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The architecture and archaeology of War Office records

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ABSTRACT

This article explores ways of understanding archival material through collection-based research. Using War Office records held in the UK's National Archives, particularly those relating to Army officers in the period 1790–1820, it provides a methodological framework through worked examples that draws upon documentary analysis and archival material culture, as well as offering a new approach of archival experimental archaeology to reconstruct processes and practices that led to the creation of records. This research shows that the history of documents is critical — though often under appreciated — to historical knowledge. Our approach stresses the importance of examining historically the creation, form, and storage of archival material. Additionally, it demonstrates the value of archivists and historians reconnecting for good practice and research insights and agendas.

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Introduction

The War Office (WO) collection held at the UK's National Archives (TNA) comprizes the records of the land forces of the British state and stretch back to 1568, with much of the material bound up with the history of the British Army that has been in continuous existence since 1660. The scale of the collection is enormous, as it consists of 417 different series, and it continues to accrue records from the War Office's successor the Ministry of Defence.¹ The War Office had a reputation for creating excessive volumes of paperwork, and it is estimated that annually it received just over one million papers in its registered series in the early twentieth century.² In contrast, the Foreign Office registered 43,865 items of correspondence in 1906 and even during the First World War only reached a quarter of what the War Office received before 1914.³ The scale of the collection presents challenges for users, whether they be archivist or researcher. It is sometimes awkward to search and use, and what we have is a fraction of all the records that once existed. But its scale — and the gaps — lends itself to collection-based research of the form that Randolph Head has championed, in which archives are treated as subjects of research rather than a site of research. As he has put it, to investigate 'the history of any system of keeping records means using the records that the system preserved (both their content and their architecture) to understand the system itself: Put simply, the means of

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research and the object of research overlap.⁴ Additionally, it presents an opportunity to take up the challenge laid by Terry Cook to address the disconnect between archivists and historians and consider the archive from inside the archives.⁵

Studies of early modern archives, both as institutions and their records, have challenged the conception of an archive as a neutral repository of historical facts. They have highlighted that archival cultures are historically specific and the dangers of anachronistic assumptions about records and record-keeping in the past.⁶ Yet the literature relating to the War Office in the nineteenth century, particularly on its reforms, tends to focus on where the control of certain aspects of army administration rested and how that changed, rather than on its day-to-day administration.⁷ Works tend to assess the effectiveness of the management of the military and avoid its impact on how we know what we do about the Army. Yet Richard Dunley's study on the Edwardian Foreign Office has shown the importance of understanding a collection for research.⁸

This paper draws upon this research agenda to explore the War Office records that are being used as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council 'Re-archiving the individual' project. A component of this project is the transcription and digitization of the printed annual *Army Lists* held by TNA in series WO 65 relating to Army officer appointments between 1790 and 1820 to produce a database for further research. Lacking the kind of documentary evidence about record creation process that Nathan Bend utilized in his study of the Home Office in the same era,⁹ we needed a different approach to understand further the records about Army officers. To that end, a project workshop was organized in October 2022 for collection-based research. Working with TNA staff as part of the team, we brought together volumes from WO 65 *Army Lists* with a selection of material from other WO series relating to different stages of the life cycle of an officer (listed in the [Appendix A](#) below), which will be discussed in more detail in the section that follows on collection archaeology.

This article investigates the War Office collection first by exploring its history through documentary evidence to understand the architecture of the collection both as a working repository for the military bureaucracy and then its subsequent history as a public archive. In the second part, we provide a more detailed analysis of the records about Army officers that have survived. Drawing upon emergent methodologies of researching the form of archive material, we demonstrate the importance of examining the materiality of documents and present a new method developed in the project for understanding records by exploring documentary relationships and reconstructing processes of their creation and use.

Architecture: the history of a collection

The war office and its records

Nearly 400 years of material relating to an institution necessarily means that the arrangement of the WO collection is complex, reflecting the administrative history of the management of the Army by the English and then the British state. The scale of the collection and its interest to historians and the public underpinned the publication of Michael Roper's valuable Roper 1998 guide to the records and the War Office's history.¹⁰ More recently, Macdonald and Lenihan's article on 'Paper Soldiers' in *Rethinking History* (also a response

as part of a digitization project) highlighted how the War Office archive from 1855 was central to the creation of an imperial world and a demonstration of Victorian power through the information state. It was a bureaucratic system that imposed order over a mass of people across the globe.¹¹ Their work emphasized that the War Office administration was not organized biographically but as a 'body' in which individuals were tracked as constituents of the whole, meaning that 'individuals are glimpsed across a shattering light of fractured, serialized records.'¹² For our project collection-based research offers a way to help obtain glimpses of individuals given the scale of material and then to contextualize and make some sense of them.

