In June 1963, Peter Vinter, the head of the Public Enterprises division (PE) but soon to take effective charge of the newly created THS (1965–69) through chairmanship of the THC, circulated a memorandum to divisional staff: ‘Much attention has been given in the Treasury in recent years to means of “funding experience”. The general aim is to ensure that past experience is more readily available in future to both us and to our successors than it sometimes has been in the past.’

This typified the manner in which the Treasury rationalized historical activities in overtly functional terms, that is to support the work of ‘the man at the desk in current and future operations’. Placing the Treasury’s version of the past on record for the sake of posterity was a secondary consideration.

From long experience, Vinter appreciated the interdependence of past, present and future, most notably the manner in which revisiting the recent past provided background and perspective for current issues as well as guidance about future possibilities. In particular, looking again at past successes and failures, especially at what one official described as ‘gigantic errors’, promised to be a useful learning exercise. Nor could Treasury forecasting be divorced from studying either past or current trends. Unfortunately for the Treasury’s historians, Vinter’s vision was shared over time by a declining number of Treasury staff at all levels.

Types of historical outputs

During the period between 1950 and the late 1970s the Treasury’s “funding experience” work resulted in a wide range of historical outputs (Box 9.1): official histories; large scale historical studies, normally printed in the THM series; divisional notes; and “seeded files”. Proposals

P. J. Beck, Using History, Making British Policy
© Peter J. Beck 2006
for a Treasury variant of the DBFP proved abortive. Official histories were intended for publication as part of the wartime series managed by the Cabinet Office’s Historical Section. During the 1950s the Treasury was still processing the remaining volumes in the Second World War Civil Series – for instance, Sayers’ history of Financial Policy was published in 1956 – but remained relatively unenthusiastic about proposals for a new peacetime series pending the government’s adoption of a central framework for such studies. Subsequently, as discussed in Chapters 2–3, during the mid-1960s the government’s introduction of the peacetime official histories under the auspices of the Cabinet Office’s Historical Section led the Treasury to give support to the project in principle, subject to exerting no detrimental impacts upon resourcing the work of the THS.

**Box 9.1** The Treasury’s “funding experience” outputs

1. large scale histories, written by the Treasury’s historians and often printed as THMs;
2. divisional notes – shorter histories produced within divisions;
3. “seeded files” – selected key documents prepared by senior divisional staff;
4. official wartime and peacetime histories – written by outside historians;
5. published collections of documents – considered but rejected.

Building upon Gowing’s legacy, Treasury historians worked principally upon THMs, which covered both general (for example, economic planning, wages policy) and specialist (for instance, Acts of God, Civil Service Superannuation) topics. Despite their diverse range, most histories shared, Ogilvy-Webb claimed, common features: ‘each constitutes an analysis as well as a description of events, and from this conclusions are, or can be, drawn’. Exceptions included THM 3, a mere chronological listing of relevant legislation covering civil service superannuation, and THM 6 specifying the form of estimates. The fact that most divisions had to rely largely upon their own resources led them to adopt a ‘less ambitious’ course concentrating upon divisional notes and “seeded files”, even if Organisation and Methods, among other specialized divisions, sought exemption from the whole exercise on the grounds that the nature of its work rendered it difficult to find suitable historical subjects.