

BUSINESS RECORDS AND THE SOLE ARCHIVIST CREATING AN ARCHIVES

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IT SHOULD NOT be necessary to convince historians or economists of the value of business records. While we live under capitalism business records are vital evidence of the work, the values, and the social organization of the community.

My own work experience brought this home to me. My introduction to archives was via state government records in the Queensland State Archives. Those who have worked in the State Archives will know how impressive colonial archives are — the extensive activities covered by the Colonial Secretary, the marvellous detail in the Governors' Despatches, the volume of information in Education Department or Immigration Department files, the many uses of Lands Department run registers. To me, it added up to a picture of a colony or state kept in smooth or at least functional order by the long arms of government. When I left Q.S.A. and spent some five years teaching history in Sydney schools, this picture was reinforced by textbooks which again (with a few exceptions like Macarthur raising sheep at Camden) showed Australian History as the product of the machinations of politicians.

It was not until I began to work in the Archives of the Australian National University in Canberra (which housed not the records of the University but collections of business and trade union records) that I fully realised the extent of private endeavours, and the role private enterprise has played in our past. I hastened to impart this new understanding to the undergraduates I tutored at A.N.U. in Australian History (this was a sideline I pursued part-time for two years) and had some success in persuading them to use or at least recognise the archives of private organizations.

Since coming to B.H.P. I have gained further insights not only into the extensiveness and importance of business activity, but also into its political power, and the close relationship between government and corporations. My contact with students is now lessened, but I feel a strong mission as an archivist to preserve, and persuade others to preserve, the records of the business community, and to encourage scholars to make increasing use of them. It should also not be necessary to convince other archivists of the legitimacy or worth of business archives — either the records themselves or the institutions which house them. Archivists in Australia are predominantly public servants and, although not provided with a lexicon of archival terminology, nor with wholly standardized work procedures, they have enough in common to be able at least to exchange ideas at meetings of the Australian Society of Archivists. Government archivists may be curious about what their private enterprise colleagues do, but unless they have worked in both fields they probably do not realize the similarities which exist between public and private records — similarities in the organization and function of the records; in the

methods which an archivist must use to handle them; and in the problems facing the archivist.

Without drawing the analogy too far, a business or corporation is a miniature state. The Memoranda and Articles of Association are its constitution; the Chairman is head of state; the Board of Directors is its Cabinet or Executive; it also has an army of administrators heading specialised departments for production, trade, transport, research, communications, labour recruitment, taxation, finance, budget and legal affairs. The one government-type department a corporation lacks is Welfare. The corporation also has a registry and records management department or policy, and an archives office. If it has neither of these, then it could, or should have them.

So far as function is concerned the differences between public and private records can be seen as minimal. Using conventional archival appraisal terms: business records can be either policy or operational; they have both evidential and informational value; they need to be preserved for the same reasons that government records are preserved — because they are evidence of the formation, structure, functions, and operations of their creating body; and because they have legal, fiscal, administrative or historical value to that body. Corporations mostly stop at that point. They refuse to go along with any nonsense about their records being part of the national heritage — although I'm hoping to change that!

The main difference is of course one of scale. Being used to vast acreages or hectares of records, the government archivist finds it difficult to adjust his or her thinking to the scale of operations of a family business or small company, which is in fact what the term 'business records' mostly covers. Most Australian businesses *are* small, and the corporation departments I mentioned before may consist of a handful of people, or the functions may be combined in a single individual. But the functions, and therefore the records reflecting them, do exist.

On the question of scale: B.H.P. is a certain exception to the Australian business pattern. It is almost a state within a state. It owns steel works (five of them), railways, an airline, a fleet of ships, until 1978 a shipyard, oil wells, mountains of iron ore, an island of manganese, coal mines, gold mines, a salt mine — mines of all descriptions — and an empire of subsidiary companies that I find almost impossible to keep track of. It has a workforce of 62,000 people with an annual wages bill of \$662 million. It has 180,000 shareholders. Last year it spent \$242 million, and made a trading profit of \$525 million before adjustments. It has forty-eight different centres in Australia, the Pacific and South-East Asia, and also offices in the U.K. and the United States. At least four States of Australia have passed legislation specially to assist its endeavours, and the ramifications of B.H.P. decisions and activities spread deep into government policy in many different fields — not only trade and investment, or minerals and energy, but defence, taxation, immigration and aboriginal affairs as well. As sole archivist of this giant enterprise I feel often overwhelmed by the immensity of the potential if not actual archival holdings, frequently despairing of the physical and

monetary problems that impede my work, but *always* exhilarated by the sheer scope and variety of the operations documented — and always convinced of the historical and archival value of the records in my custody.

