



## The Treasury Historical Section

**Peter J Beck, Emeritus Professor of International History, Kingston University**

### THE TREASURY'S HISTORIANS

Margaret Gowing	Historian	FT	March 1957-June 1959
A.K. (James) Ogilvy-Webb	Principal	FT	July 1960-1976
Mrs Barbara Granger-Taylor	Principal	PT	Jan.1963-1970
Guy Hartcup	Historian	FT	June 1965-April 1976
Mrs T. Banks	Principal	PT	Jan.1965-Sept.1966
Miss S.M. Franks	Research Asst.	FT	Sept.1965-July 1966
Mrs Catherine Dennis	Principal	PT	Oct.1966-Sept.1976
Colonel W. Russell-Edmonds	Principal	PT	Jan.1966-1974

### THE TREASURY HISTORIANS' HISTORIES, 1957-76

30 printed THMs; 22 unprinted histories; substantial number of divisional historical notes; several seeded files (leading documents on key topics); 1977 internal history of the Treasury Historical Section.

#### **Margaret Gowing, Rede Lecture, April 1978**

'But why, if the status and usefulness of historical knowledge are high, is there so little of it in central and local government? Since the machinery of government is reorganised so often and ministers, civil servants and policies are so ephemeral, surely a collective memory is required? Surely government needs to understand the complex roots of policies and problems? Surely analysis of past experience should be fed back into the system? ... who can do this except historians?'.

#### **Ian Bancroft, Deputy Establishment Officer, March 1963**

'We are having a drive on what is now called by the fashionable phrase "funding experience" '.

#### **James Collier, Deputy Establishment Officer, April 1964**

'The Treasury are becoming very historically minded these days and a great deal of emphasis is put on writing up descriptions of various episodes of recent and fairly recent Treasury activities, and of tracing Treasury policy through a series of episodes. This is only in small part for historical reasons; its main purpose is to give divisional officers a brief picture of the problems which have affected their predecessors and the ways in which they have tackled them, their successes and perhaps even their failures. These pieces are not meant to be post mortems, however; their purpose is strictly to be helpful'.

#### **Richard Clarke, July 1962**

'The purpose of having a narrative prepared [on *The Government and Wages*] was to throw light on the present problem; and this has proved well worthwhile. One gets a powerful impression throughout the narrative of "having been there before" -- situations, reactions, ideas, decisions. It is indeed rather sobering to see how many times the ground has been traversed'.

---

**Margaret Gowing, Treasury Historical Memorandum (THM) 1: *The Treasury and Acts of God*, Nov.1957, 12pp, TNA T236/5982.**

Drawing upon brief narrative accounts of 7 post-1945 Acts of God, including floods at Lynton & Lynmouth (1952) and the East Coast (1953), this history used the case studies to identify 'some useful lessons on policy' about government responses to natural disasters and their financial consequences.

- The late 1940s witnessed a significant change of course by government as compared to the pre-1939 period when 'less was expected of the Government': 'It is clear that the austere doctrine of non-interference by the Government in the consequences of Acts of God is dead ... The question now is rather when the Government should give help?'.
- Pointing to the haphazard and inconsistent nature of past responses as well as to the difficulties experienced in dealing with losses, key points for future reference included the initial official tendency to exaggerate the extent of damage; the consequent over-subscription of relief funds; the open-ended fiscal commitment arising from the mistaken promise to match voluntary contributions pound-for-pound; the importance of Treasury control over expenditure from relief funds, including clarity about their use to prevent political storms over compensation; and the need to avoid government assistance becoming interpreted as a substitute for property under-insurance.
- Government assistance provided through several channels risked duplicating effort and 'spending more money than is needed'.
- Despite the Treasury's preference for pragmatic rather than generalised responses, there seemed merit in the USA's National Distress Fund.
- Existing administrative arrangements were inadequate, since no department possessed primary responsibility for coordinating emergency relief.
- It would be prudent to conduct post-mortems into future government responses to natural disasters by way of keeping the THM up-to-date.

**Margaret Gowing, Treasury Historical Memorandum (THM) 2: Festival Pleasure Gardens, Nov.1957, 9pp. TNA T236/5982.**

Although the Festival Pleasure Gardens, part of the 1951 Festival of Britain, proved a popular success attracting over 8 million people, the Treasury lost a lot of money [amount not specified].

- Repeated delays meant that the Festival Gardens opened one month later than scheduled.
- Accounting miscalculations, including the escalating costs arising from the choice of a cost-plus rather than fixed price contract, contributed to high losses.
- Lax financial controls: 'no one bothered very much. *In my view* [author's italics] this error was fundamental and provides one of the main lessons for future experience'.

The episode offered the Treasury several lessons to take forward into the future:

- 'At the beginning a great deal of time and thought was spent in ensuring that there was a close control through a tight Loan Agreement. Having established the control, however, nobody bothered to exercise it effectively or, as far as the Treasury was concerned, to see that it was being exercised. On any similar occasions I suggest that the Treasury and other Departments concerned should be absolutely clear in their minds about the degree of control they are trying to exercise'.
- The problem was compounded by the fact that departmental responsibility was 'badly blurred', at least until 1952-53, when the Ministry of Works was given the lead role. Even then, the Treasury could not stand aside: 'On any occasion when responsibility for a company is not absolutely clear cut, the Treasury should itself make sure that it is laid down in writing from the outset exactly who is expected to do what. If there is a sponsoring department ... the Treasury should satisfy itself from time to time that the duties of supervision are being properly fulfilled'.

### **Reading**

Peter J. Beck, *Using History, Making British Policy: the Treasury and the Foreign Office, 1950-1976* (2006).  
Peter J. Beck, 'History and policy at work in the Treasury, 1957-76', *History & Policy*, 2006, [www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-49.html](http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-49.html).