

# ‘HISTORY IN FIRMS’ DOCUMENTS’: 75 YEARS OF THE BUSINESS ARCHIVES COUNCIL<sup>1</sup>

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In June 1934 a letter appeared in *The Times* newspaper headed ‘History in firms’ documents. Preservation of records. New council formed’. The letter was signed by a group of eminent names and it announced the establishment of the Council for the Preservation of Business Archives (CPBA). Later, this slightly cumbersome title was dropped in favour of the now familiar Business Archives Council (BAC). During the intervening decades there have undoubtedly been vicissitudes in the fortunes of the organisation but 75 years later, and the BAC is still actively promoting the preservation and use of business records. While the story of the Council has before featured in issues of this journal, the last major review appeared in 1984 on the occasion of the BAC’s fiftieth anniversary.<sup>2</sup> It is likely that newer members will neither have access to these journals, nor indeed might they be aware of how the Council came into being, how it has developed, and how it has been at the forefront of activity in the business archives field. This piece is thus intended both to remind and to update. It is also the opportunity to celebrate 75 years of the Council’s existence. Finally, it is appropriate that such an article should be printed, coincidentally in the one-hundredth issue of the BAC’s journal *Business Archives*.

## Origins

As the incoming President Professor Peter Mathias pointed out in a speech marking the golden jubilee of the Council in 1984, most accounts of the origins of the BAC start with that letter to *The Times* ‘as though this indisputably set the seal upon the event and provided at the same time incontrovertible evidence for the historian’.<sup>3</sup> As Matthias relates, a great deal had in fact happened during the years prior to 1934 which goes a long way towards explaining the appearance of that critical letter in *The Times*. It is worth recapping this situation.

First, it should be remembered that archives, business or otherwise, were hardly developed in the sense that we know today. There was particular concern about records that were held privately. One extremely

important initiative was the campaign launched by Lord Hanworth, who was the Master of the Rolls, to rescue manorial records which were under great threat of destruction. This scheme was one of the factors that led to the establishment of the British Records Association (BRA) in 1932, with the aim of storing and preserving all types of historical records, but again especially those in private hands. Arguably the leading light behind the BRA was its Honorary Secretary Hilary Jenkinson, later Deputy Keeper of the Public Records. Jenkinson was also the author of the seminal *Manual of archive administration*, and a notable figure in the emerging archive profession.<sup>4</sup> He was to provide much assistance to the CPBA in its early years. At its inception the BRA decided that the Master of the Rolls should, *ex officio*, be the organisation's President and so Hanworth assumed the role.

Another strand in the story was the growing interest in business history. The United States was in the lead here with the Business History Society being formed in 1926. In Britain, an increasing number of monographs were appearing either about the history of businesses, or about industrial sectors. The majority of these were penned by economic historians: economic history itself being a discipline which was emerging as a significant area of study. These books were mainly concerned with the industries of the industrial revolution such as textiles, coal, iron and steel. By this time some businesses, for instance in the banking sector, were marking their centenaries and this resulted in histories being written. What all of this had highlighted were the shortcomings in the coverage and availability of business records. Clearly action was required and academics started to make their concerns known. Mathias' assessment is that the initiative came mainly from economic historians, with the London School of Economics (LSE) as the main origin of pressure.

Before turning to the role of the LSE, it should first be noted that when George Clark, Chichele Professor of Economic History at Oxford, gave his inaugural lecture in January 1932 he spent some time talking about business history and drew attention to the fact that the destruction of 'superficially unattractive papers' needed to be prevented. He noted that Britain was behind other countries in this endeavour, 'but we have made a beginning and the time has come for pressing on with the work.'<sup>5</sup> Six months later and at the LSE, Professor of Economic History, Eileen Power, wrote a paper which argued for the establishment of a 'Committee for the study and preservation of London business archives'. Power wanted to draw up a register covering the archives of London businesses, and to establish a depository. This was seen as being analogous to the scheme

which Hanworth had been pressing for manorial records. It was suggested that the proposals should be discussed by a group of interested parties including academics and the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records. The memorandum was sent to the LSE's Director, Sir William Beveridge and evidently convinced by the arguments he secured high-level agreement within the LSE to pursue the matter. In addition, the School would be able to meet any expenses. Beveridge also canvassed support from some of the LSE's Governors who had business links. Foremost amongst these was Sir Josiah Stamp, who was Chairman of the London, Midland and Scottish Railway (LMS).<sup>6</sup>

