake not only to be responsible for the safe custody of any documents which may be entrusted to our care, but to arrange them and describe them, and from time to time to print and publish brief descriptive hand-lists of them.