

Medieval Muniment Rooms, their Furniture, Fittings and Information Retrieval Systems

by

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This paper is concerned with three matters, primarily the creation of a specialised building or room for the housing of muniments – documents recording the endowments and privileges of an institution. Second, the furniture and fittings of this accommodation, and thirdly the methods used to retrieve the information in the documents. The most notable surviving examples are to be found at the colleges of Oxford University where the author describes the development of the muniment room over the period from c.1250 AD to the mid-seventeenth century.

'Munimenta' in Latin means 'fortifications'. In the Middle Ages the term came to mean title deeds, preserved as evidence of rights or privileges. Already by the time of the Norman Conquest documents recording the giving of privileges and land were being produced by royal clerks and distributed as proof of endowments to their recipients who stored them among precious objects. At this time archives and muniment rooms to hold them did not exist. Charters were put in the same category as relics given to the patron saint rather than to individuals and so were kept in churches, which in a violent age were relatively safe places. They were bound into liturgical books, placed in treasuries and on altars where they were protected by taboos against sacrilege.

Gradually, however, gospel books and reliquaries became inadequate for the preservation of originals or copies of documents. In the twelfth and particularly the thirteenth centuries there was a great explosion of documentation and the complementary development of increasingly sophisticated legal and accounting procedures that required careful storage of the documents themselves.¹ Muniment rooms as a separate and especially designed building type originated in the same period. Among the earliest purpose built muniment rooms was the so-called treasury building, a free-standing hexagonal two-storey structure added to the newly-built cathedral at Salisbury.² It was situated near, but to begin with not actually connected to the south-eastern transept. Its interior appearance at first-floor level is known from nineteenth-century watercolours. It had strong oaken doors, a beautifully preserved radiating pavement of inlaid tiles and within it were stored the muniments of the cathedral inside great chests (Fig. 1).

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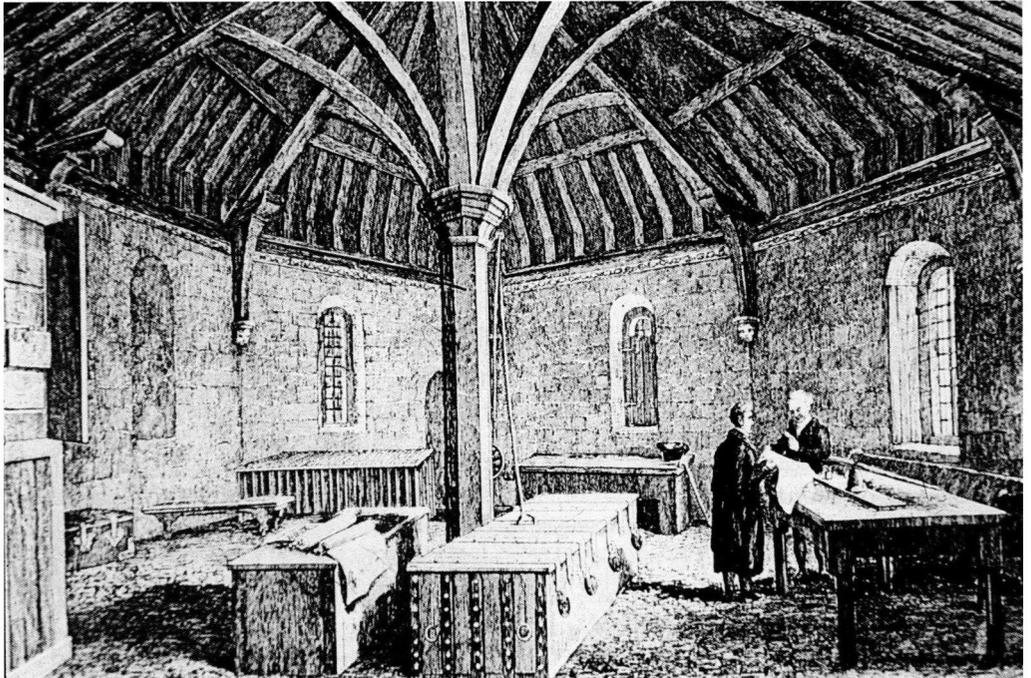


Fig. 1

Salisbury Cathedral. Interior (first floor) of treasury and muniment room – note chests.
P. Hall, Picturesque Memorials of Salisbury Cathedral (1834), plate XXI.