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Most business archivists are sole archivists, which accounts for some of their problems but not all of them. While being a one-man band, some business archivists are expected to wear two hats — to be records manager, or librarian, or public relations and community involvement advisor as well as archivist. Even dealing with archives alone, the functions of survey and appraisal, disposal, arrangement and description, reference, access, repository management, conservation, preparation of finding aids, policy, and research or even publication — functions which would be spread over a team of people in a public archives institution — are combined in one person in a business archives. Being sole archivist therefore calls for almost impossible versatility. The variety of the work is one of the greatest attractions of such a position, but involves the danger of spreading oneself too thin, or being forced by sheer volume of duties to shelve whole aspects of the job, such as conservation, because one has no expertise in that field, and no time to acquire it.

The benefits of being sole archivist are that one gets a chance, at last, to try out ideas and theories; to plan one's own work schedule; to *not* make the mistakes one has watched other archivists making; and to know the selfish satisfaction as you lock the door on Friday nights that it's all your own work. The drawback is of course that no one really works alone; if there is nobody else one is responsible for, there are always people one is responsible to. And the battles to be fought for status, for legislative protection, for proper channels of communication, for access to departments, for money, for staff, for improved accommodation or facilities — battles waged against higher authority by every archival institution — have to be fought alone.

The first problem one encounters as a sole archivist, and possibly the most enduring one, is isolation from one's colleagues. Membership of an association of archivists is essential for preserving a sense of professional identity, for gaining and exchanging information, for maintaining self-confidence. Otherwise one can be swallowed up by the corporation, getting further and further away from developments in the archival scene, and ending one's days as a company man or woman. I hope the Australian Society of Archivists will be able to rescue archivists in this distressing position, and that local branch meetings will not be too dominated by members of the larger archival institutions.

Training and literature available in this country for intending archivists are poor, generally speaking. For the specialised requirements of the sole archivist creating his own archival institution, they are even worse. I am not reflecting here on the Diploma course in Archives Administration at the University of New South Wales. That is a useful, if broad, introductory training course, but its restriction to Sydney residents robs it of real consideration on the national scene.

My own qualifications are as piecemeal as those of anyone else of my era. I first became an archivist in 1962 — long before the word archives was heard on any campus. I had an informal but thoroughly practical in-service training from Bob Sharman in Queensland, followed by a grudgingly-undertaken Registration Certificate from the Library Association of Australia (so that I could take the three archives units). For several years in Canberra I lectured or tutored Library Diploma students at the College of Advanced Education who were taking the archives elective, and at the same time was an Examiner for the L.A.A. in their Archives Administration paper. I cannot recall from those years any single text which was immediately useful for solving practical problems when I had to develop systems and procedures of my own at B.H.P. I had to fall back on general principles derived from Jenkinson, Schellenberg, Posner, and Muller, Feith and Fruin (which I had been forced to read for the L.A.A. course), and occasional articles in *Business History Review* and the *American Archivist*. I do believe that basic archival principles apply to all archives, whether produced by a public or private administration. The concepts of record group, series, provenance, original order, organic unity, physical and moral defence as enunciated by Jenkinson *et al* are still in my view the best guidelines for arrangement and description of archives.

