



**BRIEFING PAPER**

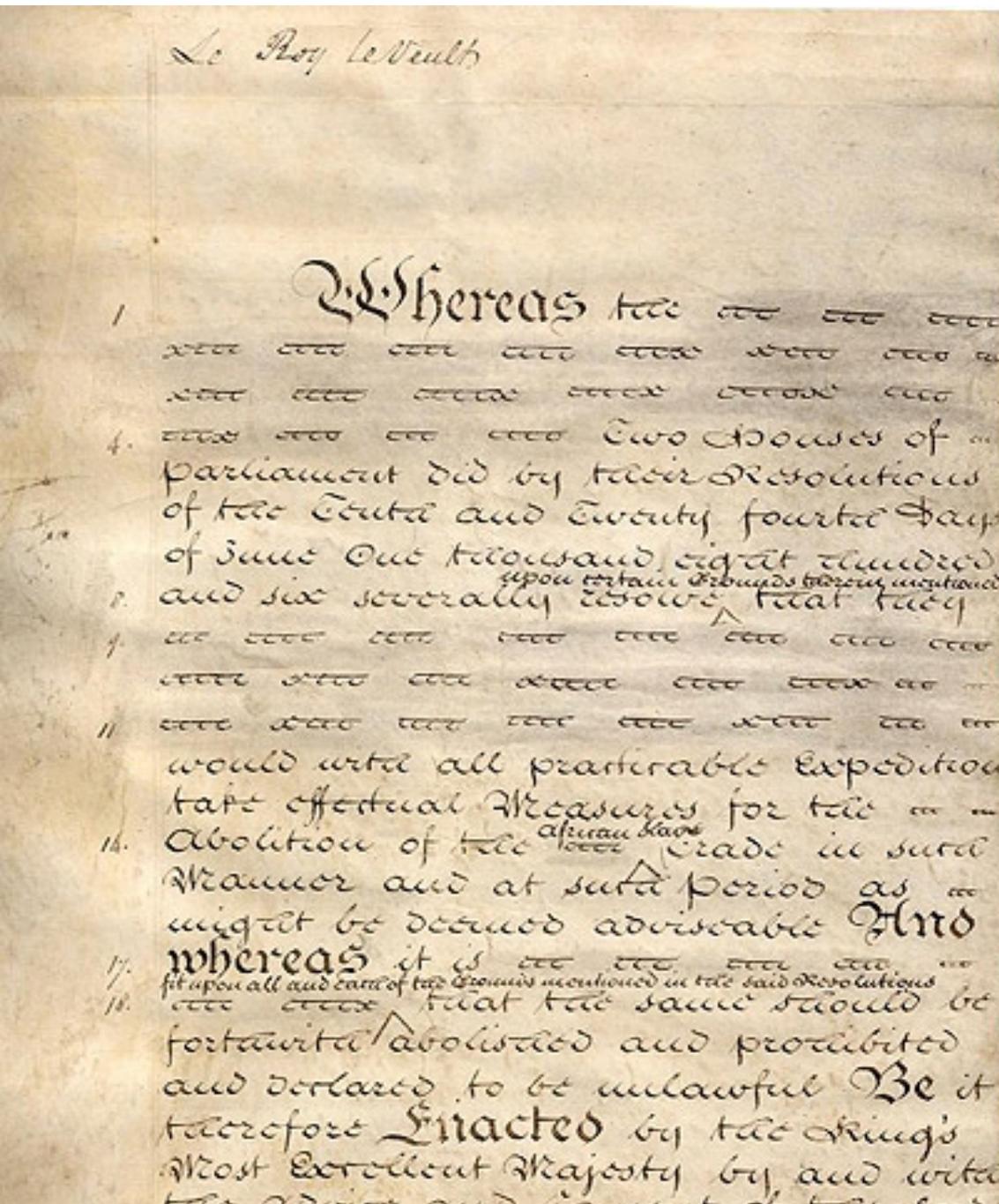
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# Vellum: printing record copies of public Acts

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## Summary

Record copies of public Acts, passed since the beginning of the 2015 Parliament, have been printed on archival paper, with front and back vellum covers. From 1849 to 2015, record copies of public Acts were printed on vellum, a durable material made of calfskin. Until 1849, they were handwritten on parchment rolls (usually made from goatskin) until then.

The practice of printing record copies of public Acts on vellum was adopted through resolutions by both Houses of Parliament. These resolutions followed recommendations made by the Select Committee on Printing in 1848, and in a 1849 report by the then Clerk Assistant of the House of Lords.<sup>1</sup> The resolutions abolished the practice of 'ingrossing' (handwriting) record copies of Acts and 'inrolling' them in parchment rolls containing all public Acts passed in a Parliamentary session. Record copies of Acts have since been printed in book form, on vellum. Record copies of private Acts were printed on vellum between 1849 and 1956, since when they have been printed on archival paper.

In 1999 proposals to print record copies of public Acts on archival paper were considered. The House of Lords approved a proposal to change to printing on archival paper, but the House of Commons voted against.

Those arguing in favour of the change claimed that archival paper was of suitable quality for printing record copies of Acts, and that this move would save a significant amount of public money. Those arguing against the change claimed that printing on vellum was a longstanding tradition; that vellum was more durable than paper; and that the change would have damaging effects on the only remaining company printing vellum in the UK.

The House of Commons Administration Committee published a report on 12 October 2015 that recommended agreeing to a renewed request from the Chairman of Committees of the House of Lords for the assent of the Commons to a change to printing public Acts on archival paper instead of vellum.