The serialized nature of WO records is complicated by the history of the institutions that created them. The architecture of the collection is like the history of a building that has been rebuilt, parts demolished, extended, added to, and repurposed since 1660. A single, unitary ministry for the administration of the Army was only established in 1870, when as part of the Cardwell reforms the office of Commander-in-Chief of the Army (then headed by George, second Duke of Cambridge)¹³ was bought into the existing War Office and all placed under the direction of the Secretary of State for War.¹⁴ The War Office into which the Commander-in-Chief's office found itself had been created in 1855. It was an amalgamation of several different departments and a response to the outcry of the failings in the Army exposed by the Crimean War, particularly the poor and overly complex state of military administration.¹⁵

The complexity of military administration has proved challenging for historians to express. John Sweetman's diagram of the military administration in 1852 identified the Crown and Parliament as the two major sources of the authority in the Army, under which there were two military appointments (the Commander-in-Chief and the Master-General of the Ordnance), the Treasury, the three Secretaries of State (Foreign, War and Colonies, and Home) and the separate Secretary-at-War. From these, Sweetman's visualization had to distinguish between continuous and partial control by these different administrative bodies, alongside supply that came from other two different sets of departments (the Ordnance Department for munitions and some equipment, and the Commissariat, a branch of the Treasury, for food for both man and beasts).¹⁶ Sweetman's diagram was just a snapshot, and Roper's guide identifies fifteen different ministers, officials, or departments responsible for running the Army before 1855.¹⁷ As the War Office became a unified military administration, in 1869 Charles Matthew Clode, solicitor to the War Office, published *The Military Forces of the Crown*.¹⁸ The scale of the publication (two volumes running to just over 1,500 pages) exemplified the complex institutional history of Britain's land forces from the seventeenth century.

Record keeping before acquisition

Clode's work included transcriptions of key documents obtained from the records of the War Office. This demonstrated that the War Office's records from before 1855 were in some kind of archiving system in which records could be searched for, retrieved, and consulted. It is worth remembering Barbara Brookes' and James Dunk's observations about the making of knowledge, as the survival, arrangement, and access to this material was in the hands of others. As they put it, 'The pasts that present themselves in archives are those which clerks, superintendents and responsible ministers created when they

demanding and set down certain information. Paperwork is therefore far from transparent or natural. And it is powerful.¹⁹ The records that Clode consulted, and a selection of which he then included in *The Military Forces of the Crown*, were kept precisely because they defined roles and responsibilities in what was a messy and obtuse administration. This impetus for record keeping reflected late medieval and early modern practices of retaining information that pertained to rights, privileges, and legal proof that has been discussed by Randolph Head in *Making Archives in Early Modern Europe*.²⁰ Outside of these, many of the records that were personal, in the sense that they related to an individual's service in the military, had a continuity of purpose as they were created and kept to inform and adjudicate claims for things like outstanding pay, pensions, medals, and land grants.²¹

Despite the need to maintain records and the evidence that it was a well-established practice before the formation of the new War Office in 1855, how it was done was far from consistent. The era was a long time before Hilary Jenkinson's *Manual of Archive Administration* (1922) and the 1940 English translation of the Dutch *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*. What we can learn from outside of, and without, written expressions of record keeping we will explore later in this article. Nevertheless, documentary evidence from specific moments gives some indications of record keeping practice. As discussed above, the military administration before 1870 was spread across different departments and office holders, each of whom decided on their own arrangements for the care of their records.²² This particularly came to light after 1855 when memoranda worked their way through the new branches of the War Office as they sought to assimilate their systems of registering correspondence and to create a single 'cartulary,' made harder because the military administration occupied multiple sites (Pall Mall, Whitehall, and Horse Guards in London) notwithstanding perennial problems with lack of space, something with which all archivists can sympathize.²³

Before this, we have some evidence about the 'old' pre-1855 War Office, but which was only created because of the predilections of office holders (details of which are in [Appendix B](#) below). For instance, when Sir George Yonge was appointed Secretary-at-War in July 1782 and took over the running of the War Office, a new volume was started documenting the employees in the office and their roles. This showed that Mr. Clinton indexed all the business of the office into a journal book and that the supernumerary clerks copied letters and orders into the fourteen series of 'books' that the office maintained.²⁴ More exhaustive were the *Instructions for the Guidance of the Clerks in the War-Office* printed in 1815, drawn up by Henry John Temple, 3rd Viscount Palmerston who held the office of Secretary-at-War from 1809 to 1828. This document partly reflects Palmerston's education in political economy at the University of Edinburgh, and details processes and management of information in the office, including how to notate documents that were to be preserved in the Register Room.²⁵