So a knowledge of classical archival theory, and some years experience with a variety of records, are the best preparation for the sole archivist until a specific training course is devised. Such a course in business archives would need to give advice to students on the best type of finding aids and indexes for a small institution to prepare; on how to deal with a wide variety of non-documentary records; on how to prepare a long-term budget and estimate costs, storage requirements, and shelving capacities; on how to handle conservation problems inexpensively; on how to design forms and essential housekeeping records. Many of these techniques can be learnt on the job. Indeed, most of them have to be, as procedures must be adapted to the records and the needs peculiar to each institution. But mistakes made in identifying a series, or embarking on the wrong kind of inventory or index, are time-consuming to remedy, and of course mistakes involving destruction of records are impossible to rectify. The sole archivist elated at avoiding others' blunders will certainly discover to his discomfort that his own are just as frightful. The one technique no training programme can impart is unfortunately central to the work of a business archivist. That is, how to deal with the organization in order to achieve and defend the integrity of the archives. At what point do you threaten to resign? When do you go over everyone's head to the Chairman of the Board? Who are the most useful allies within the organization? How do you win friends without overloading yourself with work? Which battles can safely be lost without losing the war? This is just personal relationships, a sense of P.R., and determination.

Almost inevitably the organization must be educated as to what archives are. At B.H.P. this took two years to filter through but backsliding still occurs. The most difficult aspects are the ideas that

archives are not necessarily old, and that the single document extracted from the series is meaningless. It takes an equally long time to get across what an archivist does. Management must also be educated as to what basic facilities an archives needs, how many staff and how much work-space. I approached that one cautiously at first, being content to make trenchant remarks and constant requests in half-yearly reports; but I am ever-mindful of advice once given to me that you should achieve most of what you want in the first five years. The role and status of the Archives within the organization is another difficulty. More than that, it is a long, on-going struggle requiring years of patient effort.

How far the business archivist is prepared to push these causes depends mostly on the individual. In the sole archivist situation, more than in any other, the job is what you make it. The limits are of course that management will always see Archives as a service department, and every department's value is balanced against the cost component. Bearing this in mind the archivist can still aim to have his establishment famous throughout the organization for its efficiency and enthusiasm, to have the archives enshrined as a source of corporate pride and prestige in the cold hearts of businessmen!

The single most important dictum for the business archivist to bear in mind is *know the organization*. Since the arrangement of the records is meant to reflect the structure and functions of the creating body, it is essential for the archivist to study the present framework of the company and its administrative history. This can be extremely difficult. Long-established companies invariably undergo certain organizational changes, but these are often dimly perceived by insiders, and totally ignored by outsiders, who are interested in what a company does, not what it is. As an example: prior to the First War the Secretary of B.H.P. was the most important administrator of the company. He held the company together, providing the link between the General Manager, the Directors, and the shareholders. The Directors were non-executive; they were graziers and gentlemen, with other interests besides the company. The General Manager directed the technical aspects of the company, producing the goods and the profits. Before 1900 the General Manager lived in Broken Hill and the Secretary in Melbourne. There were thus two sets of records, but unfortunately only a handful have survived. The General Manager moved to Melbourne as the Broken Hill mine diminished in importance and the steelworks at Newcastle grew. Two separate administrative systems and staffs survived side by side for a few years, with official letters apparently passing across the corridor, but in 1923 the Melbourne office was reorganized, the staffs amalgamated, and the General Manager emerged as the Chief Executive officer of the company, with all branch offices and works under his control. This is quite a fundamental change, and is nowhere clearly documented. Another shake-up occurred in the early 1960's, when the company was organized into vertical divisions such as Steel, Minerals, which applied to all centres, replacing the earlier horizontal system of Headquarters in Melbourne on top and individual works and branches underneath. Fundamental administrative changes alter the character of the records.

It is up to the archivist to discover them, and to work out the implications for his arrangement and description of the archives, and for the style of his inventories.

Deciphering the filing system used is another problem, especially when contemporary indexes and registers of correspondence have not survived. Young companies appear to manage without any system at all. B.H.P. did not adopt a number/subject index before the early 1940s. Correspondence prior to that period was already compiled into new files, and the old covers destroyed, before I arrived, so that I had no chance to look for the file-titles or numbers, and registers of correspondence had been destroyed. This leads me to believe that a professional archivist starting an archives from scratch has a better chance of solving important administrative questions if the records have not been tampered with. It is better to face dirt and disorder and put the pieces together yourself, than to follow in the footsteps of an amateur archivist who has destroyed necessary evidence of record-keeping systems, stripped or amalgamated old files, or made completely new ones either to fit current filing systems or his own canons of historical importance.