Answers provided to Parliamentary Questions on 9 November and 2 December 2015 clarified that the House of Lords managed the contract for, and was responsible for the cost of, printing record copies of Acts and purchasing vellum.

On 20 April 2016 the House of Commons agreed a motion instructing the Clerk of the House to convey to the Lords that the Commons "has withheld its consent to the use of archival paper rather than vellum for the printing of record copies of public Acts of Parliament". James Gray MP, the Member who had secured the debate, said that he hoped the Lords "will listen carefully to the views" of the Commons.

The Chairman of Committees of the House of Lords wrote to the Chair of the House of Commons Administration Committee on 4 May 2016 regarding the implications of the Commons vote. He wrote that: "We are persuaded that printing on archival paper is a more appropriate use of public funds, and that the case for continuing to print on vellum is not made". He added that if the Commons wished to arrange a contract for printing record copies of Acts on vellum, then the Lords would share experience of managing the legacy contract to assist with this. However, the Lords "does not wish to contribute financially to any future printing on vellum".

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<sup>1</sup> Also referred to as the Clerk Assistant of the Parliaments

On 23 January 2017, the House of Commons Commission agreed that it would provide front and back vellum covers for record copies of Acts. The House of Lords would retain responsibility for the printing of the record copies of Acts.

# 1. Printing record copies of public Acts

Two copies of Acts passed by Parliament are kept as authenticated records. All record copies were printed on vellum between 1849 and 1956. Since then, only record copies of public Acts were printed on vellum; and record copies of private Acts have been printed on archival paper. Record copies of public Acts, passed since the beginning of the 2015 Parliament, have been printed on archival paper and bound between vellum covers. Before 1849, record copies were handwritten (inscribed) on parchment rolls, usually made from goatskin. The oldest inscribed Act in the Parliamentary Archives dates from 1497.<sup>2</sup>

The [Oxford Dictionary](#) defines vellum as:

Fine parchment made originally from the skin of a calf.

Erskine May, the authoritative guide to Parliamentary procedure, explains the process of printing public Acts:

After examination of the text to ensure that it is correct, a proof copy of every public Act and Measure is certified by the Clerk of Public Bills in the House of Lords and sent to the Queen's Printer, and a request is sent to the Controller of HM Stationery Office to issue instructions for its immediate publication.

Two prints are prepared on durable vellum. One of these is sent for custody to the Public Record Office [now the National Archives]; the other, having been endorsed with the words by which the Royal Assent was signified, is signed by the Clerk of the Parliaments and becomes the official copy of the Act; and is lodged in the House of Lords Record Office [now the Parliamentary Archives]. Paper prints of the Act are placed on sale to the public, and such printed copies, known as Queen's Printer's copies, are accepted as evidence in courts of law.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.1 The Parliamentary Archives

The official record copies of Acts (as well as other records) have long been stored, preserved and made available to the public by the Parliamentary Archives. Their collection includes substantial quantities of both parchment records (dating back to the late 15<sup>th</sup> century), and paper records (dating back to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century).

The Parliamentary Archives has the expertise to preserve and provide access to archival records, including maintaining the strictly controlled environmental conditions required for the archival storage of both paper and parchment documents. Its repositories in the Victoria Tower meet the storage requirements for both paper and parchment; factors such as lighting, temperature and relative humidity are very closely controlled and monitored, and comply with the relevant British Standards for archive repositories (e.g. PD 5454: 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> 'Why is the UK still printing its laws on vellum?', [BBC News](#), 15 February 2016

<sup>3</sup> Erskine May, *Parliamentary Practice*, 24<sup>th</sup> edition, 2011, p660

## 2. Establishing the practice of printing on vellum

The practice of printing public Acts on vellum was agreed on 12 February 1849. The House of Lords passed a resolution to this effect on 8 February 1849 and presented it to the House of Commons on 9 February. The Commons amended the resolution and passed it on 12 February; the Lords agreed to the amendments on the same day.

### 2.1 First Report of the Select Committee on Printing

These resolutions were the result of a process of consultation dating back to at least 1848. On 16 August 1848, the First Report of the Select Committee on Printing was published. The Committee recommended that “after an Act has received the Royal Assent, two carefully authenticated copies be printed on vellum, one to be deposited in the custody of the Clerk of the Parliaments, and the other in the custody of the Master of the Rolls.”<sup>4</sup>

#### Ingrossment and inrolment

The Committee had been instructed by the House of Commons to review the system of ‘ingrossment’ of Bills.<sup>5</sup> This system, in use until 1849, is described in a paper (dating from 1837) presented to the Committee by John Birch, a former Clerk Assistant of the House of Lords:

After a Bill (having been presented to the House in MS.[manuscript])<sup>6</sup> has been read a first and second time, committed and reported, the next course is to order it to be ingrossed; that is, to be written in a peculiar strong black hand upon skins of parchment, which are then tacked together and made into a roll.<sup>7</sup>

Any amendments made at third reading would be added to the margins of the ingrossed Bill, or attached to the roll on separate pieces of parchment. The Bill would then be sent to the other House, where further amendments could be made; these would be recorded on a separate piece of paper and, if agreed, inscribed on the ingrossed roll.