The 1815 *Instructions* also reflect the impact of Parliamentary investigations into the management of the military undertaken between 1805 and 1812, born out of perceived abuses and corruption that went back to the Economical Reform movement that emerged in the wake of the American War of Independence.²⁶ Known as the *Commission of Military Enquiry*, their reports offer insights into military record keeping in the early nineteenth century. The *Thirteenth Report* covered the Master-General of the Ordnance and the Ordnance Office under his management and showed that the Secretary

of the Board had responsibility for all 'Correspondence, Minutes, and Records' and also provided a list of books kept in the office.²⁷ In the report on the Secretary-at-War and the War Office, George Adams was named as 'Keeper of the Office Books' though nothing was said of his work. Nevertheless, staff in the War Office were able to provide answers to questions after reference to records in the office.²⁸ Outside these Parliamentary inquiries, the ability to refer to historical material as precedent was utilized by the Secretary-at-War in a dispute about roles and jurisdiction that came to a head in 1811.²⁹

The post-1855 War Office was not isolated from wider developments in record keeping and archiving that appeared in mid-nineteenth century Britain.³⁰ Though War Office records were not brought into the nascent Public Record Office (PRO) in the same way court records and state papers were after the 1838 Public Records Act, in 1860 a new post of Precis-writer and Librarian was created in the War Office. Mr W. Ord Marshall was appointed, and his duties included, amongst other things, 'The care and custody of all books and records belonging to the library,' for which Mr. Marshall received £1000 salary per annum.³¹ Although this post was abolished in 1865, the function was then transferred to the Permanent Under Secretary, moving between different sections within his department of the War Office until in 1924 a separate Records section was established.³²

The evidence of subsequent archiving of historical records within the War Office appears very occasionally within the records themselves. An internal 1871 report recommended the creation of a military archive, like France's Department of Military Archives, noting that documents relating to the history of the Army were 'scattered through several offices.'³³ Tucked within the WO 31 series of Commander-in-Chief's Memorandum on officer appointments (discussed in more detail below) were four chits from 1909 requesting specific papers about individual officer appointments in 1806, 1807, and 1816. Requested by Marcus Wolfsbergen, an abstractor who worked in the sub-division that prepared and edited the *Army List*,³⁴ the requests show that the WO 31 series had been archived into the wider records system of the War Office that was instituted from 1855.

Acquisition and appraisal by the PRO

While the War Office was archiving its own records the PRO also began to have an influence over the future WO collection. Initially, though, this was not deliberate. In February 1855, the War Office Depot at No. 6, Whitehall Yard (which the War Office had used since 1833) was urgently required as offices for the new Army and Ordnance Medical Board and all the documents held there were transferred to the New Repository of the Public Record Office. The description of the move both gives a scale of the records the War Office had accumulated and their condition:

The house was entirely filled with papers from top to bottom; great quantities had to be handed down a tortuous and narrow staircase from the attics and second floor, whilst others required to be passed up from the kitchen. [...]

On the whole, the Documents, at least the more important and useful, were in fairly consultable order; some were deposited confusedly or negligently, *e.g.* in the corners of a room and on vacant tables; but nevertheless, the papers most commonly wanted for current office business could be produced without much delay. The whole of the rooms and passages

at 6, Whitehall Yard were fitted up with shelved presses; the convenient accommodation afforded by which enabled a degree of order to be maintained.³⁵

Some 40,104 parcels and books were temporarily taken into the PRO's care, weighing over 150 tons. The report to Parliament also noted that some of the papers were 'foetid and rotten,' a result of the neglect of the house and leaks.³⁶ As the PRO took custody of the material, some 22,000 bundles were 'carefully dusted' and retied with new strings. Alongside these practical measures staff in the PRO began to appraise material and identify items that could be destroyed. They noted that although a good system had existed for tracking papers taken from the repository by the War Office, this was not the case for bound volumes, and so some volumes may have been lost.³⁷ Of the 160 tons of WO records that the PRO had accumulated by 1862, 55 tons were pulped, 60 tons marked for preservation, and the last 45 tons were kept as working documents that would not need to be permanently preserved.³⁸

With the PRO's involvement, the WO records were increasingly judged against nineteenth-century norms of historical value. In accordance with the 1877 Public Record Act PRO staff began to engage more directly with the War Office about what to preserve for future archiving. This passed the responsibility for discarding documents to War Office staff themselves, according to a 'schedule of valueless documents.'³⁹ Relevant documents already in the PRO were also reviewed according to the same scheme. Further revisions to the schedule were made by the PRO's committee of valueless documents through the 1880s and 1890s, prompted by lack of storage space, which further shortened the span for which some documents were kept.⁴⁰ Seligmann has charted how interventions in the hundred years or so following have further reduced what we now have. The War Office itself undertook processes of destroying records, which focused on the registered files: the bread-and-butter case work of the War Office that would have included information about officers. The 'Very Old Series' of correspondence from before 1827 is particularly truncated; even the indexes, which could have provided some indication of what was lost, were destroyed and in essence we are left with a sample of the War Office's work.⁴¹ Ironically, some of the documents about the weeding and transfer of papers, which are referenced in the 1931 *Alphabetical Guide to Certain War Office and Other Military Records* were themselves later destroyed under Section 6 of the 1958 Public Record Act.⁴²

