

RE-CONSTRUCTING THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY: THE SMALL FIRM IN THE COVENTRY MOTOR INDUSTRY, 1896-1939¹

BRAD BEAVEN

University of Portsmouth

Business in the motor trade is frequently transacted far from the wheels of toil²

The nature and function of the business community is one of the most important concepts to have emerged from discourse within business history over recent years. It is also one of the most difficult concepts to define and research. The intricate networks amongst the business elite had important implications for the way in which firms operated internally and externally. Indeed, traditions, customs and tacit agreements within the business community, such as credit allowances and supply arrangements, often had repercussions for a whole industry³. However, examining the small and medium sized firms contribution to the business community is often fraught with methodological difficulties. This article will examine some of the most significant, and often under utilised, sources available to the historian and highlight some of the methodological approaches and problems associated with re-constructing a business community. Evidence will be drawn from Coventry, a city in which the business community became increasingly identified with the emergent motor industry during the first quarter of the twentieth century. The paper will focus on firms involved in the Coventry car component industry since, as suppliers to car assemblers and other engineering concerns, it was essential that they were active members of the business community networks. Moreover, since the structure of the Coventry car component industry was numerically dominated by the small family concern, the investigation will pay particular attention to sources relating to the role of the small firm within the business community. After identifying sources relating to small firms, the paper concentrates on three themes which, it is argued, shed light on the structure and function of the business community - the analysis of social class, the composition of the directorate, and recreational networks within the business community.

The Business Community: Archives and the Small Firm

The initial problem when embarking on a study of this nature is that firms involved in the car component industry were generally small family concerns possessing a low profile. Consequently, to some extent, the surviving source material places limitations on the research conducted. Unlike car manufacturers such as Daimler, Rolls-Royce and Jaguar, component manufacturers were rarely in themselves the subject of media attention or contemporary literature commemorating the industry's progress. Internally generated company records were also difficult to obtain. Many

of the small privately owner-managed concerns saw little value in keeping minute books detailing business decisions since they were largely answerable only to themselves. The analysis of the financial structure of these firms also proved difficult as only a handful of firms retained a consistent run of balance sheets. Moreover, firms were not required to produce standardised balance sheets until 1929, which meant that an extensive comparative analysis of directors appearing on company annual reports would have been an undependable exercise.

However, although these limitations restrict research in certain areas, there was a rich collection of source material which, hitherto, had remained largely neglected. Such sources included trade directories, official industry guides, newspapers, bank archives, Board of Trade files, oral history material, and information from private recreational clubs and societies to which members of the business community belonged. In order to utilise fully this primary source material, the study's methodology has drawn from both qualitative and non-qualitative research techniques.

Clearly, since many small car and component firms left little documentary evidence of their day-to-day activities, particularly in the early stages of the industry, the first task was to identify the firms and business men and women involved in the motor industry. To this end, the data collected from these sources were initially used to create two data bases. The first database contained information on the name and size of firms, whilst the second held data on owners, managers and shareholders within the industry.

The non-qualitative sources were primarily used to analyse the changing size, product variation, and ownership of Coventry motor firms. A most valuable source in this respect was the City of Coventry Trade Directories and Official Guides which provided information, to varying degrees of detail, on the firms engaged in car and component manufacture in Coventry. The directories often listed the proprietors and directors of firms, the products made, customers and the date of company formation.⁴ However, certain drawbacks did emerge with an over reliance on the information contained in trade directories. In some instances trade directories accidentally omitted firms that were still trading or failed to register changes in ownership after take-overs or mergers. Clearly, when compiling a data base on the number of Coventry firms it was necessary to consult other sources. Perhaps the most useful sources from which to cross reference the data gleaned from directories were the trade journals. For example, publications such as *The Motor* and *Autocar* listed annually the Coventry motor firms that displayed products at the yearly motor shows.

Non-qualitative data concerning the nature of the component industry was also ascertained from the information supplied by the *Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders* which published various reports throughout the period on the size, number of workers, output and product variation of the industry. Similar information on the state of the motor industry was also available from various editions of *The Times* newspaper and in the Political and Economic Planning Report of 1950.

The non-qualitative methodology proved effective in identifying motor firms and measuring the changing structure of the industry. However, in order to analyse the structure and nature of the Coventry business community it was necessary to consult qualitative evidence. Source material of this kind was extensive but, surprisingly, had previously often been neglected by historians. For example, despite heavy bombing of Coventry's engineering firms during the Second World War, the City Record Office and the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick hold over thirty company archives of Coventry firms engaged in car and component manufacture since the 1890s. Indeed, for over twenty years both repositories have pursued a policy of collecting and preserving business records.⁵ Car assemblers were particularly well represented, and component firms such as Van Raden, Cornercroft and Coventry Motor Fittings provided fresh areas of research since, prior to this study, they had received little academic attention. These sources often comprised minute books, cash books, balance sheets, production sheets, customer correspondence and company histories. Not only did this material reveal information on the personalities who owned the firm, but it also offered an invaluable insight into a company's financial position, product strategy, and customer relations.