Printed copies of the Bill reflecting changes made at each stage were also available to Members of Parliament (printed by the printer contracted by the House in which the Bill originated). Most evidence provided to the Committee noted that these copies were easier to consult than the ingrossed rolls, which could be bulky, making it

<sup>4</sup> First Report from the Select Committee on Printing 1847-48 (657), 16 August 1848, piii

<sup>5</sup> Also spelled ‘engrossment’

<sup>6</sup> Evidence given to the same Select Committee by John Dorington (Chief Clerk of the Public Bills and Fees Office) notes that since 1836, Bills could be presented in print rather than manuscript. Minutes of evidence, 27 June 1848, printed in the First Report from the Select Committee on Printing 1847-48 (657), 16 August 1848, p15

<sup>7</sup> Minutes of evidence, 31 May 1848, printed in the First Report from the Select Committee on Printing 1847-48 (657), 16 August 1848, p2

difficult to locate proposed amendments. It was felt that as a result, errors could be made when handwriting amendments on the rolls. The record could look untidy if lots of amendments were made that required writing in the margins, and erasing and scraping the parchment (as illustrated by the image on the front page).

Once the Act had received the Royal Assent, the ingrossed roll would be kept by the Parliament Office, and stored in the Jewel Tower before 1864, and the Victoria Tower after 1864. Additionally, the text of the Act would be copied by hand (with all amendments incorporated) from the printed final Act onto an 'inrolment'<sup>8</sup> at the end of the session (Birch specifies: "it is from the print, and the written amendments made thereon and thereto, that the ingrossment is made in practice, and not from the formally recognised manuscript copy").<sup>9</sup> These inrolments contained all the public Acts passed during the session, and were stored in the Rolls Chapel at Chancery Lane (now the National Archives).<sup>10</sup>

### Alternatives

John Birch suggested an alternative to the practice of 'ingrossment and inrolment'. He recommended replacing the inrolments with books printed on parchment; and proposed that at the point that a Bill would be ingrossed, it should instead be (emphasis in the original):

*...printed on parchment.* That is, the Bill may be printed on paper (except one copy) exactly in the way ordinarily used for Bills in their progress through the House, or for promulgation after the Acts are passed, ...; but that *one copy*, identical in all other respects with the rest, shall be printed on *parchment*, partly by way of distinction, partly as being more durable, and partly as giving somewhat of a more formal character to the document. And this copy of the Bill, so printed on parchment, and made up *bookwise*, in the same form as the other Bills on paper, shall be the record with reference to which all the future proceedings and alterations in the Bill shall be made, in the same manner as they are now to the *ingrossment*; and henceforward the ingrossment, and even the form of a *roll*, shall be entirely laid aside.

John Dorington (Chief Clerk of the Public Bills and Fees Office at the time) recommended an alternative to this plan in evidence to the Select Committee: to avoid alterations and erasures on the record, he proposed printing two record copies on parchment or vellum only after the Bill had received the Royal Assent, one of which would be inrolled following existing practice.<sup>11</sup> Lord Langdale, Master of the Rolls at the time,<sup>12</sup> thought a printed book would meet the requirements of a

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<sup>8</sup> Also spelled 'enrolment'

<sup>9</sup> Minutes of evidence, 31 May 1848, printed in the First Report from the Select Committee on Printing 1847-48 (657), 16 August 1848, p3

<sup>10</sup> Further information about the history of passing and storing Acts is provided in M F Bond, La Reyne le veult: the making and keeping of Acts at Westminster, *History Today*, 1956, Vol. VI, pp. 765-773

<sup>11</sup> Minutes of evidence, 27 June 1848, printed in the First Report from the Select Committee on Printing 1847-48 (657), 16 August 1848, pp18-9

<sup>12</sup> The Master of the Rolls was responsible for the safe keeping of public records under the *Public Record Office Act 1838*; more information can be found on the [website of the National Archives](#). This responsibility moved to the Lord Chancellor following the *Public Records Act 1958*

record copy (namely being accurate, durable and accessible) whilst being more “more convenient” to use and store.<sup>13</sup>

Evidence given to the Select Committee on Printing, as well as to the earlier Select Committee on the present method of ingrossing Bills (which reported in 1823), notes that the enrolments were consulted only extremely rarely.<sup>14</sup>

### **Parchment, vellum, or paper**

When questioned, John Birch clarified that the record copies could also be printed on other material:

... I question whether vellum or paper might not be better; they are both better for printing on than parchment; and if paper were used, the official character of the copy might be distinguished by being made on paper of a different sort, size and colour from the ordinary prints, on vellum paper for instance; and the durability of the instrument itself is of less consequence, when the permanent preservation of evidence of its contents is sufficiently secured by the multiplication of copies by printing, in case of the destruction of the original.<sup>15</sup>

The Clerk Assistant of the House of Lords at the time, John Shaw Lefevre, recommended that “two fair printed copies of the folio edition on large paper be substituted for the engrossment deposited at the Tower, and for the enrolment.” When asked if vellum would be more appropriate, he responded that he was unsure of the durability of printing on vellum, and that paper was suitable for the purposes of record copies of Acts.<sup>16</sup>

### **Changing the practice**

John Birch was also asked whether he thought that the change he proposed would require an Act of Parliament, or could be effected through resolutions passed by both Houses of Parliament. He was uncertain, but noted that the practice in use did not rest upon an Act of Parliament, but on “the immemorial practice of the two Houses”.<sup>17</sup>

The evidence published by the Select Committee on the present method of ingrossing Bills in 1823 confirms the ancient origins of the practice of ingrossing Bills. When this Committee considered the practice of ingrossing, there was no suggestion yet of changing to print. However, several witnesses suggested keeping records as books rather than rolls, and there was also some discussion of using paper or vellum instead of parchment.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Minutes of evidence, 11 August 1848, printed in the First Report from the Select Committee on Printing 1847-48 (657), 16 August 1848, p26

<sup>14</sup> First Report from the Select Committee on Printing 1847-48 (657), 16 August 1848; Report from the Select Committee on the present method of ingrossing Bills, 1823 (552), 11 July 1823