Of relevance to our project was the continuing storage of old documents within the War Office's new home at Pall Mall without any relevance to the tasks of the sections (known as sub-divisions) there. For example, sub-division C. 2 that was responsible for 'Colonial and Miscellaneous Military Subjects' still had commission books from 1660 to 1861 and notification books (copies of letters sent to the Secretary of State notifying them of officer appointments) from 1713 to 1782. Sub-division M.S. 2 held correspondence books about officer appointments, promotions, and retirement from 1806, a memorandum book of promotions from 1793, and copies of Annual Army Lists from 1796. Sub-division C.4 (Parliamentary Business) was custodian of Fencible Book, No. 4 1798–99 on appointments and promotions of officers in these home defence units,⁴³ though the other three volumes that presumably once existed were not there. C.4 also held some of the oldest material, including papers on the Tower Liberty and Water Course at Tower Dock that dated back to 1570.⁴⁴ The selection and transfer of this material is difficult to track, but it took considerable time. For example, the 1564 pieces of the

Commander-in-Chief's memoranda about promotions and appointments (now series WO 31) were received by the PRO on 26 August 1914 though they dated from 1793 to 1870.⁴⁵

Collection archaeology: officer appointments 1790–1820

Reading the materiality of a collection

Having analyzed the history of WO records to better understand their provenance, arrangement and what has been lost, we turned to examining the collection that we now have. The documented history of the War Office collection explored above provides contextual evidence about Army Officer records between 1790 and 1820 that were relevant to our project, but to go further we needed different analytical tools. We based this work on the insights of researchers looking at the materiality of archive sources: to look at the records that we have as objects that can then help us understand processes of record creation and use that were not documented or for which the documentation has not survived. As Peter Lester has explored, the digital turn has presented opportunities to reconsider the materiality of archived sources. As they put it, the physical properties of archive material are 'sources of information, but they are also objects, with tangible, physical qualities which can elicit and stimulate both cognitive and sensory responses.' Further, the physical form enables the content to be used.⁴⁶ Generally, Lester (and others) have noted how historical research focuses overwhelmingly on content until the medium practically disappears before the reader, part of a longer term decline noted by Cornelia Visman in the status of palaeography and diplomatics to 'mere ancillary sciences.'⁴⁷ Looking at the materiality, construction, and storage of records relevant to our project provided a further way of understanding how information was gathered and processed, and so a way of appreciating how form and function influenced records.

The core component of our digitization project is the series WO 65 *Army Lists*, or to give them their full title *A List of the Officers of the Army and Marines*. These are annually printed registers of Army officers, with the bulk of text arranged into lists of each unit in the Army. These books were available to the public and printed and bound in various formats. A consignment sent to Ireland in 1810 included folio and octavo sizes and various bindings in Morocco leather, calfskin leather, or half bound (TNA's copies were rebound in 1923 and are octavo size).⁴⁸ The series kept in the WO collection are unique as they were actively used by clerks in the military administration. Stamped with 'War Office — Secretary of State's Library' the main feature that strikes a reader are the handwritten annotations. These track changes from the printing of one list until the publication of the next, demonstrating that these *Army Lists* formed part of the bureaucratic processes relating to Army officers with the advantage that it was already indexed by the pre-existing arrangement of the book. Furthermore, to facilitate these printed books as a tool to maintain information the binding was different from those that were publicly available as they had a blank page next to the printed page to provide space for annotations. There is no definitive information about who in the pre-1870 military administration maintained the WO 65 series, but it was most likely clerks in the War Office. Within the books themselves there are annotations to other correspondence and information that uses the War Office system of numbering cases.⁴⁹ Additionally, in 1808 the death of Leonard Morse, a long-serving clerk in the War Office, led to a series of letters about reforming the

printing of the *Army Lists*, and showed that Morse ran a separate business for the publication of the *Army List* between 1754 until his death in 1808.⁵⁰ That the WO 65 series was maintained by War Office staff is further evidenced by the absence of handwritten notes about units that were managed by the separate Board of Ordnance, primarily the Royal Regiment of Artillery, indicating that clerks did not have access to information about these units.

