

## MANUSCRIPT MATERIALS FOR CORNISH HISTORY.

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Although Cornwall is richer in the number of County Histories than almost any other division of the kingdom of equal importance, it is undoubtedly wanting in extended histories of a more local character, and an enormous mass of detail remains yet to be worked out. We have histories of Bodmin, of Liskeard, of Falmouth, and graphic sketches of Penzance and of a few other localities, and a History of Launceston is now in the press. But neither of these, so far as they are publicly known, are upon a scale to meet the demands of the modern topographer and local historian; and for the greater part of Cornwall the general county histories supply our only available information. And even they are far, in many respects, from fulfilling the modern idea, and of meeting modern needs; while, with all their excellences, they fall very short of the standard set by Sir John MacLean in that model parochial record—*The History of Trigg Minor*.

I am not sure, however, that the delay which has perforce occurred in carrying out the detail work of historical research within our county, is altogether to be regretted. We have all of us seen churches which were among the first victims of what became the mania of restoration; and we have all of us regretted the damage done by zealous but unskilled hands, and wished unavailingly that the work had been left to the fuller knowledge of a later time. And something of the same feeling must attach to the perusal of the results of historical labours, patiently and perseveringly continued, and wanting nothing to attain the chronicler's perfection *but* the solid basis of ascertained fact. We have already so much to undo, that we may be thankful there is no more.

It has only, indeed, of very late years, since the treasures of the Record Office have been made widely available, and still more, so far as local history in particular is concerned, since the Historical Manuscripts' Commission has been pursuing its

useful career, that the original materials for this work have been placed within the reach of the historical student. Probably few know what this really means, save they whose lot it has been to trace a statement through a long range of copyists—each passing with the general public as an independent authority—to find at last that the originator had blundered, or been led astray by lack of sufficient information; and that a single document sufficed to render worthless the whole of their labours. In fact, where an original record exists, it is never wise to assume that it has been duly considered by our predecessors, and the only safe course is to bring everything so far as possible to the test of contemporary evidence.

These remarks are simply preliminary to a few suggestions concerning the materials of our Cornish history which yet exist in manuscript. I feel sure that at the present moment, notwithstanding all that has been done, we are very imperfectly acquainted with those records, and that unless a special effort is made at the present moment, we never shall be. The Historical Manuscripts' Commission has done some work in the county, and will do more, but it is overburdened with its toils and straightened for means, and years in any case must elapse before it could do for Cornwall what really needs to be done at once.

We have reached a stage in the history of the county which closely corresponds to the eventful 1832. In that year the bulk of the ancient Cornish parliamentary boroughs were swept out of existence; and those of them which had not municipal corporations ceased to show any signs of local life, while several of those which did rejoice in the possession of a chief magistrate and a civic body, as time went on failed to keep up their charters, in the absence of the stimulus—not always unprofitable—of a contested election.

I think we may safely assume that the whole of these boroughs possessed records of some kind or another, and records which would throw valuable light upon many important points in our local history. I do not believe that they are all lost, or past recovery, especially in those cases where proprietary influence was strong; but can anyone tell us where they are? Is there any clue to the muniments of St Mawes, Tregony, Grampound, Mitchell, Fowey, Tintagel, West Looe, St. Germans, Newport? And is not the enquiry worth the making? I have

reason to think that in some instances the clue exists, but I do not wish to carry this paper beyond suggestion.

We have now, however, arrived at a period when it is certain that some of those unreformed corporations of the county which have maintained their existence until the present day, will disappear, while those which are left must pass under the ordinary municipal scheme. What is to become of the muniments of the corporations doomed by Sir Charles Dilke's bill? They would be practically valueless in private hands, and would soon be lost sight of in any case. Moreover, with regard to the reformed corporations, will not their position with regard to the historical student be very different to that of the old close bodies which they will replace, and their records be more readily accessible?

My idea, therefore, is this, that an effort should be made to secure for the purpose of historical research such local records as are in danger of disappearance, and I would combine with this an attempt to ascertain, with some approach to precision, what the full manuscript materials for Cornish history may be.

The task is by no means a light one. It is far too great for any one individual, but I venture to think it is neither beyond the province nor the powers of the Royal Institution. Here, with greater accessibility than elsewhere, might be deposited the muniments, properly arranged and indexed, of the corporations that have ceased to be (should any be recoverable), and of those that are doomed to extinction. And this would be a good work, even if it went no further.

But we may go much further. Would it not be possible, with the consent of the various corporations throughout the county, to do on a small scale, but with special regard to local interests, what the Historical Manuscripts' Commission is doing on a large—to examine the various collections of records in the county, and to calendar their chief contents?

I have reason to believe that some of the corporations at any rate would be glad to have their collections examined, and so far reported on and arranged by competent authority. With the volunteer aid that no doubt would be available the cost need not be heavy, and a very few years would put us in possession of a body of original historical material of the highest value. We should do, in fact, for the local manuscripts of the

county, what Messrs. Boase and Courtney have done for its printed literature, with the further advantage that we should be perpetuating and preserving records of which no copies exist, and which once lost—unlike the immense majority of printed books—can never be replaced.