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of evidence, 31 May 1848, printed in the First Report from the Select Committee on Printing 1847-48 (657), 16 August 1848, pp5-6

<sup>16</sup> Minutes of evidence, 28 July 1848, printed in the First Report from the Select Committee on Printing 1847-48 (657), 16 August 1848, p23

<sup>17</sup> Minutes of evidence, 31 May 1848, printed in the First Report from the Select Committee on Printing 1847-48 (657), 16 August 1848, p10

<sup>18</sup> Report from the Select Committee on the present method of ingrossing Bills, 1823 (552), 11 July 1823

## 2.2 Resolution of the House of Lords and the report of the Clerk Assistant

On 4 September 1848, the House of Lords resolved:

... that the Clerk Assistant be directed, in communication with the proper Authorities of the House of Commons, to take such preliminary Steps as may be necessary so as to enable the House, if it shall so think fit, at the Commencement of the next Session, to dispense with the present Form of ingrossing Bills, and to transmit and to receive printed Copies of the same.

The Clerk Assistant, John Shaw Lefevre, reported on 6 February 1849 that he had communicated with the Speaker of the House of Commons and that nothing prevented Parliament from dispensing with the system of ingrossing Bills. He proposed that after a Bill had been passed by both Houses, it should be:

1. ... printed by the Queen's Printer, who should furnish a Print thereof on specially manufactured Paper, to the House of Lords, before the Royal Assent, and also a Duplicate of such fair Print.
2. That one of such fair Prints of each Bill should be duly authenticated by the proper Officers of each House as the Bill to which both Houses have agreed.
3. That the Royal Assent should be indorsed on such fair Print so authenticated, which should be deposited in the Record Tower [now the Parliamentary Archives], in lieu of the present Ingrossment. [...]
9. That the Master of the Rolls should, upon being duly authorized in that behalf, receive in lieu of the Copies of Public General Acts as now inrolled, the herein mentioned Duplicate fair Print of each Public Bill, to be held for the same Purposes, and subject to the same Conditions for and upon which the inrolled Acts are now received and held by him.<sup>19</sup>

Both Houses would employ the same printer (the Queen's Printer), "an Arrangement productive of Economy, Convenience, and Despatch, and tending to lessen the chance of Errors"; and the printing arrangements would not apply to private Bills "for the present Year".

## 2.3 House of Lords resolutions

On 8 February 1849, the Lord Chancellor reported the recommendations of a House of Lords Select Committee that had been appointed to consider the Clerk Assistant's report on dispensing with the system of ingrossment and inrolment of Bills. The Committee recommended three resolutions, which were then agreed to by the House of Lords.

It was resolved that "it is expedient to discontinue the present System of ingrossing and to alter the present System of inrolling Bills"; that "this House is prepared to agree to the following Arrangements, if agreed to by the other House of Parliament"; and that a 'House Copy' of each Bill

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<sup>19</sup> House of Lords Sessional Paper vol. XXV (1849)

originating in the House of Lords would be printed on paper and laid on the Table of said House, for the purpose of entering amendments made by the Lords.

The arrangements agreed to were the recommendations the Clerk Assistant had made in his report, but for one change (emphasis added):

2. That on its Return to the House in which it originated, without Amendments, (or if amended, after the Amendments shall have been settled and agreed to,) it shall be fair printed by the Queen's Printer, who shall furnish a fair Print thereof **on Vellum** to the House of Lords before the Royal Assent, and likewise a duplicate of such fair Print, **also on Vellum:**"

It was then ordered "That the Two first Resolutions be communicated to the Commons at a Conference, and their Concurrence thereto desired." <sup>20</sup>

## 2.4 House of Commons amendments

The House of Lords communicated their resolutions to the House of Commons at a conference held in the Royal Gallery on 9 February. The Commons considered the resolutions on 12 February 1849 and made three amendments. The first two were drafting changes to take out unnecessary words. The third amendment changed the process of authenticating bills; this no longer needed to be done by officers of *both* Houses:

That one of such fair prints of each Bill shall be duly authenticated by the Clerk of the Parliaments, or other proper Officer of the House of Lords, as the Bill to which both Houses have agreed.

The amendments were communicated to the Lords at a conference in the Royal Gallery held immediately after the debate. The Lords agreed to the amendments.<sup>21</sup>

The House of Commons resolved to extend the arrangements for printing public Acts to private Acts on 27 July 1849.

## 2.5 Final ingrossments and first prints

The first record copies of public Acts were printed in the same session the resolutions were agreed to (12&13 Victoria I, 1848-9). Record copies of private Acts were also printed from the next session onwards (13&14 Victoria I, 1849-50).

### Public Acts

The final public Act to be ingrossed and inrolled was the *Savings Banks (Ireland) Act 1848*, which received the Royal Assent on 5 September 1848.<sup>22</sup> The first public Act for which a record copy was printed was the

<sup>20</sup> House of Lords Journal, volume 81 (1849)

<sup>21</sup> House of Commons Journal, volume 104 (1849-50)

<sup>22</sup> Public General Act, 11 & 12 Victoria I, c. 133 - *An Act to amend the Laws relating to Savings Banks in Ireland*

*Inland Revenue Board Act 1849*, which received the Royal Assent on 27 February 1849.<sup>23</sup>

### Private Acts

The final private Act to be ingrossed was Private Act (Not Printed), 12 & 13 Victoria I, c. 34 - *An Act to dissolve the Marriage of Edward Eustace Hill Esquire with the Honourable Georgiana Charlotte, commonly called Lady Georgiana Charlotte, his now Wife, and to enable him to marry again; and for other Purposes*. Until 1922, private Acts for divorces and naturalizations were counted as 'not printed' because they were not printed for promulgation as statutes. However, the record copies of such Acts were printed onto vellum after 1849.