The following year, in February 1933, a meeting took place at the LSE, and chaired by Beveridge. Here it was decided: that the register of archives should not be limited to London businesses; that the new body should be called 'The Council for the Preservation of Business Archives'; that the support of Hanworth should be enlisted; and that there should be a link with the BRA. By the summer of 1933 everything was apparently in place for the launch, but this was then severely delayed because the negotiations with the BRA became bogged-down. Although the BRA and the putative archives body were intended to come together, they never did, for reasons which are not entirely clear. In many respects the objectives of the two organisations would have seemed to have dovetailed well, and the BRA offered a domicile and administrative structure. For its part the BRA was wary about any proliferation in the number of small representative groups in the field: it wanted business archives to be a section of the BRA, and come under the control of its ruling Council. But the CPBA was perhaps reluctant to be subsumed, with the consequent loss of its specific remit. As Clark was later to explain in this journal, 'We were afraid however that we should be drawn into other activities far outside our strictly limited aims.' He went on to add, in an observation that some might feel sympathy with today, 'We were all busy university teachers, and we did not want to be involved in any more committee meetings or correspondence than was necessary.'<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it was still the case that in 1934 the future relationship with the BRA seemingly remained unresolved, and at the announcement of the launch it was still anticipated that some union between the two might take place. If Clark is correct there may have been little appetite for this, and the CPBA was more than happy to operate as an independent organisation with clear and limited functions. This has proved to be a tenet that has remained strong over much of the Council's history.

The culmination of the story came in May 1934, when a larger, and

public, meeting was called in order to launch the CPBA. It was this meeting that marked the real beginning of the Council. Although not everyone was present, there were 39 founder members comprising academics, librarians, and businessmen. Although the academics were predominant amongst the supporters of the fledgling Council, there was also an important input from business, something which has been stressed by John Wadsworth. For example, representatives from some high-profile companies were invited to the launch, and there were seven business leaders amongst the founding members, including Arnold Power of WH Smith, and Arthur Tweed of Twinings (Tweed was quickly replaced by Stephen Twining).<sup>8</sup>

One of the issues agreed at the meeting in May was the text of a letter to *The Times* and this duly appeared in June. It was signed by an impressive and influential group of people: Stanley Baldwin, a past and a future Prime Minister; Lord Davies, and of course, Lord Hanworth; bankers, F.C. Goodenough (Barclays), Edward Hoare (Hoare's), and Herbert Lawrence (Glyn Mills); and Josiah Stamp, who, as noted above, was Chairman of the LMS. The remainder of the signatories were academics: Beveridge and Clark continued their support, while the others were John Clapham (Professor of Economic History at Cambridge), A.F. Pollard (Director of the Institute of Historical Research), and Arthur Redford (Reader in Economic History at Victoria University, Manchester). The first officers of the CPBA were Hanworth, who was President, Clark as Chairman, and Hoare as the Treasurer.<sup>9</sup>

The letter pointed out that there was a scarcity of one of the most important classes of documentary evidence: the records of business and firms. There were several reasons for this including that of shortage of space in offices. Where records did survive, they often remained inaccessible. The purpose of the new association, the letter continued, was with the co-operation of businesses and families, to gather information about the existence of records and to prevent the further destruction of papers which were likely to be of interest to historians. How would this be achieved? The first object of the Council was: 'to map out the ground by compiling a register of all business records over 100 years old'.<sup>10</sup> This was to be done by questionnaires and it was intended that the Council might offer help in exploring and classifying papers. In cases where the destruction was a consequence of a lack of space, then it was the aim of the Council to make arrangements for records to be deposited in public libraries or other institutions. Furthermore the Council could offer expert advice in cases where firms were unsure about which records should be

preserved.

The early years of the Council were far from easy. There was a shortage of resources which meant that activities were highly circumscribed. Nonetheless, the plight of business records had been raised, and a start was made on compiling the 'register of archives': the survey of London business houses was apparently two-thirds complete by 1937. After only five years of existence the war intervened and unsurprisingly, there were greater priorities. The register was moved to Oxford for safe-keeping. Clark records that the Master of Nuffield College, where the register was kept, had peremptorily dismissed these 'societies for preserving the junk of the past'.<sup>11</sup>

In the immediate post-war period there was little change in the fortunes of the Council and activity was somewhat muted. The name of the organisation was formally changed to the Business Archives Council in 1952, though evidently this more convenient form had been in use for some years. Membership numbers remained fairly static during the first 20 years of the Council's life: membership was by invitation only and the original 39 had increased to just 50 or so by the mid-1950s. Thereafter a rapid rise in members occurred, thanks largely to the efforts of Stephen Twining who was instrumental in securing the support of a wider business and institutional base. Although Twining died in 1960, the expansion continued apace so that by 1965 there were more than 260 members, the overwhelming majority being firms and institutions. Banks still provided the bulk of income, but nonetheless there was a broadening of the corporate coverage with firms such as Boots, Courtaulds, and Reckitt and Colman joining. The successful attraction of new recruits was undoubtedly an impressive achievement, yet all was not well. Appropriately enough events came to a head in 1968: a year characterised by student unrest and protest. For the BAC it was not quite a 'Paris spring', but there was certainly a revolution and that year marked a turning point in the Council's history.