The WO 65 *Army Lists* sit within a larger corpus of material in which Army officers were written about and written to. As part of the project, we wanted to further understand how the parts to be digitized were situated within their wider archival context. By examining other sets of WO records regarding Army officers ([Appendix A](#)), we could identify not just content about individuals or groups — important though this is — but also how information about individuals moved into, through, and out of records. This provided insights into record keeping practices at the time of the creation of this material. Through a survey of potentially relevant material in the WO collection for the period 1790 to 1820 we identified two series as complementary to WO 65 *Army Lists* and the most directly relevant to the management of Army officers. The first was WO 3 that contains copies of letters sent from the office of the Commander-in-Chief; and the second was WO 31, which comprises letters, memorials, and notes about officer appointments sent to the Commander-in-Chief (titled Memoranda on officer appointments as a series). Both echoed the primacy of the Office of the Commander-in-Chief in the day-to-day management in the personnel and discipline of the Army from the creation of the office in 1793.⁵¹ In addition, we identified two further important series in the copies of letters sent from the War Office now catalogued as WO 4 and the registers it maintained about officers that form a subseries in WO 25.⁵²

This surveying, however, identified a conundrum. As was explored above, the pre-1855 War Office maintained the records that produced the annual *Army List* but there was little evidence of lateral communications between the War Office and the Commander-in-Chief substantial enough to underpin the changes recorded in the WO 65 *Army Lists*. The out-letters from the Commander-in-Chief's office to the War Office only total fourteen volumes for thirty years and thousands of individuals.⁵³ The answer lay in two inferences. Firstly, the physical proximity of the two offices, as they both shared the Horse Guards building in London at the time, presented opportunities for information to be shared outside of the written transmission and suggested that clerks in these two officially distinct departments had access to each other's records. Secondly, as discussed above the records of the War Office have undergone a process of continual and sometimes drastic 'weeding' since 1855. Nevertheless, evidence from the materiality of the records that remain indicate that details about Army officers were shared between the War Office and the Commander-in-Chief, so the records we might presume to have existed had no need to be created.

The form the records took drew upon commercial practices of maintaining letter books and existing stationery they could purchase to do it.⁵⁴ Except the WO 31 Memoranda on officer appointments, WO records relating to officers are in volumes, rather than arranged into files. This contrasts with the records of the Treasury or Foreign Office in the same period, which have more in common with the *sachaktenregistraturen* system of record keeping that had emerged in Prussia in the sixteenth century.⁵⁵ These volumes were purchased as blanks at the time and then filled in by clerks as was needed. Some volumes

have watermarks that allow the books to be traced back to S&G Wise, papermakers in Maidstone, Kent.⁵⁶ The blank volumes included tools to find information within them, either pages at the front for handwritten contents pages or, more frequently, index pages bound into the volume. The content of indexes indicates that they were filled in as the clerk copied letters into the main body of the volume. They are not absolutely arranged alphabetically, and the page number determines the position with a letter's index. For example, the index under F in WO 3/605 (Private out-letters from the Commander in Chief) proceeds: 'Faris, Wm, 48; Foy, Mr, 68, Francis, Captain, 95; Fellowes, Sir James, 132; Fincasine, Captain, 155; Fawcett, Wm, 185..'. The segmentation of records into discreet sets of physical volumes, rather than an archive of contextually related information, is further confirmed by the registers that the War Office maintained (now mostly in WO 25). The series includes volumes that were created by the binding of forms returned from individuals, like the survey of officers undertaken in 1809–10 (WO 25/744 to/748), as well as volumes created of collated information, such as the list of half-pay officers (a pseudo-form of reserve where officers retained their commission but were not actively attached to a unit) in 1814 which is now WO 25/3006. Additional markers of the 'libraryness' of record keeping comes from the spines of these volumes where they survive, which provided the user with the equivalent of a book title and so a quick means of finding the right volume from a shelf, provided they knew in broad terms what the volume/book was about.

It is important to note that not all the archive material relating to officers fits the configuration as a library. Much like Riordan's observations about State Papers,⁵⁷ the boundaries between library and archive in the military administration were overlapping. The volume-in-a-library model of record keeping principally applied to copies of letters that were sent *from* the various offices of military administration or material that it abstracted and maintained for itself in the form of registers. As noted earlier, it is likely that many letters coming into the military administration were subsequently destroyed. Furthermore, contemporary epistolary practice asserted that letters were the property of the writer, even when preserved by someone else, and that the author could request them back.⁵⁸ Such sensitivities would have been heightened by the status of Army officers as gentleman.