The first private Act for which a record copy was printed was Local and Personal Act, 13 & 14 Victoria I, c. i - *An Act for carrying into effect an Agreement entered into between "The Suffolk and General Country Amicable Insurance Office" and "The Alliance British and Foreign Life and Fire Assurance Company"*. The Act received the Royal Assent on 17 May 1850.

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<sup>23</sup> Public General Act, 12 & 13 Victoria I, c. 1 - *An Act to consolidate the Boards of Excise and Stamps and Taxes into One Board of Commissioners of Inland Revenue, and to make Provision for the Collection of such Revenue*.

## 3. Proposals to change the practice

### 3.1 1999 debates and history

Parliament previously voted on the practice of printing public Acts on vellum in 1999. The [Select Committee on the House of Lords' Offices](#), and the [House of Commons Administration Committee](#), had recommended a change to archival paper.<sup>24</sup> The [House of Lords](#) approved a motion to change to printing Acts on paper (no division).<sup>25</sup> The [House of Commons](#) then debated a motion to agree with the House of Lords' resolution.<sup>26</sup>

Those arguing in favour of the change claimed that archival paper was of suitable quality for printing record copies of Acts, and that this move would save a significant amount of public money. Those arguing against the change claimed that printing on vellum was a longstanding tradition; that vellum was more durable than paper; and that the change would have damaging effects on the only remaining company printing vellum in the UK. The House of Commons voted against the motion (Ayes 53, Noes 121).

The [appendix](#) to the 1999 report by the House of Commons Administration Committee included a note by the (then) Clerk of the House. This note gives details of earlier consideration of the issue of printing on vellum:

3. The 1849 Resolutions were not formally amended by the House when in 1956 (following the recommendations of a Joint Committee and the Lords Offices Committee) it was ruled by the Speaker that the vellum requirement should no longer apply to private Acts (HC Deb. (1955-56) 558, c. 945). On the other hand, given the recent history of attempts to change the practice regarding record copies of public Acts (see para. 4 below) it is suggested that amendment by the House (and by the Lords) of the earlier Resolutions would be the most appropriate course in this case.

#### Archival paper

4. A proposal to extend to record copies of public Acts the 1956 decision on printing of private Acts on vellum was rejected by a Sub-Committee of the Lords' Offices Committee in 1957 after they had heard evidence which appeared to cast doubt on the suitability of paper for archival purposes. The suggestion was not considered in the Commons at that time. In 1985, a similar proposal which had been agreed by the Lords was put before the Accommodation and Administration Sub-Committee in this House and rejected: no report was made setting out the Sub-Committee's reasons, though it is believed that Members took the view that the anticipated level of savings did not justify a departure from long-standing tradition. It was also the case that

<sup>24</sup> Select Committee on the House of Lords Offices, Second Report, 25 May 1999, 1998-99; House of Commons Administration Committee, Second Report, 21 June 1999, 1998-99

<sup>25</sup> HL Deb 14 October 1999 cc516-9

<sup>26</sup> HC Deb 1 November 1999 cc32-49

representations were made by a Member in whose constituency a vellum-making factory was located. (It should perhaps be added here that there is currently only one supplier of vellum in Europe. In the event of failure, recourse would have to be had to North America.)

### 3.2 House of Commons Administration Committee report 2015-16

The House of Commons Administration Committee published a [report](#) considering the use of vellum on 12 October 2015. The report recommended agreeing to a renewed request from the Chairman of Committees of the House of Lords for the assent of the Commons to a change to printing record copies of public Acts on archival paper instead of vellum.<sup>27</sup>

James Gray MP (Conservative), a member of the Committee, raised a Point of Order on 26 October 2015 to highlight that he had missed the part of the meeting where the Committee discussed and unanimously agreed the report, and to register his objection. He also asked about the process of changing the practice of printing on vellum:

Mr Speaker, am I right in thinking that because the use of vellum was brought in by an order of the House, voted for on the Floor of the House, its removal would also require a vote of this House? If that is the case, would that be an opportunity for me both to register my dissent properly and to try to encourage hon. Members on both sides of the House to oppose what seems to me to be a disgraceful piece of heritage vandalism?

**Mr Speaker:** [...] I can confirm that for the recommendation—this is the key point—to be implemented, the matter would have to be brought to the Floor of the House, as it was in 1999. In such circumstances, he will very likely have the chance to address the House on the subject and, if need be, to press his opposition to a Division. Perhaps I can just say in this context, and I feel sure that the hon. Gentleman will be familiar with the *Official Report*, that the vote of 1 November 1999 will be fresh in the minds of some colleagues. [...]

The hon. Gentleman did not refer to a date on which a previous resolution was passed. I believe it was in 1849, but there is no doubt that whatever the precise date it was in the long-distant past and a considerable period away from the 21st century that he and I now inhabit. I will leave the matter there for today, but knowing the hon. Gentleman and his perspicacity, he will require no further incentive to proceed with the matter as he thinks fit.<sup>28</sup>

### 3.3 Parliamentary Questions

On 9 November 2015, some background information about the current use and cost of vellum was given in response to a series of Parliamentary Questions from Sharon Hodgson MP (Labour). She had asked about the cost of using vellum and alternatives, and about who the House of Commons Commission had consulted on changing from

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<sup>27</sup> Administration Committee, *Record copies of Acts*, 12 October 2015, HC521 2015-16

<sup>28</sup> HC Deb 26 October 2015 cc 39-40

vellum to archival paper. Tom Brake MP (Liberal Democrat) responded on behalf of the House of Commons Commission:

