

Securities, Whisky, Tourism and Co-operation: Business Archives in Scotland at the end of the Twentieth Century

Lesley Richmond

Lesley Richmond graduated from the University of Edinburgh with an honours degree in Scottish Historical Studies. She subsequently worked for the Business Archives Council surveying corporate records and then as an in-house corporate archivist before becoming Deputy Archivist at Glasgow University in 1987. She is currently Acting Director of Archive Services and is Secretary of the International Council on Archives Section on Business and Labour Archives, sits on the National Council of Archives (NCA), participates on the Research Libraries Group EAD Advisory Group and has published extensively in the field of business archives and has been instrumental in the introduction of the EAD in the United Kingdom.

Introduction

Scotland is a very small nation on the rim of Western Europe. Its contribution to the world of business at the end of the twentieth century is in financial services, the drinks industry and tourism. However its industrial past is one of great economic successes. It was the centre of one of the most advanced and prosperous industrial economies of the nineteenth century. In 1914 it was one of the leading centres of heavy engineering in the world. The names of many of its once highly successful companies are still renowned in 1999. The modern Scottish business manager, however, does not want to look to the past, they do not believe that they can afford the luxury of heritage as they try to survive in a modern business climate. However business archives are very much alive in Scotland and much of it is concentrated at Glasgow University Archives & Business Records Centre (the Centre)¹, in the heart of a region that was once 'the workshop of the British Empire'.

Glasgow University Archives & Business Records Centre, operating within an environment of limited state and institutional support, attempts to market business archives to the creator of the records, the businesses themselves and to the users of business records, historians and other researchers. The tenets of good archive theory are followed - business records belong with the business which created them; companies should exploit their archives; companies should appoint an archivist and set up archive programmes. In practice, however, these ideals are rarely achieved because of the environment within which the Centre operates, often the only achievement being to persuade a company that its records are of historical value, to others, if not to themselves. In 1999 six companies² in Scotland have archive programmes and professional archivists managing their archives, which represents a doubling of numbers in the last five years, while other companies have attempted to make some archive provision in-house for their records. Although the Centre houses a collection of internationally acclaimed business records the academic usage of the collections is low.

The Business Records Centre at Glasgow University was not originally planned as a regional/national record repository for business records but that is what it has become. It now contains one of the largest dedicated collections of business records in Europe. Its development, current operation and guiding philosophies are the themes which this article will explore.

History of Glasgow University Archives & Business Records Centre

The decision to establish a Business Records Centre at Glasgow University was not taken by the University Archives. Like many other special collections held by universities world wide, the Centre was established by an academic department concerned to collect the raw materials on which its future research would be based. In the late 1950s the first Professor of Economic History, Sydney Checkland, arrived in Glasgow from Cambridge. He decided to adopt a strategy to provide projects and source material for his post-graduates and research staff. He canvassed moral and financial support and in 1959 the Glasgow Senior and Junior Chamber of Commerce endowed a Lectureship in Business History. Part of the remit of the post holder was to survey the records of businesses in Glasgow and the west of Scotland, many of whose origins went back to the beginning of industrialisation in the region. Gradually many of these collections came into the Department, especially after the recession hit the west of Scotland in the 1960s. As the collections grew, space became a problem and, after the collapse of Upper Clyde Shipbuilders in the 1970s, the University Archives took over the management of the collections. Since then the Centre has grown dramatically in size, operation and direction.

Current position of the Centre

The Business Records Centre today is housed in a converted flour mill, and has over 450 business collections, held in proper environmental conditions, containing the records of over 1000 companies, occupying nearly 8 kilometres of shelving, with search room and other facilities. The collections cover nearly every aspect of industrial and commercial activity in the west of Scotland since the middle of the eighteenth century. Its collection of shipbuilding records is unrivalled and includes those of John Brown, builders of the *Queen Elizabeth* and *Queen Mary*. It is very strong in heavy engineering records, reflecting the industrial heritage of the region, and these include the records of the North British Locomotive Co, which in 1903 operated the largest locomotive factory in the world - bigger than Baldwins in the US, Mirrlees Watson & Co, sugar machinery manufacturers, and Babcock & Wilcox Ltd, boilermakers. It also holds the records of the House of Fraser Group which includes material from department stores, such as Harrods and Army & Navy, located throughout the UK; James Finlay & Sons, East India merchants; the Gourrock Ropework Co (which includes the records of the Robert Owen's New Lanark Mills, the utopian industrial concern of the late eighteenth century); J & P Coats, thread manufacturers to the world; Anchor Line and Ellerman Line, ship owners; HarperCollins Publishers; whisky companies such as Allied Distillers, producers of such brands as *Ballantines*, *Teachers* and *Long John*; confectioners; investment trusts; paint manufacturers; agricultural merchants; racecourse owners; furniture manufacturers; salvagers; insurance companies; and many, many more.