Beyond what may be missing, the series WO 31 Memoranda on officers appointments is especially well preserved and serves to give some means to further explore information storage. These usually comprize letters, sometimes from the officers themselves, about appointments, promotion, or leaving the Army. In contrast with the volumes of out-letters and registers, the material in WO 31 was archived into 1565 'bundles,' now contained in boxes, and arranged by date. Sometimes a bundle comprizes a month's worth of changes; sometimes as little as a week. These records have been aggregated at least twice: firstly at the time of receipt, where the material about an individual was all folded into an enclosing piece of paper creating a parcel on which was written the name of the person, often with the unit or appointment, all of which was then bound with the proverbial red tape. Secondly, these parcels were then bundled together with a tag indicating the date range of the whole set, and which now form the archival reference. Although no exact dates can be ascertained, the handwriting on the tags indicates archiving later in the nineteenth or twentieth century. Perhaps the Deputy Keeper of Public Records' annual reports mentioning of 'ticketing' WO records is suggestive of this process.⁵⁹ Both the form (a physical bundle and a parcel both of which must be undone and then opened) and the

storage medium (rows of parcels without an external reference like the text on the spine of a volume) provided a level of anonymity to these records. And they still do — they are not searchable by name but only by knowing the date that an officer was appointed, promoted, or left the Army.

Reconstructing processes of record creation and use

The materiality of the sources we had selected provided insights into the creation and use of these documents, but to further explore record keeping process and practices, we bought together a range of material to examine together to explore documentary relationships that are obscured by the division of the WO collection into series. The principal items were the WO 65 *Army Lists* with a selection of WO 31 Memoranda on officer appointments discussed above. We brought out additional material relating to different stages of the life cycle of an officer. Supplementing the information about appointments were the official Notification Books in WO 25 that confirmed appointments to the Secretary of State. Information about the service of officers was provided from WO 17 Monthly Returns and WO 27 Inspection Returns. Records about half pay, pensions, and rewards (to both officers and their families) was provided through items in WO 24 Papers on Establishments and WO 25 Registers. By doing this, we had opportunities to undertake a different form of archive-based research, akin to experimental archaeology, whereby we could explore how the clerks would have used these items and compare them to each other in terms of both the physical properties and their content.

By comparing the content between these WO series, we were more easily able to see how the information in WO 31 Memoranda was then transferred in a reduced form into the handwritten annotations in WO 65 *Army Lists*, and then printed in the subsequent version of the *Army List*. This, incidentally, highlighted an issue with officers who made more than one change in a year, which would not be documented by examining the printed version only, and further affirmed the value of the annotated WO 65 *Army Lists* as a reference tool at the time and now for us.

Across the documents, their content and structure highlighted how important the regiment or unit was in the identification of individuals. Information about individuals was routinely collected and collated with the unit as a starting point. The scale of the endeavour of managing so many people without a file-based system of identification meant that units became the contextual differentiator between individuals, which along with rank could manage both the number of people documented but also cope with the same or similar sounding names. This method of organizational-based identification could also handle those who did not give the Army their full name, as the workshop participants noted dashes in places of first names in the *Army Lists*.

The physical form of the documentation also provided insights. In addition to the observations discussed already above, we also noted that there was a class of documents that were sent into the War Office or the Commander-in-Chief's office that were then bound into volumes soon after they arrived: the WO 27 Inspection Returns. These were then fitted into the model of military administration running a shelf-based library of information that could then be referred to by its staff. Unfortunately, the other class of incoming material about serving officers in WO 17 Monthly Returns were rebound in the

late 1920s and early 1930s, denying us opportunities to explore how these would have fitted into the information architecture and physical space of the Horse Guards building.

The collective examination of these records also allowed us to reconstruct processes of record creation and information flows, which in turn highlighted what was stored where and the silences in the records. The most personal information, such as details in letters of support about a prospective officer's family or social relationships, and the case the prospective officer made (sometimes in the form of a petition) were preserved in WO 31 Memoranda but this information was not systematically conveyed into other records. This, in turn, identified an archival silence about the decision-making process on whether to approve an application which, if it was ever documented, has not survived. Once a name was laid before the King and approved, then the individual shifted into the unit-rank-name identification model as all the necessary offices were notified about their appointment. Additionally, documentation in WO 31 indicated that a prospective officer needed the approval from the commander of the unit they were applying to, but any initial approach to that commanding officer was not present in the documentation forwarded to the Commander-in-Chief's office. This identified a potential set of records outside those at TNA that may be in the personal or family papers of commanding officers. Finally, our process mapping showed how by reversing the direction of travel in the records a researcher looking for an individual could gradually uncover layers of information about them.