The House of Lords is responsible for the printing of two record copies of each Act, both printed on vellum in accordance with the Resolutions agreed by both Houses in February 1849. The Commission does not incur any expenditure on the printing of these copies, and has therefore undertaken no inquiry into, or consultation on, the proposal from the Chairman of Committees in the House of Lords to move to the use of archival paper. It has also therefore not sought to assess alternative options, nor undertaken any analysis of relative storage or care costs of vellum as opposed to archival paper. The House of Lords agreed in 1999 to vary its resolution and that vellum should cease to be used. The predecessor Administration Committee had considered arguments in support of a similar proposal from the House of Lords in June 1999. That Committee recommended in a report (*Record Copies of Acts, HC 539*) to the House that the proposal to end the use of vellum be accepted. However, following a debate on 1 November 1999, on a motion that the Commons agree with the Lords in their resolution, the proposal was rejected by the Commons. [Deb HC: 1 November 1999, Col 32ff].

In his letter to the Administration Committee of 17 September, printed with the Committee's Report (*Record Copies of Acts, HC 521*), the Chairman of Committees stated that the average annual cost of printing vellums is around £100,000 a year. I understand that the current estimate of the savings arising from a switch to archival paper are about 80%, amounting to around £800,000 of savings to public funds over the next ten years. These arise from the greater ease of printing on paper rather than vellum, as well as the raw material costs. The exact level of savings to public funds will depend on the number of Acts passed, and number of pages per Act, per year, and the precise specification and contractual arrangements agreed for future printing. The Commission has made no assessment of the breakdown of savings arising.

The Chairman of Committees records in his letter the view that high quality archival paper would maintain durability and print quality. I understand that the National Archives has already informed Parliament that it does not require a vellum copy, and that it takes the view that archival quality paper is sufficient to maintain the public record. It also maintains a comprehensive database of legislation, both "as originally enacted" and "as amended", on [www.legislation.gov.uk](http://www.legislation.gov.uk). Private Acts have been printed on archival paper since 1956. There are internationally recognised ISO standards for archival paper, and for archival quality ink and printing processes.<sup>29</sup>

Further information was provided by the Chairman of Committees in response to a Parliamentary Question in the House of Lords on 2 December 2015:

The House of Lords agreed to cease using vellum for public Acts in 1999, with a resolution to that effect being passed on 14 October 1999. At that time, the change was not agreed by the House of Commons.

<sup>29</sup> WQ [13880](#), [13881](#), [13882](#), [13883](#), [13884](#), [13885](#), [13957](#), [13958](#), [14164](#), 9 November 2015

Since then the House of Lords has continued to pay for the production of two copies of each public Act of Parliament, printed on vellum. (One copy is retained in the Parliamentary Archives; one copy is sent to the National Archives.) The Lords has done this even though it is not in accord with the October 1999 resolution of this House.

In the past six years (2009/10 to 2014/15) the Lords has spent a total of £620,440 on vellum Acts; an average of just over £103,000 per year.

This is despite the availability of archival paper which is of extremely high quality and durability. Private Acts of Parliament have been printed on archival quality paper since 1956, and I am not aware that vellum is now used for any other governmental or parliamentary records.

The National Archives have confirmed the view they took in 1999; that they do not require a vellum copy, and that archival quality paper is sufficient to maintain the public record.

Switching from vellum to high quality archival paper would, on a conservative estimate, save approximately 80% on current costs - or around £80,000 per year. The exact level of savings to public funds will depend on the number of Acts passed, and number of pages per Act, per year, and the precise specification and contractual arrangements agreed for future printing.

As well as being an expensive raw material, vellum requires a highly specialised form of printing which is not widely available, the machinery for which is expensive to maintain, and which is likely to be more difficult to procure on the expiry of the House's current printing contract in March 2016.

As the start of a new Parliament seemed a natural point at which to implement the change previously agreed by this House, the main party Leaders, the Convenor and the Lord Speaker were consulted early in the present session, and the House Committee was informed in July 2015. I then wrote to the Chairman of the House of Commons Administration Committee on 17 September to invite that House to agree to the change.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.4 Another Commons debate on vellum

On 7 January 2016, James Gray MP (Con) asked the Leader of the House if the Government would make time available to debate the continued use of vellum. The Leader, Chris Grayling, said it was a matter for the relevant Committees and that he had "had no request to make time available for a debate about it".<sup>31</sup>

On 9 February 2016, Sharon Hodgson MP (Lab) raised a point of order about vellum, as she had heard its use had been discontinued and the contract with the printer ceased. She asked the Speaker when Members would get a chance to debate this change, particularly in light of his assertion of 26 October 2015 that changing the practice of printing on vellum would require a decision on the Floor of the House. The Speaker said that this had been his understanding at the time, but that:

the arrangements for printing Acts of Parliament and the associated expenditure are matters for the House of Lords, and

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<sup>30</sup> WQ [HL3713](#), 2 December 2015

<sup>31</sup> [HC Deb 7 January 2016 c442](#)

not for this House, so its arrangements with the printers of Acts are not matters for the Chair.<sup>32</sup>

The next day, James Gray MP asked the Speaker on a point of order what effect a motion to reverse the decision to discontinue the use of vellum agreed following a Backbench Business debate would have. The Speaker said:

First, I have not actually changed my view on the desirability of a vote in this Chamber on the matter. The hon. Gentleman is quite right in saying, as I readily acknowledged yesterday when a point of order was raised, that I had expected a vote would take place on that matter in this House. However, the matter does fall within the aegis—and, it appears, in terms of decision-making competence, the exclusive aegis—of the other place. For that reason, and on account of their desire to proceed, there is no entitlement for this House to supersede the will of the other place.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman quite correctly judges that it would be open to him and to other Members to seek a Backbench Business Committee debate on this matter. I wish the hon. Gentleman all success, presumably in a cross-party effort, to secure such a debate. It is not for me to seek to comment on how the other place judges matters. I would not have sought to do so anyway and I have been reminded by sound professional advice that it is not for me to do so. I therefore do not think I should get into the business of speculating as to what might happen. I have known the hon. Gentleman for well over 20 years and he is, at his best, a formidable and energetic campaigner. If he feels strongly, my advice to him, together with the hon. Lady from the Labour Benches who raised the matter yesterday, is to go ahead and seek a debate, marshal his forces and to plan for victory, rather than to spend time sitting around predicting it. Perhaps we can leave it there.<sup>33</sup>

On 1 March 2016, James Gray MP presented a proposal for a debate on the continued use of vellum to the Backbench Business Committee.<sup>34</sup> A debate was scheduled to take place on 10 March. However, on that day, other House business meant that there would not be much time to debate the use of vellum, and James Gray withdrew his motion. The Leader of the House, Chris Grayling MP, said that the Government would not make time available for a debate on another day, but that the Backbench Business Committee would be likely to.<sup>35</sup>

James Gray MP also tabled an early day motion calling on the House of Lords to reverse its decision to discontinue the use of vellum, which attracted 41 signatures.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.5 Cabinet Office intervention

The media reported on 15 February 2016 that the Cabinet Office had offered to take on the cost of printing public Acts on vellum.<sup>37</sup> Matthew

<sup>32</sup> [HC Deb 9 February 2016, c1439](#)

<sup>33</sup> [HC Deb 10 February 2016, c1579](#)

<sup>34</sup> Backbench Business Committee, [Transcript of meeting](#) 1 March 2016,

<sup>35</sup> HC Deb 10 March [c438](#); [c524](#)

<sup>36</sup> Early Day Motion 1173, [Record copies of Acts](#), 1 March 2016, 2015-16

<sup>37</sup> E.g. 'Why is the UK still printing its laws on vellum?', [BBC News](#), 15 February 2016

Hancock, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, told the Telegraph that:

Recording our laws on vellum is a millennium long tradition, and surprisingly cost effective. While the world around us constantly changes, we should safeguard some of our great traditions and not let the use of vellum die out.<sup>38</sup>

However, James Gray MP noted in his representation to the Backbench Business Committee on 1 March 2016 that:

There has been some media coverage of Matt Hancock's announcement that the Government would pay any costs and that they want to see the tradition maintained. That was interpreted as being done and dusted, but the reality of this place, with its wonderful procedures, is that the Administration Committee in the Lords are the people who will decide and the Administration Committee in the Commons are the people at our end who decided too.

The Government, of course, have no part to play in that. It is not a Government matter; it is a parliamentary matter. Although we very much welcome the Government's commitment to reversing the decision, they have no actual constitutional way to do so, which is why, with the Government's encouragement, I have asked the Backbench Business Committee. The Clerks have been very much involved in advising me on this matter. They have said that procedurally, this is the correct way to reverse the Lords' decision. If we can get the Commons to agree to this, one imagines the House of Lords will have to listen to it. The Government's intervention is helpful, but not decisive.<sup>39</sup>

On 14 March, Lord Laming, the Chairman of Committees, responded to a Parliamentary Question by Lord Lexden, asking "whether he plans to reconsider the decision to cease using vellum for Public Acts":

As the House Committee was content that we were seeking to take forward the House's 1999 decision and the House of Commons has indicated that this is a matter for the Lords, I have no such plans.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.6 Commons debate on Record Copies of Acts, 20 April 2016

On 20 April 2016 a backbench business debate, secured by James Gray MP, was held in the Chamber on a motion to instruct the Clerk of the House of Commons to convey to the Clerk of the Parliaments that the House of Commons "has withheld its consent to the use of archival paper rather than vellum for the printing of record copies of public Acts of Parliament".<sup>41</sup>

Mr Gray noted in his opening speech that, if the motion was passed, it would send "a strong message" to the House of Lords that its decision to end the practice of printing public Acts of Parliament on vellum "is

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<sup>38</sup> 'Vellum should be saved in a bid to "safeguard our great traditions", says minister', [The Telegraph](#), 15 February 2016

<sup>39</sup> Backbench Business Committee, [Transcript of meeting](#), 1 March 2016, p5

<sup>40</sup> [WQ HL6562](#) [on Acts: Publishing], 14 March 2016

<sup>41</sup> HC Deb 20 April 2016 [c1001](#)

not accepted by this House". Mr Gray added that he hoped the House of Lords "will listen carefully to the views of this place".<sup>42</sup>

During the debate, those in favour of maintaining the use of vellum disputed the sums of money that others have argued would be saved if Acts were printed on archival paper instead. James Gray MP stated that:

The cost of printing the laws of this land is approximately £56,000 per annum and the cost of vellum is a relatively small amount on top of that. In other words, the saving by changing to paper would be, at best, perhaps £10,000 or £20,000 a year.<sup>43</sup>

Sir Gerald Howarth MP emphasised the durability of vellum: "We know that vellum lasts 500 years, but we do not know that any other material will last 500 years".<sup>44</sup> Sharon Hodgson MP similarly argued that:

Our most important documents have been printed or written on vellum, from Magna Carta to the Domesday Book...All these historical manuscripts have been preserved for posterity because they were printed on vellum...Surely the legislation we make here is worthy of this small additional cost. These are the laws of our land, and they should have the status and respect that is implied when they are printed on vellum.<sup>45</sup>