The Centre holds business records dating from the 1730s until the 1990s. Approximately 80 per cent of the collections are of companies which are defunct and 20 per cent of companies which are still trading. In terms of shelf metrage the split is nearer 50/50. A great deal of the original acquisition of material was done with the liquidators of companies; but in recent years more deposits have been received from live companies, whose directors acknowledge that the records of their company may be of historical value, but can see no commercial sense in employing an archivist or expending large sums of money in their preservation. Where possible financial assistance for the maintenance of such records is negotiated with the companies. In reality this is not a fee for maintaining a collection but a donation. There is always a risk that the company will cease to pay for a number of reasons - it has hit lean times, it has diversified away from its original business or has reduced its activities, or its directors are no longer convinced of the necessity of paying for the upkeep of its records. In such cases when the company cannot be convinced of the vital importance of the

collection to itself, the region, country or indeed the world, then the loss of income is absorbed and the collection re-appraised.

Collecting strategies: theory and practice

The acquisition policy of the Centre is: 'to collect records relating to business (broadly conceived) in the west of Scotland, including records of business elsewhere, where the main centre of activity is/was in the west of Scotland, or where there is no other appropriate local or national repository.' The lack of appropriate local or national repositories has been a problem for many years and continues today. In the UK, and in Scotland in particular, many local repositories are either too small to take a large business collection or lack staff expertise to cope with such deposit. The problem of finding a place of deposit for the records of a large company when it ceases to trade or wishes to dispose of its archives is often immense. Where can its records go? Where is their 'natural home'? British archivists have been guilty of ignoring the problem until faced with a particular instance and then letting crisis management take over. This does mean that collections of business records are at risk of destruction.

During the last six years, the Centre has been involved with two major British companies of international repute which decided that their in-house company archives were no longer of any interest to them as they were no longer part of their core operations. The collections came to the Centre, partly, but by no means solely, because of the very large quantity of material involved.

Access policy

The Centre is open to all who wish to consult the records, such as academics and students of Glasgow and other Universities, depositors and general members of the public. As far as possible non-restrictive deposit agreements are negotiated with companies as there is no point in storing records that no one is allowed to consult. However, in some cases access to records is by written application to the company concerned.

The collections are catalogued for quick and easy access by company, academic and public researchers alike. Collections are listed by company and, within each company, records are arranged by record series within functional activities. Where collections are in heavy demand, such as the Army & Navy gun books, North British Locomotive plans, ship photographs etc., databases have been compiled to help identify specific information quickly. A summary guide of fond level descriptions of the Centre's holdings is being marked up in the EAD (Encoded Archival Description)³ and

mounted on the web in both XML and HTML. Archival Authority Records are also being created for the corporate record creating entities.

Users of business archives

Academic business historians make up a very small proportion, about, 10%, of the researchers who use the Centre's facilities. The vast majority of users are genealogists, family historians, students doing project work, the media, heritage professionals, model makers and other enthusiasts interested in such topics as transport, labour, design, technology, shipwrecks, agriculture, architecture, and housing. As far as possible, depositing companies are encouraged to remain in close contact with their records but the use that companies make of their collections varies greatly. For some companies this only involves sending all their historical enquiries to the Centre while for others major research is undertaken for them, ranging from histories of brands or particular factory locations, markets etc. to full-blown histories. The Centre co-operates fully with company historians, and helps plan exhibitions, centenary events, videos, etc.

Some initiatives have been very successful. One of the most successful being the Scottish Brewing Archive (SBA) which offers a solution to companies unable or unwilling to maintain their own archive facilities: get together and act co-operatively. The Scottish Brewing Archive was set up in 1982 by the Scottish brewing industry to bring together and safeguard the industry's archives which, during a period of brewery closures, were in danger of being lost forever. An archive trust was formed by representatives of the companies that make an annual financial contribution to the upkeep of the archives. This includes the salary of a professional archivist who also carries out research on behalf of the industry and members of the public. Originally based in Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, SBA moved to the Business Records Centre in 1991, and has thrived in its new home. The Archive contains the records of 66 brewing companies and consists of 200 metres of records and over 100 metres of bottles, pub signs and other artefacts of the industry. The records, photographs, labels and bottle collections are in great demand from the media, advertising agents, TV & film companies and beer enthusiasts. A biannual *Newsletter* is issued to Friends of the Archive and an annual *Journal* is produced. The Scottish brewing industry contracted dramatically and is now numerically small. No one, or perhaps only one, member of the surviving industry could justify the cost of an archivist or proper archive premises but as a group they have the service of a professional archivist and researcher and their records are preserved under proper archival conditions. The largest two brewing companies, one of which is now the major UK player, use the archivist of

the Scottish Brewing Archive as they would their own company archivist. The Archive has been used to research and supply photographs for heritage/visitor centres, for researching ideas for new advertising campaigns, labels, brand names, company histories, etc. and the Archivist of the Brewing Archive has a regular feature in one company's PR newsletters and has regular exhibitions at the head offices at one of the others. About 50 per cent of enquiries received by the Archive originate from the brewing industry which contrasts dramatically with the rest of the Business Records Centre where approximately over 5 per cent of enquiries originate from the depositing companies.