It is, sadly, unlikely that eager professional archivists will get first bite of the cherry as far as business archives are concerned. Companies appear firmly wedded to the idea that a company man, preferably one who has spent thirty or forty years in its service, is the best person to organize its 'old records'. They have a point. Long memories can unravel administrative changes and remember key personnel. Unfortunately a company retainer is likely to advocate restrictive access (to protect the company's secrets), and to be biased in favour of the records or department he knows best. If an ex-member of the Correspondence section or Registry, he may ignore accounting records. Again, with the company's interests at heart, he is likely to be impressed by the accountant's or records manager's command to save space, and much material of historical value may be destroyed. Companies are likely to feel the need for the services of a records manager before they recognize the need for an archivist. It is unusual for a company to have, as B.H.P. does, both. In most cases the expense of both officers could not be justified. If both functions are to be combined in one person, it is preferable to have someone who is an archivist at heart, with records management training. There must necessarily be some conflict between the two jobs, since the records manager is under pressure to reduce the bulk of paper, and the archivist is concerned to preserve as much as will provide comprehensive documentation of the organization's activities. Better to have some internal conflict than an externalised conflict between personalities.

This brings us back again to that central point — the place of the archivist within the organization. Ideally, this should be negotiated before one accepts appointment. It is probably more pertinent to the archivist's well-being than salary, which can always be raised later, whereas re-allocating your archives from the aegis of one department to another changes not only who you report to, but which budget you operate under, and all sorts of power struggles and accounting

difficulties may be involved. An archivist needs great and powerful friends, preferably with money. To appear on the organization chart in a central position, and as close to the top as possible is ideal, such as reporting directly to the General Manager or Administration Manager. To be placed as a late-comer under Library, or Registry, or the Economist, may mean that you have last call on financial resources, and are removed from the main channels of authority and communication. This in turn prevents you from issuing general directives to all other departments, or gaining entry to departmental hiding-places for records. A separate budget for capital expenditure on archives should also be negotiated beforehand, so that you can depend on, and plan for, independent resources. It also confers department status. Annual or half-yearly reports should be provided by the archivist, even if they are not asked for. These are a chore to prepare, but statements of number of files issued, footage of new material, number of enquiries attended to, and shelf-area of records processed will not fail to impress somebody. The report protects the sole archivist from charges of idleness, it provides a lever under requests for more money, and best of all it performs an educative function, since it sets out plainly and in businesslike terms what exactly an archivist does do.

As to the first action a company archivist should take: you can be outwitted or bulldozed on all other points, but you must gain as soon as possible the final say in destruction of records. And get that in writing. Nothing should be destroyed without the archivist's approval. If you have this authority you can feel assured that nothing of value will be lost during the months or years you may need to survey departmental records, draw up disposal schedules, compile file indexes, or gain accommodation or staff. One should also aim for automatic and regular transfer of material of archival status to the archives, and for the right of refusal of documents which you do not consider worth housing but others may. Otherwise you are manoeuvred into the position of grateful receiver of crumbs from the table.

What documents should the business archivist keep? Despite varieties to be found in company structure and activity, the hard core of a business archives should be common to all types:

- Memoranda and Articles of Association (with any amendments)
- Prospectuses
- Registers of Directors
- Registers of shareholders
- Annual reports and balance sheets
- Minutes of shareholders meetings
- Minutes of Directors meetings
- Minutes of policy committees e.g. Finance, Management
- Ledgers
- Taxation papers

These are the skeletal framework of the company archives, the evidence of a company's legal and financial existence. To these must be added the flesh and muscle of each department. Merely as examples of different types of records, I could mention:

- Departmental reports
- Organization charts
- Estimate as well as actual budgets
- Long term planning budgets, with working papers
- Census returns
- Patents and agreements
- Personnel files
- Training programmes and manuals
- Payroll summaries, and perhaps timesheets
- Price lists and catalogues
- Sales charts and budgets
- Pricing policy memoranda
- Consultants' reports
- P.R. publications and advertising samples
- Technical data re plant and equipment
- Departmental correspondence
- Internal memoranda.