Some of those who opposed the motion questioned whether to "propagate tradition for the sake of tradition".<sup>46</sup> Paul Flynn MP argued that "When we have a very sensible proposal from the House of Lords for an efficiency saving that will save £100,000, we turn it down because of sentimental, confused thinking, as though we were still living in past ages".<sup>47</sup>

Ronnie Cowan MP also argued that:

whether or not legislation is written down on paper that is replaced over subsequent generations is inconsequential; it is the idea, principles and continued effectiveness of our laws, not the means of recording them, that are the most worthy of our attention.<sup>48</sup>

During the debate Matthew Hancock MP, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, clarified the Government's position following some reports that the Cabinet Office had offered to take on the cost of printing on vellum. The Minister emphasised that the issue at stake was one for the House, but said that the Government offered financial support from other savings to help ensure that the tradition was not broken by a lack of funding. Mr Hancock said:

...this is, first and foremost, a House matter. Should the House carry the motion today, I hope that we can work with the other place to find a path forward that both Houses find satisfactory. In that spirit of pragmatism, the Government have offered financial support from other savings, without further burdening taxpayers, to ensure that this tradition, which is of great symbolic and

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<sup>42</sup> HC Deb 20 April 2016 [c1001](#)

<sup>43</sup> HC Deb 20 April 2016 [c1002](#)

<sup>44</sup> HC Deb 20 April 2016 [c1004](#)

<sup>45</sup> HC Deb 20 April 2016 [c1007](#)

<sup>46</sup> HC Deb 20 April 2016 [c1018](#)

<sup>47</sup> HC Deb 20 April 2016 [c1014](#)

<sup>48</sup> HC Deb 20 April 2016 [c1017](#)

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practical value, is not irrevocably broken by a lack of funding on this small scale.<sup>49</sup>

The House divided, and the motion was agreed to by 117 to 38.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> HC Deb 20 April 2016 [cc1024-25](#)

<sup>50</sup> Votes and Proceedings, 20 April 2016, 9(2); HC Deb 20 April 2016 [cc1028-1029](#)

## 4. Decision to change practice

### 4.1 Lords response to Commons Vote

The House of Lords House Committee considered the implications of the vote in the House of Commons on 20 April 2016 at a committee meeting on 3 May. The Committee agreed that the Lord Chairman of Committees should write to the Chairman of the House of Commons Administration Committee and, on 4 May, he wrote in the following terms:

As you know, this House agreed in 1999 to move to printing Acts of Parliament on archival paper instead of vellum. We are persuaded that printing on archival paper is a more appropriate use of public funds, and that the case for continuing to print on vellum is not made.

If, in the light of the debate, the House of Commons wishes to arrange a contract for printing record copies of public Acts on vellum then the House of Lords Administration will gladly share experience of managing the legacy contract to assist you in making any such arrangements. I am sure you will appreciate that this House does not wish to contribute financially to any future printing on vellum. It is also important that we ensure the longevity of any public Acts, as the Clerk of the Parliaments must certify a record copy of them.<sup>51</sup>

### 4.2 House of Commons Commission response

The House of Commons Commission considered the question of vellum at its meeting on 23 January 2017. It agreed that it would provide front and back vellum covers to the House of Lords, for the record copies of public Acts:

USE OF VELLUM FOR RECORD COPIES OF ACTS

The Commission endorsed the provision to the Lords of front and back vellum covers for record copies of Acts.<sup>52</sup>

### 4.3 Final Act to be printed on vellum

As noted above, the House of Lords' contract – for the printing of record copies of Acts on vellum – expired in March 2016.<sup>53</sup>

The final Act to be printed on vellum was the *Modern Slavery Act 2015* (chapter 30), which was the final Act in the list of those receiving Royal Assent when the 2014 Session of Parliament was prorogued.<sup>54</sup>

The first Act to be printed on archival paper between vellum covers was the *Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Act 2015* (chapter 31), which received Royal Assent on 21 July 2015.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> WQ [HL7954](#) [Acts: Publishing], 10 May 2016

<sup>52</sup> House of Commons Commission, [Decisions 23 January 2017](#), Item 5

<sup>53</sup> WQ [HL3713](#), 2 December 2015

<sup>54</sup> [HC Deb 26 March 2015 c1682](#)

<sup>55</sup> [HC Deb 21 July 2015 c1349](#)

## 5. Further information

### 5.1 Historic Hansard

The [Historic Hansard](#) website provides transcripts of the majority of Parliamentary proceedings from 1803-2005. A few notable instances include:

- [HC Deb 2 January 1894 cc653-4](#) about the employment of women in vellum printing;
- [HC Deb 29 May 1913 cc332-4](#) about the printing contract;
- [HL Deb 23 July 1957 cc37-9](#) about an earlier inquiry into using paper instead of vellum.

### 5.2 Freedom of Information requests

A series of Freedom of Information requests from 2008 provides some information about the use of vellum. A [Freedom of Information request](#) to the House of Commons revealed that:

Acts of Parliament are produced under the authority of the 'Queen's Printer of Acts' who is Carol Tullo, the Chief Executive of Office of Public Sector Information ( OPSI, formerly HMSO) and any contract is between her and TSO [The Stationery Office], not the House of Commons. I understand that the printing of record (vellum) copies of Acts is undertaken by TSO under arrangements made by the Clerk of the Parliaments.

Another [Freedom of Information request](#) to the National Archives resulted in a copy of the contract with The Stationery Office being released. A [Freedom of Information request](#) to the House of Lords made details about the price of printing on vellum available: in 2007/08, this cost £31.08 per page.

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