It was however in the burgeoning university of Oxford that muniment rooms began to be built with ever increasing complexity in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Colleges were academic institutions with impressive (and expensive) buildings designed for communal living, halls, libraries and gate-towers; their activities were regulated by statutes which gave them continuity. They were richly endowed with manors and these agglomerations of land needed to be effectively controlled if the wealth flowing from them was to be channelled back to the scholastic community. Since the proof of legal possession of lands lay in title deeds it was essential to protect them. Hence the muniment rooms at Oxford were among the first to be built.

The oldest purpose-built muniment room here was the so-called Treasury building at Merton College constructed between 1288-91.³ The well thought out design included several aspects which were repeated in later college buildings. It was planned to begin with to be free standing and thus, like many medieval kitchens, less likely to suffer from fire damage.⁴ Later, it was joined to other buildings in Mob quad. The unique form of the roof, steep pitched and gabled and made of stone which sprang from two-centred and chamfered arches dying on the side walls, also arose from a fear of fire. Additional security was gained by siting the room on the first floor approached by only one narrow stone-built newel staircase barred by solid doors. Moreover it was paved with glazed tiles resting on a stone vault. It was, in fact, a veritable small fortress.



Fig. 2

Windsor Castle. Aerary – note door, grid over window and stone vault.

Photograph Author



Fig. 3

Windsor Castle. Aerary – note door and tiled floor.

Photograph Author

Edward III founded his college of canons at Windsor Castle and to complete this he added a treasury or 'aerary' (from Latin *aerarius*, belonging to money) (Figs 2, 3 and 4) on the west side of the cloister over a vaulted porch.⁵ It was begun in June 1353 when John Umberill and his masons were paid for scappling stones for the 'room known as the treasury'. The vault of the chamber itself was made of Eglemont stone bought from Sir Simon of Swaniland in 1354. It is an oblong chamber with stone walls 23½ feet long, 11½ feet wide and 13 feet high. The stone vault is of two bays with diagonal transverse longitudinal and wall ribs with carved double roses at intersections and against the walls. The interstices are filled with coursed clunch. The floor is paved with 4½ inch paviers of several patterns bought from Penn in Buckinghamshire in 1355. The aerary is lit by a window in the south end, set at the back of a widely splayed pointed recess. Its two-round headed and cinque-foiled lights are rebated for shutters and an iron grill with bars weighing 3 cwt 23 lbs and costing 60s 6¼d was added in 1496-7. It was well planned to be a combined treasury and muniment room being difficult of access. One had to go over the roof to get to the short stone newel which led via two strong doors to the room itself.

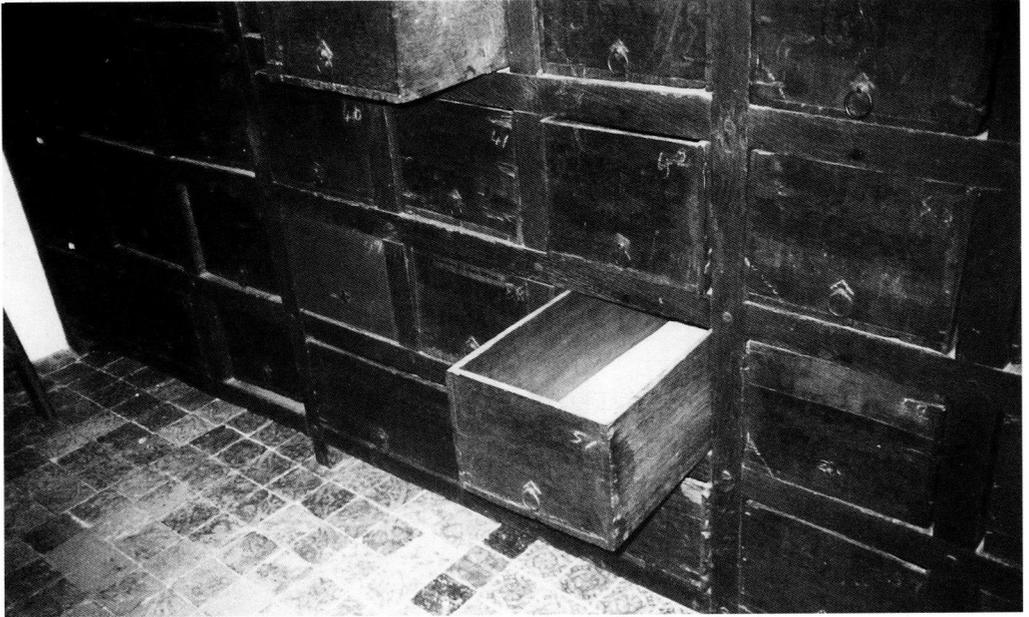


Fig. 4

Windsor Castle. Aerary – note nest of drawers and tiled floor.