Conclusion

The accession of War Office records into TNA is quite well documented, but the collection's architecture and archaeology are complex. By taking a collection-based research approach, this study has illustrated how some of that complexity came to be and, critically, explored some of the influences that this has on the records and therefore the research that is based on it. Though this record series is perhaps unusual as it has extant archival meta-records, nevertheless we faced challenges in exploring record keeping practices in the era 1790–1820 that we were interested in understanding for our project. In addressing this, the War Office collection has provided a practical case study in research methods that can be used to understand the creation and storage of records and potentially be re-applied to other collections and institutions. The techniques we adopted and developed are twofold. Firstly, through examining the material culture of records, which stresses the importance of form and storage alongside the content that has traditionally been given primacy. Secondly, by studying records series alongside each other to understand the unwritten flows of information and practices in the 'office' that created them. This is a form of archival experimental archaeology to reconstruct the processes and sequences of record creation, and gain insights into collections, both their form and content, through experiential learning. Moreover, our study has demonstrated the importance of archivists and historians reconnecting, and how critical archive studies can be turned to good practice and provide insights and research agendas for both historians and archivists.

Notes

1. 'Records Created or Inherited by the War Office, Armed Forces, Judge Advocate General, and Related Bodies.'
2. Seligmann, "'Hors De Combat"?', 53.
3. Dunley, 'The Archive of the Edwardian Foreign Office,' 432–33.
4. Head, *Making Archives in Early Modern Europe*, 39.
5. Cook, 'The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country,' 614.
6. Walsham, 'The Social History of the Archive,' Corens et al., *Archives & Information in the Early Modern World*.
7. Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army, 1868–1902*, 6–8; Strachan, 'The Early Victorian Army,' Sweetman, *War and Administration*, 8–14.
8. Dunley, 'The Archive of the Edwardian Foreign Office'
9. Bend, 'The Home Office and Public Disturbance, c. 1800–1832,' 55–70.
10. Roper, *The Records of the War Office*.
11. Macdonald and Lenihan, 'Paper Soldiers'
12. Ibid., 388.
13. Spiers, 'George, Prince, Second Duke of Cambridge (1819–1904), Army Officer.'
14. Roper, *The Records of the War Office*, 101–2.
15. Sweetman, *War and Administration*, *passim*; Dawson, 'The French Army and British Army Crimean War Reforms.' For the specific response of the military medical services, see Duncan, 'Resistance and Reform.'
16. Sweetman, *War and Administration*, diagram inserted within front cover.
17. Roper, *The Records of the War Office*.
18. Clode, *The Military Forces of the Crown*; Foster, *Men-at-the-Bar*, 90.
19. Brookes and Dunk, 'Bureaucracy, Archive Files, and the Making of Knowledge,' 285.
20. Head, *Making Archives in Early Modern Europe*.
21. Macdonald and Lenihan, 'Paper Soldiers,' 389.
22. Roper, *The Records of the War Office*, 284.
23. 'Registry — Formation of a Central Registry for All War Dept. Papers'
24. 'Account of the Persons Employed in the War Office.'
25. *Instructions for the Guidance of the Clerks in the War-Office*.
26. Greenleaf, 'The Commission of Military Enquiry, 1805–12,' Knight, *Britain against Napoleon*, pp. 331–336; for the longer history of reform see Reitan, *Politics, Finance, and the People*, especially pp. 196–201.
27. 'The Thirteenth Report of the Commissioners of Military Enquiry,' 106–10.
28. 'Sixth Report of the Commissioners of Military Enquiry,' 426; for an example of using records to answer questions, see. pp. 626–627.
29. Faulkner, 'Role of National Defence,' 45–46.
30. Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional*, chap. 5; Cantwell, *The Public Record Office, 1838–1958*.
31. 'War Department,' *Newcastle Journal*, 30 November 1860.
32. Roper, *The Records of the War Office*, 284.
33. Baring, Airey, and Chapman, 'Report of a Committee on the Topographical and Statistical Department.'
34. Cash, *The War Office List*, 25, 45, and 264.
35. 'Public Records: Sixteenth Report,' 6–7.
36. Ibid., 6–7.
37. Ibid., 23–25.
38. 'Public Records: Twenty-Third Annual Report,' 8.
39. 'Appendix B: Classification of War Office Records.'
40. See for example 'Memorandum from Secretary to Committee on Valueless Document.'
41. Seligmann, "'Hors De Combat"?,' on the Very Old Series, see Roper, *The Records of the War Office*, 22–23.