However, in some cases the analysis of internally generated business records alone was not sufficient to ascertain a company's position, especially in financial matters, as material had sometimes been destroyed, omitted, or 'massaged' in official company literature. Therefore, other qualitative records were examined. The under-utilised bank archives proved an invaluable source in providing an accurate account of a company's financial position. These archives revealed the sources of finance open to firms, the extent firms relied on bank loans and the fiscal relationship between car manufacturers and their suppliers. The reference books of the Coventry branches of Lloyds, Midland and Barclays presented a vivid picture of the Coventry business community. Indeed, the information contained in the banking records was not confined to financial matters since products, output, the character of customers and business strategy were also discussed. The bank archives also offered detailed information on component firms whose records no longer exist, highlighting their value as a source. Likewise, the Board of Trade files at the Public Record Office were the only surviving source material available for some small firms. The Board of Trade files contain lists of share holders and directors of limited liability firms which were founded or wound up during the period under study.⁶ Despite the fact that many files were randomly destroyed, this source provides a useful cross section of Coventry firms and reveals the type of product made by the firm, in addition to the occupation and residential location of owners and shareholders. Birth certificates and will probates (deposited at Somerset House) and *The Stock Exchange Year Book*, which listed board members, could also be used to trace individuals, family business interests and the social background of entrepreneurs involved in the Coventry motor industry. Indeed, the Board of Trade files along with trade directories, *The Stock Exchange Year Book*, business archives and various biographies and obituaries, were the primary sources for Table 1, which examines the occupations of directors of

Coventry car component companies.

Another important area that is almost always neglected, as it is often perceived as outside the realms of the business world, are the records of exclusive clubs and societies to which much of the business community belonged. Club minute and address books reveal a wealth of information, including the extent to which a particular industry was represented in the club's membership, and the areas of a town which became dominated by the business elite. Finally, insights into the origins and organisation of firms which had left behind little or no documentary evidence were also gained through oral history interviews with former employees and owners. Extensive use was made of the oral history archives housed in the Coventry Record Office and Coventry University.

Thus, despite the absence of a consistent run of company records relating to the Coventry car component industry, the cross referencing of surviving data was sufficient to create two detailed data bases from which an insight of the Coventry community emerged. While it was impossible to obtain information on all of the firms operating within the Coventry car component industry, the evidence gleaned from these surviving sources provides a useful insight into the managerial structure of the industry between 1895 and 1939.

Approaches to the Analysis of Social Class

Before the analysis drawn from the primary source material can commence, it is necessary to note the methodological difficulties involved in analysing the nature and function of a firm's managerial structure. A major methodological problem associated with the analysis of small firms was the difficulty of uncovering and defining the different roles which directors and managers possessed. This problem was not unique to the Coventry car component industry as Leslie Hannah has asserted:

It is, in fact, more difficult in the British context than in any other to distinguish among a founding entrepreneur and his family, the financial interest, and the managerial interest, simply because these roles were not clearly differentiated in Great Britain.⁷

Indeed, in many cases it was extremely difficult to differentiate between the owner and manager of a firm, especially where small scale family firms were involved. In addition, in terms of categorising firms, this study classed small owner-managed firms within the 'family firm' category since they shared many attributes in the structure and management of a 'family firm'.⁸

The following tables, although they do not contain information on all of the Coventry component firms between 1895 and 1939, provide a useful insight into the ownership and management structure of the industry. Most of the tables were derived from a data base containing 316 names of directors and shareholders of seventy Coventry car component firms. Information was collected on the director's firm, residential location, occupation, social class, shares held, and whether they were founders, inheritors or considered to be professional managers. Given that an

individual's inclusion in the study depended on the availability or reliability of the source material, it cannot be claimed that the sample was selected 'randomly'. There is also a bias towards smaller firms as they were numerically dominant in the Coventry car component industry during this period.⁹ However, the sample does contain a cross section of directors and major shareholders from small, medium and large firms and the analysis of the data collected enables the identification of company directors and their social status and the nature of the firms which they controlled.

Table 1 is a detailed analysis of the stated occupations of directors of Coventry component firms that were contained in either a firm's articles of association or share registration documents. From the sample of directors and major shareholders, a total of 184 directors had declared their occupation.

Table 1
Stated Occupation of Coventry Car Component Directors 1895-1939

Component Engineer	Other	Gentleman	Car Manufacturer	Solicitor
65 per cent	14 per cent	9 per cent	8 per cent	4 per cent

Source: B. Beaven, 'The Growth and Significance of the Coventry Car Component Industry, 1895-1939', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, De Montfort University, 1994), Appendix II.