Photograph Author

William of Wykeham's clerkship of the works at Windsor Castle meant that he oversaw the finance, collected materials for the buildings, recruited and paid the wide variety of stone-cutters and labourers who worked on the site.⁶ Moreover as a civil servant of long standing he had doubtless been aware of Bishop Stapledon's reorganisation of the royal records in the Tower of London. Towers meant security. The political crisis of the Peasants Revolt in 1381 must have sharpened his fears for the safety of the title deeds with which he was to endow his dual foundations of Winchester and New College Oxford. One of the aims of the rebels was the destruction of manorial records, the proof of villeinage and labour services. In Essex for instance manorial records in over seventy places were seized and burned.⁷ Consequently when William of Wykeham decided to endow his school at Winchester and his college at New College, Oxford, with multiple manors he had a model (the aerary at Windsor Castle) and a motive (the protection of his title deeds from peasant insurrection). He decided to lodge the muniments of both foundations in towers.

Difficulty of access was one facet of security. The muniment tower at Winchester College was sited next to the chapel in one corner of the second quadrangle.⁸ It could only be approached by way of the chapel and up a stone-built newel staircase. At New College access to the muniment tower (Figs 5, 6 and 7) was even more convoluted.⁹ The ground-floor room at the lowest stage of the tower was entered directly from the quadrangle. A second room, immediately above, was entered from a door at the head of the stairs leading to the cross passage of the first-floor hall. A third door led from the

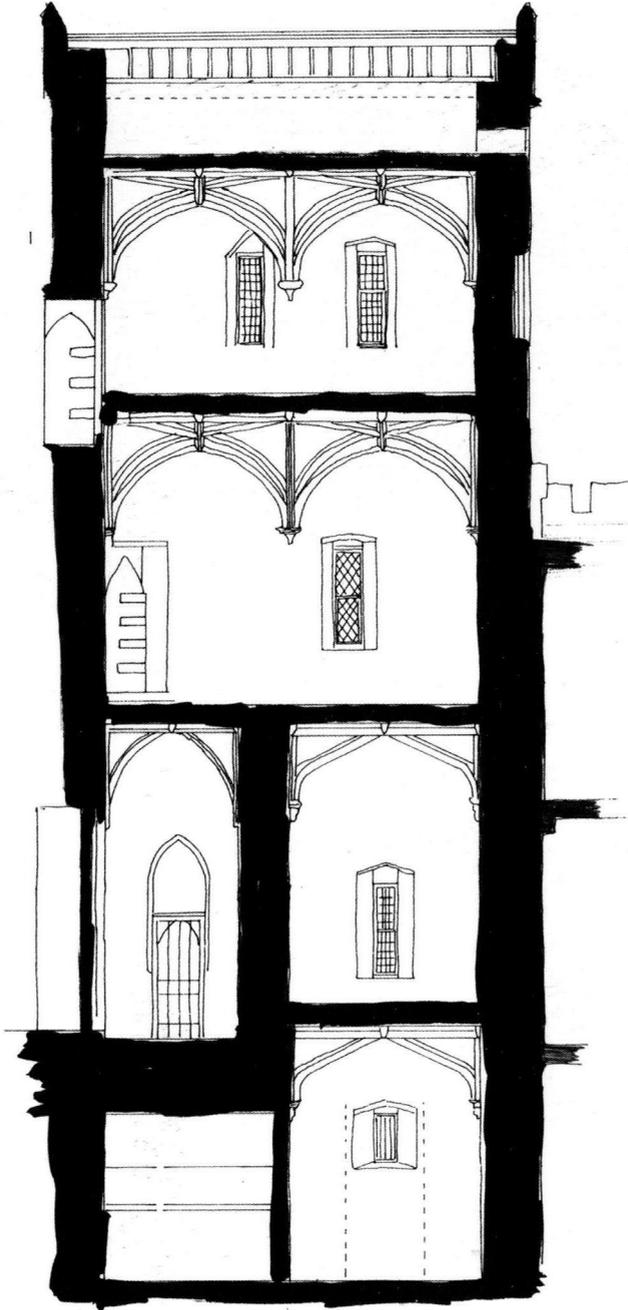


Fig. 5
New College. Section through muniment tower.
Midland Survey Partnership and New College archive