The last three items pose the greatest problems of bulk and appraisal.

It has been estimated by one writer that only some 2% - 5% of a company's records are worthy of permanent preservation. Of this small percentage it is estimated that perhaps 80% would issue from the Secretary's Department, 10% from Finance, 5% from other Head Office departments, and 5% from plants, regional offices, and discontinued divisions. These latter percentages do not tally with my experience, but I would not argue with the overall 2% - 5%. So much of company documentation is concerned with routine business dealing with clients — with orders, receipts, invoices, lading bills, weighbridge dockets, vouchers, requisitions. While the application of the computer to historical or economic research has possibly enabled ingenious use to be made of these and other routine records, the archivist should not shrink from the decision to destroy such material after statutory requirements are fulfilled. This must be done if the archives are to be kept to a realistic size. The alternative — the creation of a monster archive by a non-selective archivist — may persuade Management that an Archives is an uneconomic proposition, and after dismissing the archivist or his advice, destruction will then be much more ruthless. A basic test for material of great bulk and doubtful value might be — is the information preserved elsewhere in summary, or otherwise more amenable, form?

Company archives may have to contend with one controversial series — the so-called 'private' records of executives. These, because of their confidential nature, may be exempted from usual Registry filing and supervision. Indeed, at B.H.P. they have virtually their own filing system. They comprise correspondence on company matters with both company centres and non-company persons; 'personal' correspondence on non-company matters; confidential reports from various sources; and internal memoranda to and from other executives. Each executive has a secretary who jealously guards her master's records, and is answerable only to him. Great debates have ensued at B.H.P. over whether these records are really archives — they are

in fact housed in Archives and processed by me. I have always insisted that they are, because of the importance of the subject-matter, and the impossibility of dividing an officer's private and public duties when so much business is done by personal contact. The opposition tends to shift ground on the argument, so that sometimes executives' records are archives (when they need the physical security of Archives, and the services of the archivist for listing, retrieving, and disposing), and sometimes they aren't (when the archivist complains of lack of space and the solution is seen as removing something from Archives rather than providing a larger area). The tiny proportion of truly personal letters in these files is a convenient peg on which to hang the private-not-official argument, which is ridiculous when these officers are the corporation's decision-makers.

Company archives also have to contend with varieties of non-documentary records which have not yet found their way into larger repositories, or at least not as such a large proportion of the total holdings. These include tapes and sound recordings, films, photographs, slides, glass negatives, maps and engineering drawings, models and samples of products — artifacts of all kinds — and a wide variety of printed ephemera of a publicity nature. Computer tapes and microfilm may also be included, depending on the size of the company and the facilities in the Archives for safe storage and use of these materials. As in all archives institutions, these latter will need increasing consideration in the future.

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The position of lone archivist applies to many situations other than companies. Universities, hospitals, schools, historical societies, trade unions, city councils, do or could employ archivists. During the last twenty-five years these positions have been rare in the Australian archives world, but are likely to grow in numbers and importance in the future. Certainly, of the last eleven archival positions I have noted with some interest publicly advertised over the last three years, nine have entailed establishing an archives and operating it alone. A growing band of sole archivists, like single parents, may feel the need to establish therapeutic contact with each other as well as with more fortunate archivists. It would be helpful to the sole archivist if the A.S.A. allotted more time in its journal, its branch discussion-groups, and its national conferences to the problems peculiar to his situation. Training courses should similarly make special efforts to prepare future candidates for jobs of this nature. It is also important to seek out the men and women promoted (or demoted) to Archives from within their own organization, who are struggling to master archival problems without previous training or experience. These people should be encouraged to join our groups, to talk about their problems, and to give us the benefits of their insights, in exchange for our knowledge or advice.

Being sole archivist is no job for the faint-hearted. It will not suit the quiet archivist who likes to be left alone with his records. The one-man archives will prove to be a frantically busy place, and its quietness may well be needed as solace for rebuffs from, or preparation for battle with, an indifferent or unsympathetic administration.