### **1968: revolution in the air**

Despite the increase in membership and the consequent additional income that this generated, there was also dissatisfaction in some quarters. To some at least the BAC was an increasingly moribund organisation: the Executive Committee had met only three times in two years; communication was far from effective. The 'journal' was a cursory and thin affair. Academics who, as we have seen, had been at the forefront of the Council in the early years, were unimpressed that its potential was not being fulfilled. Archivists too

were experiencing disquiet. The simple version of this story is that at the Annual General Meeting in July 1968, presided over by the Council's President Lord Denning, the honorary officers and most of the executive were ousted and replaced by new blood. This fails to do justice to the full drama of episode. It fell to a small group of business archivists to don the mantle of revolutionaries, with the figure of Len McDonald, the Archivist at Pilkington as the leader. Yet it was an entirely peaceful revolution, albeit at 28 votes to 25, a close vote. Much of this untold story was revealed in the tribute to Len in Issue 95 of this journal in 2008, to which readers are referred. There can be little argument with the conclusion of Edwin Green's 'historical note' that this was indeed 'a pivotal moment' in the history of the BAC.<sup>12</sup>

In the decades following the 'coup' the BAC expanded its work in a number of significant ways: the Council undertook survey and advisory work; the conference became a key date in the diary of business archivists; the journal was revitalised; the Wadsworth Prize for business history was inaugurated. All this activity took place against the backdrop of a greater prominence for business archives and an increasing number of what could be termed specifically business archivists: it may even have contributed to the growth.

The original founders of the Council would surely have approved of the survey and advisory work that has been undertaken as part of the expansion of activities since the late-1960s. A number of important surveys of business records have been carried out under the auspices of the Council. These include banking (Alison Turton and John Orbell), brewing (Lesley Richmond and Alison Turton), chartered accountants (Wendy Habgood), pharmaceuticals (Lesley Richmond, Alison Turton and Julie Stevenson), shipbuilding (Alex Ritchie), and veterinary medicine (Pamela Hunter). The results of this work have been published for the benefit of researchers. Another important survey was that of the archives of 1,000 of the oldest registered companies in Britain undertaken by Lesley Richmond and Bridget Stockford, and later Richmond and Turton produced a directory of corporate archives.<sup>14</sup> The BAC has also published *Managing business archives* edited by Turton and John Orbell's *A guide to tracing the history of a business*.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the survey work during these years the Council was also active in providing advice to companies about archives, and in rescuing business records that were under threat. There were some notable successes in this area: Lloyds of London, Fyffes, Unigate, Chubb, and the Port of London to name but a few. It is worth reiterating that such

activity was central to the establishment of the Council in the first place and that this work has continued to be one of its central objectives. Indeed in the present economic climate the need for it remains as great as ever.

As well as identifying and rescuing records, the Council has undoubtedly made an enormous contribution towards encouraging and fostering the increased number of specialist business archivists. Indeed many of those employed on the survey and advisory work have gone on to become leading lights in the sector. The BAC has been involved in organising training courses in pursuit of these aims. Just as important have been the annual conferences. These were started by Tom Ingram and David Avery in the late 1960s and have served to highlight what has been happening in the sector. While the format and content of the conferences have changed according to contemporary trends and interests, the essential benefits to those attending remain, not least that of meeting other business archivists and those using business records.

Another visible sign of the BAC's work during these years was the enhancement of its journal, *Business Archives*. Until the end of the 1960s it was little more than a newsletter. At this point Richard Storey became the Editor and *Business Archives* became something altogether more serious. While there later followed the inevitable trials and tribulations of production, including the publication of only a single issue per year from the mid-1970s into the 1980s, by 1987 the situation was such that *Business Archives* was split into two titles *Principles and Practice* (BAPP, appearing in May), and *Sources and History* (BASH, appearing in November). Up until 1987 Richard Storey, Richard Wilson, Philip Cottrell, John Armstrong and John Orbell had spells in the editorial chair. Following the split, *Principles and Practice* has been edited by Alison Turton, Serena Kelly, Lucy Jones, and Valerie Johnson, while *Sources and History* has been under the charge of Phil Ollerenshaw, John Davies, Lucy Newton, and Brad Beaven. Mariam Yamin and Mike Anson are currently in charge of BAPP and BASH respectively. The other outputs of the Council include the quarterly Newsletter, and in more recent years the website.