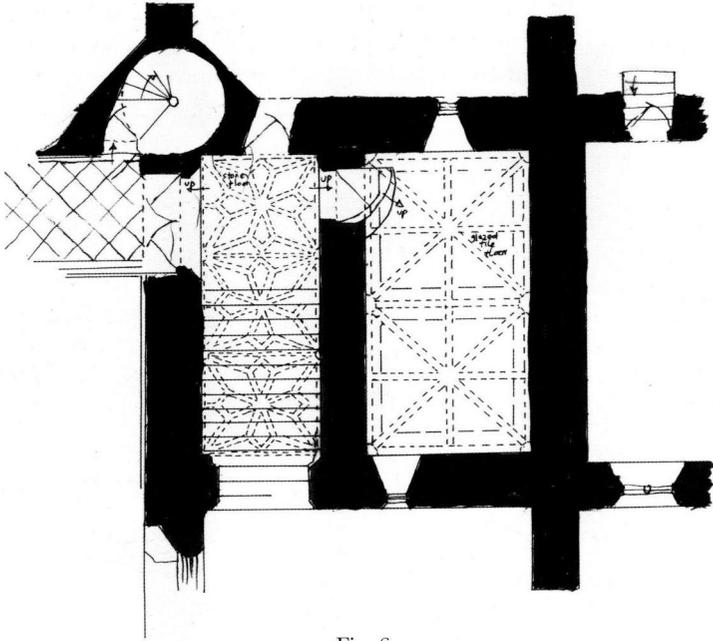


Fig. 6
New College. Ground-floor plan of muniment tower.
Midland Survey Partnership and New College archive

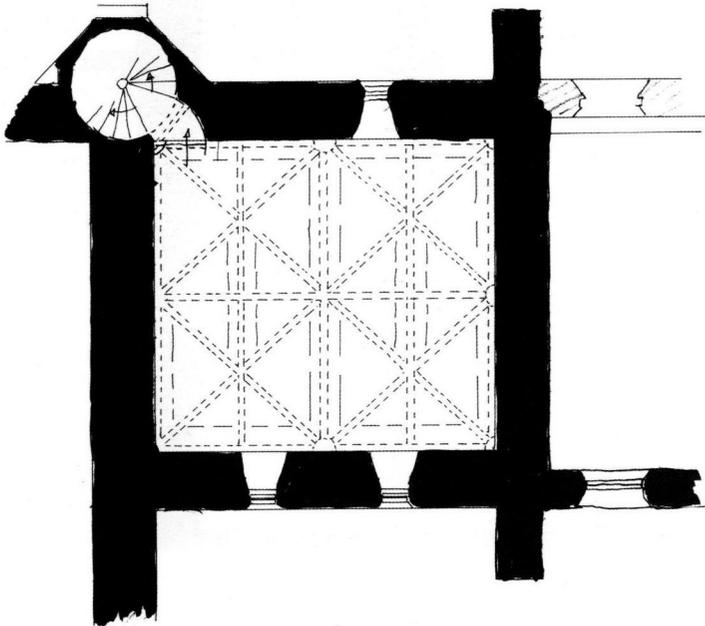


Fig. 7
New College. First-floor plan of muniment tower.
Midland Survey Partnership and New College archive

passage to a stone newel staircase connecting the second and third rooms. These doors were immensely strong and rendered fireproof by being sheathed in iron. The upper rooms were similarly fire proofed by floors paved in Penn tiles (as at the 'Aerary') and stone-vaulted ceilings (Fig. 8). Iron bars formed a grid over the shuttered windows (Fig. 9). There was no heating. Originally the documents were stored in chests to which we shall return.



Fig. 8

New College. Muniment tower vault.