Table 1 shows that 65 per cent of directors connected with the car component industry described themselves as component manufacturers or engineers. Whilst this represented the largest occupational sector, a small but significant number of directors declared themselves car manufacturers (eight per cent) and gentry (nine per cent). The latter two categories were significant since they almost certainly provided capital for component firms. For example, the wealthy Riley family, whose main business interest was car manufacture, financed three component firms, whilst the financial backers behind firms such as Coventry Chain, Hewer Car Bodies, Forman Motor Co. and Thomas Pass all described themselves as 'gentlemen'. The breakdown of directors' occupations can also reveal the social class of directors. Using the criteria set by David Jeremy in the Dictionary of Business Biography, the directors, through the nature of their occupations, were placed into two broad categories of social class.¹⁰ Class I included the gentry; large farmers and landowners; large businessmen; professionals, such as doctors and solicitors; and senior managers or agents. Class II comprised small businessmen, independent craftsmen, retail traders, clerks, and white collar workers. In the case of Coventry's business community, the directors who declared themselves car manufacturers were largely derived from wealthy families such as the Rileys and consequently were placed in Class I along with the occupational groups of gentlemen and solicitors. On the other hand, in the course of research, it was discovered that the vast majority of

directors who stated that they were component manufacturers or engineers were small businessmen or independent skilled craftsmen. This group was subsequently categorised as Class II. Although occupational status can hide a multitude of variables, the exercise does provide a useful guide to the class structure of the Coventry car component industry and the results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Class Structure of Directors involved in the Coventry Car Component Industry

CLASS I		CLASS II	
Gentlemen	9 per cent	Component	
Solicitor	4 per cent	Manufacturer/Engineer	65 per cent
Car Manufacturer	8 per cent		
Total 21 per cent		Total 65 per cent	

Source: B. Beaven, 'The Growth and Significance of the Coventry Car Component Industry, 1895-1939', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, De Montfort University, 1994), Appendix II.

Table 2 shows that a large majority, 65 per cent, of directors who stated their occupation, were derived from Class II. The high proportion of directors in the Class II category would suggest that many of the firms involved in the Coventry car component industry were either small scale, owner-managed or family firms. To test this hypothesis further, an analysis of the size of firms' boards and the founders of firms was undertaken. The results of an analysis of board size are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

A Sample of the Size of Firms' Boards in the Coventry Car Component Industry 1895-1939

<i>Number on Board</i>	<i>1895-1914</i>	<i>1915-1939</i>
1 Director Only	2 (Firms)	11 (Firms)
2 Directors Only	13 (Firms)	13 (Firms)
3 Directors Only	9 (Firms)	12 (Firms)
Over 4 Directors	14 (Firms)	18 (Firms)
Total Number of Firms	38 (Firms)	54 (Firms)
Mean Board Size	3	3

Source: B. Beaven, 'The Growth and Significance of the Coventry Car Component Industry, 1895-1939', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, De Montfort University, 1994), Appendix II.

Clearly, firms with one or two founding directors would indicate that they were owner-managed concerns, while boards with more than two family members would suggest that they had considerable influence on a firm's affairs. Table 3 shows the size of boards of 38 firms for the period 1895-1914 and 54 firms for the years 1915-1936. While evidence for the size of firms was sketchy for the period prior to the First World War, the average totals for both sets of years show that the size of firms' boards did not alter dramatically. Indeed, between 1895 and 1939, the component industry averaged only three board members per firm. From a total of 92 firms sampled during the years 1895-1914, 60 possessed only between one and three directors. Thus, the sample suggests that the typical boardroom structure in the car component industry consisted of either a single director operating an owner-managed enterprise, two directors acting as partners, or three directors, all of whom may have had a stake in the firm or may have been connected with the business through family ties.

To further test the hypothesis that the majority of firms involved in the Coventry car component industry were either small scale, owner-managed or family firms, an examination of company founders was undertaken. During this analysis, owner-managed and family concerns were classified under the 'family firm' category as there was very little difference between these two types of company, both in behavioural characteristics and the organisation of a firm.¹¹ From a total of 263 directors, 100 directors (38 per cent) founded family firms prior to 1914. Moreover, of the 100 people that founded firms before the First World War, 23 (23 per cent) were still on their respective firm's board after 1930. Given that the entry and exit of firms in the market place was high during the interwar period,¹² and the possibility that a proportion of pioneering founders would have died by 1930, the number of founders continuing to control their firm was particularly high. Indeed, as the results show that over one third of the directors sampled founded their own firm, they further substantiate the hypothesis that the Coventry car component industry was dominated by family firms.