The Council has also sought to encourage researchers to use business records. This has been achieved in several ways. In the early 1990s the 'Business History Research Fund' was established thanks to donations from Sir Peter Thompson, the Chairman of the National Freight Corporation, and the Wellcome Trust. In recent years the Bursary has assisted scholars embarking upon their academic careers, with the results of the research published in BASH. It has also meant that previously unused sources for

business history have been utilised and highlighted. It may well be the case that there are too many literary awards, but the prominence of the BAC Wadsworth Prize cannot be denied. Martin vander Weyer recently noted in *The Spectator* magazine that the Wadsworth ‘may not yet be as celebrated as the Booker or the Whitbread, but it richly deserves to be’.<sup>16</sup> The background is that John Wadsworth was an economist by training, but was also the co-author of a history of the Midland Bank: this work *A hundred years of joint stock banking* was a pioneering work in banking history. Wadsworth served in many capacities on the BAC Council for over 40 years and to mark his retirement in 1977 his colleagues formulated an idea which resulted in the awarding of an annual prize for the outstanding contribution to British business history. The Prize has now been awarded on 31 occasions and the list of winners reads like a ‘who’s who’ of business history. It is a sign of the standing of the Wadsworth that an impressive range of contributors could be put together for a special issue of *Business Archives* to mark 30 years of the prize.<sup>17</sup>

### **Retrenchment and resurgence**

The Council continued to pursue all of these various activities through the final decades of the twentieth century. However, problems were also beginning to surface and by the early years of the twenty-first century, it was clear that the Council, like many small charities, faced serious financial difficulties which required urgent thought about the Council’s mode of operation. Costs were exceeding income by a considerable margin and the consequence was that in the financial year 2001/02 there was a deficit of £17,000. It was a situation that was likely to continue without drastic action. The principal manifestation of this was the decision to close the BAC’s staffed office in London, something which accounted for a large proportion of the annual outgoings. It was also necessary to find a new home for the Library, and this was eventually transferred to the Centre for Business History at the University of Glasgow. Another element of the rescue package was that the Trustees were determined that, despite having to continue operating on a much reduced basis, the core activities should be maintained. This has required much in the way of voluntary input from Trustees in order to ensure that this has been able to be achieved. The advent of a new slimmed-down BAC coincided with an influx of new Trustees and the Council has been able to continue the core activities such as the conference, journals, newsletter, and now of course a website, while pursuing new initiatives such as the National Strategy for Business

Archives. The impact of the recent financial crisis has demonstrated once again the need for the championing of business archives, just as there had been in the 1930s.

Arguably the most significant event since the restructuring of BAC's operations, and one of the most important in the Council's history, was the launch of the National Strategy for Business Archives in the summer of 2009. There has been a lengthy gestation period for this, but it has long been an aspiration. There is still much to be done in this direction, but hopefully future history of the BAC will be able to judge that the strategy was a success. The document was unveiled at the House of Lords in July 2009 and keynote speakers included the Governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, Chairman and Chief Executive of Marks and Spencer, Sir Stuart Rose, and former Head of MI5 (and one-time archivist) Dame Stella Rimmington. While undoubtedly an enjoyable and successful event which attracted much positive publicity in the national media, this was only the beginning. Much of the work of the Council in the coming years will be directed towards the implementation of the Strategy.

### **Presidential reflections**

There has been a fruitful association between the Council and the Twining family. Stephen Twining had long been interested in business archives and had written a history of his family firm, *250 years of tea and coffee*, published in 1956. He was one of the earliest members of the Council and his interest was passed to his son, Sam Twining, who joined the BAC Executive Committee in 1968 and four years later became Chair. In 1995 he took over as President, a position he held until stepping down in 2008. Delegates at the BAC Annual Conference that year were treated to his reflections on the changing face of business archives.<sup>18</sup> The story described in this article will be a familiar one to Sam. His memories of the BAC go back to the mid-1950s when he had just joined Twinings and the Council was run from a small room at the top of Twinings' offices.