Photograph Author

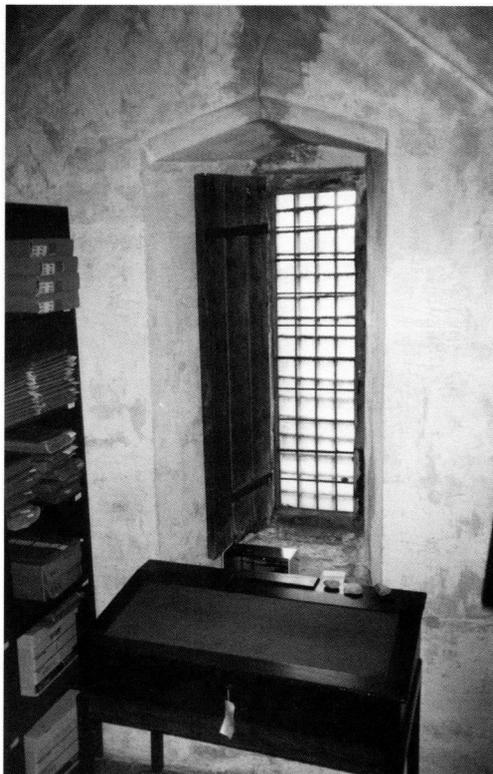


Fig. 9

New College. Window with iron grill.

Photograph Author

A further refinement in the search for security was provided at All Souls College, the foundation of Archbishop Chichele in 1440.¹⁰ Here the muniment room was in a gate tower accessed through and above the lodgings of the head of house (Fig. 10). Chichele employed Wykeham's own words when he directed that the common seal and the common chests containing the college's documents were to be placed over the entrance gate in a building 'after the manner and form of a tower'. Entrance was through the medieval warden's lodgings.¹¹

The gatehouse tower accessed through the warden's lodging became the norm for muniment rooms at Oxford colleges in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹² At Lincoln College the tower was the first building to be erected. Here the Rector lived until c.1468

when the rooms became the college's treasury where the chests were kept. At Exeter College similarly the muniment room was on the top floor of the gatehouse tower known as Palmer's tower. This was the original entrance and faced onto Exeter Lane running along the city wall at this point. Similar arrangements were made at St Bernard's College, Balliol, Brasenose (Fig. 11), Corpus Christi and later still Oriel and University Colleges.

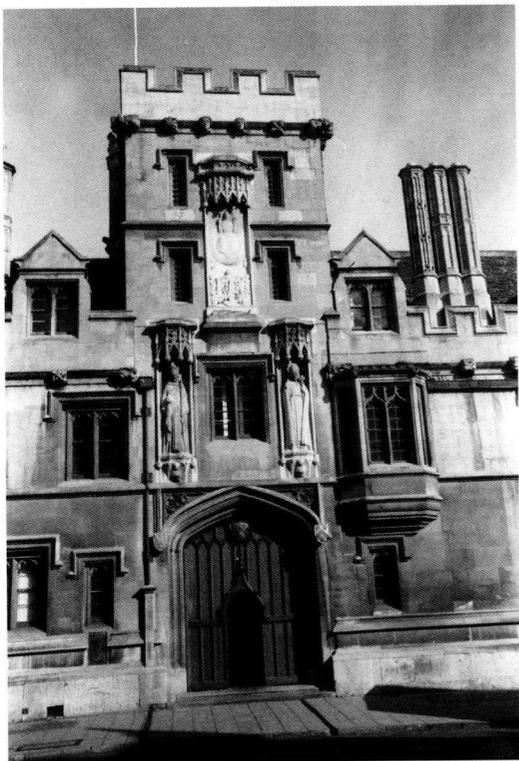


Fig. 10
All Souls College. Gatehouse –
location of former muniment room.
Photograph Author



Fig. 11
Brasenose College. Tower –
the upper two rooms are muniment rooms.
Photograph Author

William of Waynflete, bishop of Winchester, master of the richest see in England and the founder of Magdalen College was deeply influenced by Wykeham's ideas. He built the muniment tower of his college next to the chapel (Fig. 12); as at Winchester College one entrance was through the chapel and up a stone newel staircase.¹³ There was, however, an alternative approach up the stairs of the Founder's Tower and through the President's lodgings. This, in effect, made the president the guardian of the college's muniments. In his statutes, Waynflete prescribed that the room on the lower floor was to contain valuables such as the plate, not often required for use and the money saved out of daily expenditure. This he had the foresight to put aside for litigation expenses and for a future estate purchase fund. The room on the upper floor was to contain other sums devoted to similar purposes and to offset sudden disasters such as fire damage, a kind of insurance fund.