42. They were in series WO 32. WO 32/156 and WO 32/157 were about the weeding and transfer of papers to PRO; *An Alphabetical Guide to Certain War Office and Other Military Records*, 251.
43. For a recent study of the Fencible units, see Butcher, “By Beat of Drum or Otherwise”.
44. ‘List of Documents of Earlier Date Than 1861 at the War Office, Pall Mall,’ details of the subdivisions and their responsibilities can be found in Robinson, *The War Office List*.
45. ‘Register of Transfers of Records to and from Department,’ fol. 107.
46. Lester, ‘Of Mind and Matter,’ 74–75.
47. Vismann, *Files*, 39.
48. ‘Palmerston to Edward Baker Littlehales, Bt.,’ 10 February 1810. For the rebinding, see for example WO 65/55.
49. See for example WO 65/47, image 4 of the pdf (no page number), with a reference to ‘List of officers of various Regiments, Cavalry & Infantry, who died at St. Domingo between 31 May & 31 Dec. 1796 95,289/2&3.’ For details of the registry numbering system, see Roper, *The Records of the War Office*, 22–23.
50. ‘George Harrison to Secretary at War,’ 8 July 1808; ‘James Pulteney to George Harrison, Esq.,’ 1 August 1808.
51. The references are: WO 3/330–392 Letters to Regimental Officers; WO 3/591–616 Out-letters — Commander-in-Chief (private); WO 31/1–496,/1480–1501,/1534–1543,/1548–1557, &/1559 Office of the Commander-in-Chief: Memoranda and Papers.
52. The references are: WO 4/514 to/518 Commissions; WO 4/997–1008 Promotions; WO 25/40–66,/96–111, & 116 Commission Books; WO 25/155–191 Notification Books to the Secretary of State; WO 25/213–220;/223–231 Succession Books.
53. WO 3/152–165 Letters to War Office and other public departments.
54. Ellis, ‘Letters, Organization, and the Archive in Elizabeth Montagu’s Correspondence,’ 618–21.
55. Head, *Making Archives in Early Modern Europe*, 262–64.
56. Holden’s *Annual London and Country Directory of the United Kingdoms and Wales*.
57. Riordan, ‘The King’s Library of Manuscripts.’
58. Ellis, ‘Letters, Organization, and the Archive in Elizabeth Montagu’s Correspondence,’ 606.
59. ‘Public Records: Twenty-Third Annual Report to Her Majesty of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records. [22 February 1862],’ 44.

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Data access statement

All data underlying the results are publicly available in the archives and libraries identified in the bibliography and no additional source data are required.

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- WO 3/152-165 Letters to War Office and other public departments, January 1803 October 1820, TNA
- WO 3/330-392 Letters to Regimental Officers, September 1800 February, 28 1821 TNA.
- WO 3/591-616 Out-letters – Commander-in-Chief (private), 1 March 1803-31 1821, December TNA.
- WO 4/514-518 Commissions, 1805-1820, TNA.
- WO 4/997-1008 Promotions, 1 October 1789-30 November 1806, TNA.
- WO 65/40-73 Printed *Army Lists*, 1790-1820, TNA.

Appendix A: summary of War Office records utilized, held at The National Archives (TNA), Kew, London

The following lists the record series utilized for our project, and links to the catalogue entry for them.

WO 3: Out letters from the Commander-in-Chief's office. Copies of letters in volumes. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C14214>

WO 4: Out letters from the Secretary-at-War. Copies of letters in volumes. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C14215>

WO 17: Monthly Returns to the Adjutant General in the office of the Commander-in-Chief. Loose material bound together into folders by year and unit. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C14228>

WO 24: Papers Concerning the Establishments. Volumes documenting the establishment of units in the army and militia, and other financial arrangements such as half pay for officers. Created in volumes. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C14233>

WO 25: Entry books and registers from the War Office. Includes details relating to: commissions, records of service, troop movements, casualties, deserters, pay, pensions, absences and discharges. Various pre-printed book or volumes. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C14234>

WO 27: Inspection returns to the office of the Commander-in-Chief. These consist of reports from inspecting generals of the condition of the regiment, the numbers of men and the names of officers present and absent. Loose material bound into volumes. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C14236>

WO 31: Memoranda of appointments, promotions, and resignations to the Office of the Commander-in-Chief. Loose letters, memorials, and notes, filed together in bundles. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C14240>

WO 65: Printed Annual Army Lists. These official lists give the names of officers of the regiments with the dates of commissions. Printed volumes with handwritten annotations. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C14273>

Appendix B: Personnel in the UK's military administration, 1793-1820

Commander-in-Chief

25 January 1793	General Jeffery Amherst
13 February 1795	Field Marshal Frederick, Duke of York
18 March 1809	General Sir David Dundas
26 May 1811	Field Marshal Frederick, Duke of York

Secretary-at-War

6 January 1784	Sir George Yonge
11 July 1794	William Windham
February 1801	Charles Philip Yorke
17 August 1803	Charles Bragge
12 May 1804	William Dundas
8 February 1806	General Richard Fitzpatrick
31 March 1807	General Sir James Murray Pulteney
1 July 1809	Lord Granville Leveson Gower
28 October 1809	Henry John Temple, 3 rd Viscount Palmerston