Archival co-operation

The one element that marks out activities at Glasgow University is co-operation with other bodies in the field. Several other repositories in the west of Scotland also collect business records and there is good collaboration with them and the National Archives office in Edinburgh over the rescuing and acquisition of business records. During the early 1990s the Survey of Scottish Architectural Practices was established as a collaborative venture, based in Glasgow University Archives & Business Records Centre, and resulted in a very successful comprehensive survey and rescue of the records of Scottish architects, the first of its kind in Europe. The profession had undergone a period of disruption caused by amalgamations and office closures and large accumulations of records and drawings were in danger of destruction. A joint project was undertaken, managed by Historic Scotland, the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, Glasgow University Archives and the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments in Scotland, and funded by these bodies and several charitable trusts. The project surveyed the surviving records of architectural and related practices throughout Scotland; advising architects of the historical importance of their holdings; advising on preservation; arranging for deposits, 70 cubic metres to date with more still in private hands, and gaining an expertise and creating a methodology which has been adopted internationally.

However, it is the support given to and the involvement of Glasgow University Archives with the Business Archives Council of Scotland (BACS) which has proved the most successful co-operative venture in preserving business records. The Council is a registered charity formed in 1960 by a group of businessmen, lawyers, accountants, librarians and university personnel (both historians and archivists) with, 'the aim of encouraging the preservation and study of archives which bear on the history of commercial and industrial enterprises'. The Council in its early years worked closely with the first University Lecturer in Business History, Peter Payne, who

undertook a survey of industrial businesses in the west of Scotland. It was assumed that this survey would only take two years to complete but it continues today. The results of the original survey were published in 1967 in *Studies in Scottish Business History* (Cass), one of the earliest examples of a guide to collections of business records in any country. Peter Payne listed the records of 155 businesses which he tracked down in national or local record offices or held in private hands. Of the fifty collections of business records which were held privately, all of them are now deposited in a record repository which demonstrates the value of survey work, not just as a record of what exists but also as a marker to the owner as to the interest in, and historical value of, what they hold.

Since 1978 when the national archives office, then known as the Scottish Record Office, first made a grant-in-aid available to the Council, which is matched pound for pound by Scottish businesses the Council has been able to employ its own surveying officer based in the Business Records Centre. So forty years on from Peter Payne's pioneering work, surveys continue to be undertaken throughout Scotland; advice is given to companies on the preservation of their records; and archives are rescued from destruction when factories close, offices move or a liquidator is appointed and efforts are made to place them in the most appropriate record repository.

Not surprisingly, because of the large concentration of businesses in the west of Scotland, the percentage of deposits which are passed to the Business Records Centre via the BACS Surveying Officer is high (60%). Lists of historically valuable records are produced and with the company's permission are made available to researchers. Both the company and potential researchers, therefore, are made aware of historically valuable material. Companies of all sizes are approached, by region, or industry and there is still plenty of work to be done. Where it is justified the Surveyor tries to persuade the company to appoint its own full or part-time archivist or suggests that the Council undertakes to carry out housekeeping duties in respect of a company's records on an annual basis. Over the last ten years the number of companies requesting record management advice has increased, especially in the financial sector.

Conclusion

Glasgow University Archives & Business Records Centre acts as a national repository for private business records in Scotland. Its growth has been determined by the business and industry in the west of Scotland. It has been shaped by the conditions in which it found itself - a large industrial base with international connections but now in rapid terminal decline. It

has proved successful in operating in a mixed economy of dead and living companies, of being a corporate records centre and an archive repository. It straddles the world of the corporate archive and the research repository promoting the preservation and use of business records by all types of users: from the corporate to the general public not forgetting the academics and students completing their class work, the original reason for its establishment.

Endnotes:

1. See URL <http://www.archives.gla.ac.uk>
2. Three banks, two whisky companies and one owner, custodian and manager of the built cultural heritage.
3. For further information see article by D Pitti in D-Lib Magazine, November 1999 entitled 'Encoded Archival Description: An Introduction and Overview' URL <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/november 99/11pitti.html>