Fig. 12

Magdalen College. Muniment tower – entrance is either via the chapel or through the former president's lodging (left).

Photograph Author

This room had a tiled floor and heavily shuttered and barred windows. It was not, however, so strongly fortified as at New College. There was no stone vault; nor were the doors originally sheathed in iron. All the muniments were distributed in various chests, the originals and copies being kept in different chests. The keys of the chests and the doors were all to be different and entrusted to various members of the college.

FURNITURE AND FITTINGS

All great early-medieval households, whether royal, episcopal or noble, were originally itinerant. This meant that all possessions from the chapel furniture to the pipe rolls had to be packed in chests to accompany their mobile masters (Figs 13 and 14). Despite the fact that institutions like monasteries, colleges and guilds were no longer on the move, muniments and other valuables continued to be kept in chests. Kings like Henry VIII had over one hundred chests. They were of two main kinds.¹⁴ First, round-topped coffers were, in general, smaller and thus more portable. Their lids were curved and designed to throw off rain. Generally they were not footed and thus were suitable for travelling purposes. They had iron handles at each end or iron hoops through which one or two carrying poles could be inserted. Such is one of the chests in Hereford cathedral and there are two similar examples at Salisbury. The other type, rectangular, flat-lidded and sometimes provided with feet was hardly portable but secured a dry, rat-free environment for documents. Most were made of oak planks, but sometimes Baltic softwood was used, perhaps strengthened

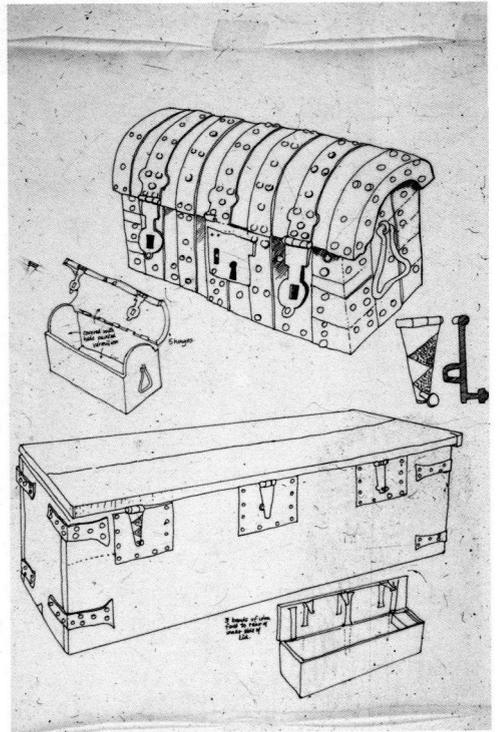


Fig. 13
Magdalen College. Chests.
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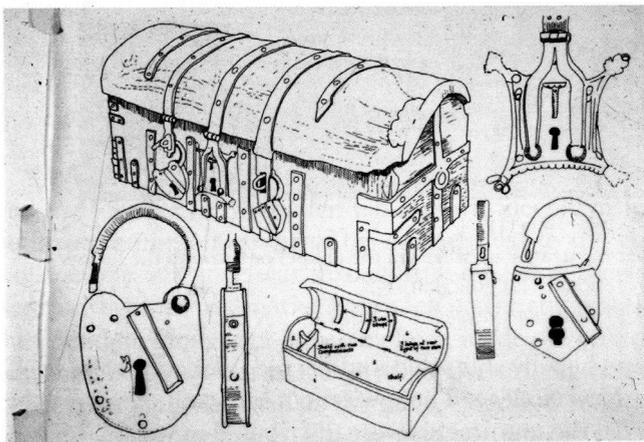


Fig. 14
Magdalen College. Chest.
Drawing Author

with iron bands as in one of the Magdalen chests. It is likely that the travelling chests now in the Magdalen muniment tower had accompanied Waynflete in his frequent peregrinations to court and round his see. Chests can be very large indeed. One dating from the twelfth century in the first-floor muniment room above the south transept at Westminster Abbey is 3m 83cm (12 feet 7 inches) long and 61cm (2 feet) wide and 43cm (17 inches) high excluding the legs. Another is even more



Fig. 15

Norwich Cathedral. Chest with dowels for small bags containing documents.