Sam noted a number of features about the BAC which bear repetition because they offer some insight into the nature of the Council and why it has survived all these years. First, was the remarkable level of loyalty of the membership with many long-term supporters: the average span of paying members was 24 years, and 35 per cent had joined in the 1970s or earlier. As Sam remarked, this was surely a result of a real community of interests in the field. Second, Sam highlighted the continuity of service of the honorary officers which had aided clarity and consistency. As he is only too

well aware, this is not something that is always present in the voluntary sector. As an aside, this author has been delighted to find that he is only the latest of a number of staff from the Bank of England to have served on the Executive. Third, is the fact that the BAC is a broad church which has been able to accommodate business people, archivists, and researchers, from all manner of organisations. Finally, and this takes us back to the origins of the Council, the BAC possess a very strong sense of identity and purpose. For these reasons, Sam was optimistic about the future.

### **Final remarks**

While a few names have been mentioned in the course of this article, it by no means a comprehensive treatment, and nor is it intended to be. Perhaps at some stage in the future a fuller account might rectify this. Suffice to say that over the years many people have given their time to the Council in varying ways and it is appropriate to thank them all here.

Characteristically, the commissioned history will pay tribute to the work carried out over whatever number of years is being celebrated and then look forward to the future over a number of years until the next significant anniversary is reached. An obvious ploy maybe, but in any event let us celebrate 75 years of the Business Archives Council and at least look forward to another 25 years of promoting the importance of ‘history in firms’ documents’.

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to Terry Gourvish for his research assistance with this piece.
- <sup>2</sup> The previous articles are Sir George Clark, ‘British business archives, 1935-48’, *Business Archives*, no. 34 (June 1971), pp.7-9; John Wadsworth, ‘Businessmen, bankers and the Business Archives Council’, *Business Archives*, no. 36 (June 1972), pp.14-7; Peter Mathias, ‘The first half century: business history, business archives and the Business Archives Council’, *Business Archives*, no.50 (1984), pp.1-16. Mathias’ piece was written with the help of John Armstrong. I am also extremely grateful to Edwin Green for providing me with the text of Sam Twining’s address to the BAC Annual Conference in 2008, which contains much on the Council’s history.
- <sup>3</sup> Mathias, ‘First half century’, p.1.
- <sup>4</sup> Hilary Jenkinson, *A manual of archive administration, including the problem of war archives*. (Oxford, 1922). The second edition appeared in 1937.
- <sup>5</sup> Clark, ‘British business’, p.7.
- <sup>6</sup> Mathias, ‘First half century’, pp.3-5.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.8.
- <sup>8</sup> Wadsworth, ‘Businessmen’, p.14.

- <sup>9</sup> Hoare's Bank are still the Council's bankers today.
- <sup>10</sup> *The Times*, 21 June 1934.
- <sup>11</sup> Clark, 'British business', p.9.
- <sup>12</sup> 'Len McDonald (1993-2007): in tribute', *Business Archives: Principles and Practice*, no.95 (May 2008), pp.44-53. Edwin Green's piece was based on a file of Len's papers which told the 'full story'.
- <sup>13</sup> Alison Turton & John Orbell, *British Banking. A Guide to Historical Records* (Aldershot 2001). This publication updated a previous survey; Lesley Richmond and Alison Turton, *The brewing industry: a guide to historical records* (Manchester, 1990); Wendy Habgood, *Chartered Accountants in England and Wales. A guide to historical records* (Manchester 1994); Lesley Richmond, Julie Stevenson, & Alison Turton, *The Pharmaceutical Industry. A Guide to Historical Records* (Aldershot, 2003); Alex Ritchie, *The shipbuilding industry: a guide to historical records* (Manchester, 1992); Pamela Hunter, *Veterinary medicine: a guide to historical sources*, (Aldershot, 2004).
- <sup>14</sup> Lesley Richmond and Bridget Stockford, *Company archives: a survey of the records of 1000 of the first registered companies in England and Wales* (Aldershot, 1986).
- <sup>15</sup> Alison Turton (ed.), *Managing Business Archives* (Butterworth-Heinemann and the Business Archives Council, Oxford, 1991); John Orbell, *A Guide to Tracing the History of a Business* Turton (eds.), *Directory of corporate archives* (Business Archives Council, 4th ed., 1996).
- <sup>16</sup> *The Spectator*, 19-26 December 2009, p.57.
- <sup>17</sup> For some more detail on the Wadsworth and a list of previous winners see Mike Anson, 'The Wadsworth Prize at 30', *Business Archives: Reflections and Speculations*, no.97 (November 2008), pp.1-6.
- <sup>18</sup> Sam Twining, 'Reflections: the changing face of business archives over the last 30 [actually 40] years', 12 November 2008.