Photograph Author

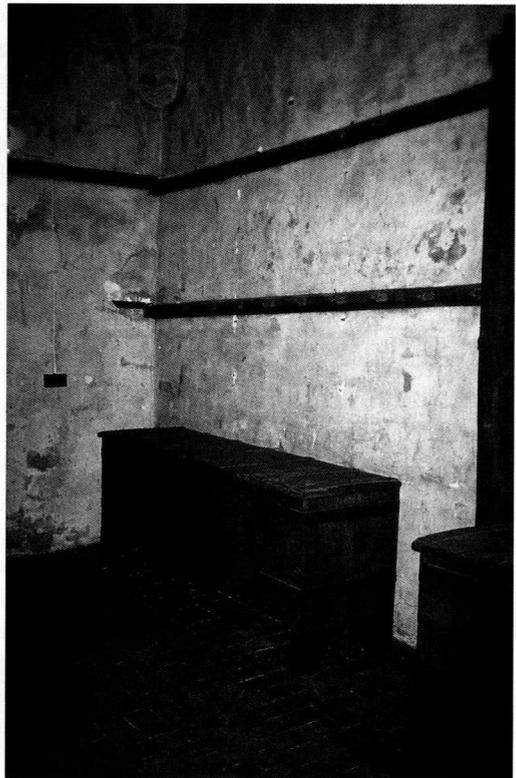


Fig. 16

New College. First floor with racks for pegs to suspend bags of documents.

Photograph Author

colossal being 4.11m (13 feet 6 inches) long, 1m 12 cm (3 feet 9 inches) wide and 68cm (27 ins) high. Clearly chests of these dimensions were not meant to be moved; in fact, they were designed so that they could not have been taken down narrow spiral staircases. Presumably they were constructed *in situ*.

One of the shortcomings of chests for storing documents was the difficulty of retrieving a particular item. One way around this was to separate out the documents into different categories. In this way, for example, Royal charters could be kept separate from Papal bulls. It was also possible to create sub divisions within chests. Long chests could be packed with smaller boxes or divided into compartments.

An ingenious if slightly bizarre method was used at Norwich where the chests used for holding many of the title deeds of the cathedral priory were divided by a series of short wooden pegs protruding from the inner sides of the chest.¹⁵ The pegs are some 7.5cm (3 inches) long and are notched 12mm (1/2 inch) from the free end. In one chest there are fourteen pegs along each side and twelve in the other. The documents (which were frequently only small slips of parchment) and the seals were kept in little bags, which were suspended from the notched pegs (Fig. 15). The advantages of this system were that air

circulated round the bags, rats were unable to enter, the subject matter could be indicated by little parchment tags attached to the chest near each peg and cross-referenced to the inventory. Such was an effective filing system.

You can judge my excitement when I met the same system at the muniment tower at New College, Oxford, except that it was extended out of the chests into the walls.¹⁶ A recent clear out of furniture had revealed that attached to the walls was a light timber framework consisting of uprights and holding a series of planks at head-height (Fig. 16). These bore the marks of pegs and by the side of each were little parchment tags indicating the names of manors. It would seem that documents stored in bags in this way would have been available for immediate reference probably for the clerks sitting in the room dealing with accounts.

Two other methods of storage combining information retrieval were developed in the fifteenth century. We have already noted the security conscious addition of the 'aerary' at Windsor Castle.¹⁷ It was furnished in 1422-3 with a large nest of drawers, 2m 14cm (7 feet) tall and 3m 36 cm (11 feet) broad. It is built of massive oak framing which housed recesses for sixty-three drawers in nine vertical and seven horizontal rows. The drawers are pulled out by means of tinned iron rings on each drawer hanging from iron plates. Each drawer is labelled with the names of manors in large free brush strokes (Fig. 17). It is certainly a rough piece of furniture but is still intact after six centuries and until very recently housed vellum rolls, its original function.



Fig. 17

Windsor Castle. Aerary – chest of drawers.

Photograph Author

A similar armoire was provided for the vicars choral at Wells when a suite of rooms was added in *c.*1457.¹⁸ This unit was divided horizontally into two parts: the upper part is fitted with fifty-two rows of small drawers lying in pairs with uprights set between pairs of drawers. The bottom board of each drawer is elongated to form a tab which serves as a handle. A number of the drawers are unfortunately missing.

The chest system of document storage was supplemented but not superseded in the sixteenth century at both Winchester and New College Oxford by nests of drawers similar to those first described at Windsor and Wells. At Winchester College there are eight-bay and four-bay multi-drawer armoires; the drawers are unusual in that they are carefully carved with linen-fold out of the solid wood (Fig. 18). New College has a more workaday version with knob handles and the names of manors painted on the front of the drawers (Fig. 19).



Fig. 18

Winchester College.

Sixteenth-century chest of drawers – note linen-fold carving on the fronts of the boxes.

Photograph Author

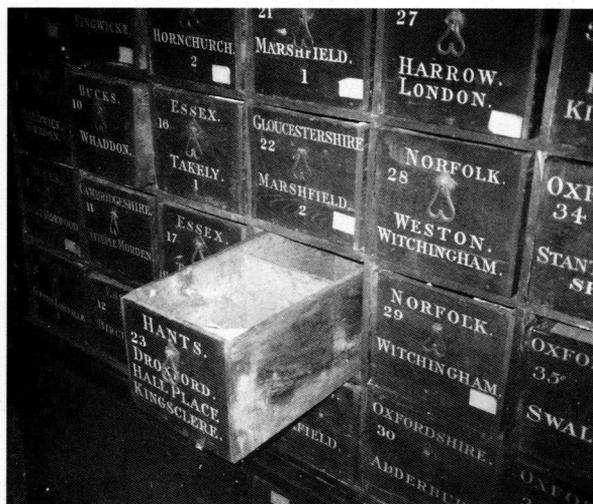


Fig. 19

New College.

Chest of drawers in lower room of muniment tower.

Photograph Author

Magdalen College muniment tower is furnished with a second method which is transitional between the cupboard system and chests of drawers. Here in the early years of the sixteenth century a series of cupboards was made which fit round two sides of the room and within which were stored one hundred small boxes. Each cupboard is numbered with small copper-alloy plaques stamped with roman numerals and each has an iron ring for opening. The little boxes with sliding lids (called *pixides*) are full of title deeds and seals relating to separate manors and are labelled with little rectangles of parchment (Fig. 20). To protect the contents from rain, the cupboards were given a lead roof.¹⁹



Fig. 20

Magdalen College. Box with title deeds.

Photograph Vernon Brooke

We have noted that towers were the preferred architectural setting for muniment rooms. Perhaps the grandest of these towers was that built for the university on the east side of the Bodleian Library, begun in 1613 and completed in 1624 (Fig. 21). Here Brian Twyne, 'perhaps the greatest archivist England has ever produced'²⁰ and first keeper of the University archives, set about reducing the documents in his care to order. In 1627-8 he engaged in the monumental task of compiling a thirty-volume cartulary or transcript of all these on a separate sheet or sheets. He then figured out how to store these in instantly retrievable form. In 1628 he had constructed small nests of drawers, each to fit neatly into some seven or so compartments within the cupboards. Trevor Aston goes on to describe how the drawers were of varying sizes and each was subdivided with smaller compartments within the cupboards. He described how the drawers were of varying sizes and each was subdivided into smaller compartments. Each had a detailed list of its contents. The result of all this was that there were six interlocking entries or pieces of information. The cartulary, itself a kind of master index, the cupboard compartment, drawers, subdivision of drawers, bundle wrappings, individual documents with endorsements. Later archivists added further presses, which are still standing.²¹

The success of the methods used to preserve records is to be found in the remarkable series of largely continuous records which have survived and enable us to reconstruct the history of the university in such detail.



Fig. 21

Bodleian Library. Tower of five orders – site of the university muniments.

Photograph Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My interest in muniment rooms began when I was taken round the Vicars' Choral at Wells by L. S. Colchester in the early 1980s. I began to record the collegiate rooms and their furnishings in the mid-1980s, helped by Roger Highfield and Sarah Bendall (Merton College). I went on to study the towers, the chests and other muniment arrangements at All Souls (Professor Salway), New College (Caroline Dalton), Brasenose (Elizabeth Boardman) and Magdalen (Janie Cottis and Robin Darwall-Smith). I owe much to the archivists at Windsor Castle, Winchester College, Westminster Abbey and especially to Simon Bailey of the University Archives, Oxford. Gerald Harriss encouraged me, and James Ayres and Lauren Gilmour urged me to publish these observations.

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