Another indication of whether the Coventry car component industry was derived from small family firms was the location of a firm's head office: if a firm's head office was located outside Coventry it would suggest that the firm was a subsidiary of a larger organisation. Information concerning the location of head offices was gathered for 201 companies for three sample years, 1912, 1919 and 1936, and the results are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4 shows that, between 1912 and 1936, the vast majority of Coventry car component firms based their head offices in the city. Thus, although the number of firms with head offices based in Coventry declined slightly by 1936, externally located head offices accounted for only 10 per cent of the firms in the industry.

Table 4
*The Number of Coventry Component Firms and the location
of their Head Offices*

Date	1912	1919	1936
Number of Firms	61	78	62
Coventry Head Office	57	75	52
	(94 per cent)	(96 per cent)	(84 per cent)
External Head Office	4	3	10
	(6 per cent)	(4 per cent)	(16 per cent)

Source: B. Beaven, 'The Growth and Significance of the Coventry Car Component Industry, 1895-1939', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, De Montfort University, 1994). Appendix II.

By analysing directors occupations and social status, size of company boards, the identity of founding directors, and the location of company head offices, an attempt has been made to show that the dominant type of firm in the Coventry car component industry was the small-scale 'family firm'.

The Business Community Network: Composition of the Directorate

In an industry dominated by the family firm, it is perhaps not surprising to discover that few firms employed professional managers at boardroom level. From the directors identified, only eight and a half per cent stated their profession as 'manager' in the articles of association and share allocation forms. Moreover, a closer investigation of these directors reveals that they were derived from three categories of firm: the multinational firm, the foreign firm and the firm which had been subject to a take-over or merger. Thus, the pool of professional and technically skilled managers in the Coventry component industry was mainly derived from multinationals, such as British Thomson-Houston and Dunlop, and foreign firms, such as Hotchkiss et Cie and the Torrington Company. Professional managers were also installed in some companies after successful take-overs, for example at Doherty Motor Accessories and Motor Panels.

Therefore, as Harrison discovered in his research on the cycle industry, the deliberate employment of formally educated managerial staff in the component trade was the exception rather than the rule.¹³ Moreover, whilst formal technical training was often lacking, managers with commercial training in sales and marketing were also few and far between. However, in a supply industry such as the car component industry, it was imperative to possess an effective communication structure with other suppliers and, above all, car assemblers. Consequently, firms followed a tradition, which began in the cycle industry, of appointing key individuals who possessed a good insight into the trade and an intimate knowledge of important firms within the area. The significance of this strategy was revealed by analysing the

number of directors who held more than one directorship. A sample of 263 directors, taken from 70 component firms between 1895 and 1914, showed that twenty one individuals (8 per cent) held more than one directorship. However, of these twenty one directors, seven (33 per cent) held over two directorships. Table 5 shows the most sought-after directors that emerged from the sample and the firms that appointed them as paid advisors.

Table 5

A Sample of Key Directors with more than two Directorships in the Coventry Car Component Industry between 1895-1939

Name	Class	Directorships	Occupation	Firms
H.J. Baker	1	3	Company Director	Daimler Motor Co. (1899) Mills & Fulford (1903)
A. Bedrell	2	4	Agent	Brett's Stamping (1836) TG John (1919) Zephyr Carburettors (1919) Bluemel Bros. (1929) Chey'more Sheet Metal (1936)
A.S. Hill	1	3	Manufacturer	Coventry Chain (1896-1921) Bluemel Bros. (1913-1921) Smith's Stamping (1917-1921)
C. Hill	1	3	Gentleman	Coventry Chain (1895) Brett's Stamping (1899) Charlesworth Bodies (1907)
W.N. Lindley	1	3	Solicitor	Coventry Climax (1904) Coventry Chain (1907) British Piston Ring (1911-45)
W.A. Oubridge	2	3	Company Director	British Piston Ring (1911-42) Valves Ltd (1916) Holbrook Bodies (1920-1929)
V. Riley	1	3	Manufacturer	Albion Drop Forgings (1904) Riley Engine Co. (1914) Midland Motor Body Co. (1932)

Table 5 shows that most of these key directors were derived from social class 1 and did not have an engineering background. Those who stated their occupation as manufacturer, such as Charles Hill, Alick Hill and Victor Riley,¹⁴ came from wealthy Coventry families. Only William A. Oubridge, whose father was a market gardener,¹⁵ had any practical engineering experience gained from outside a family firm.

Source: B. Beaven, *The Growth and Significance of the Coventry Car Component Industry, 1895-1939*, (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, De Montfort University, 1994), Appendix II.

Indeed, Baker, Bednell, and Lindley¹⁶ can be best described as 'commercial men' since they had no engineering experience but a large network of contacts.¹⁷ Alfred Bednell's career as a company agent made him an ideal advisor on business matters. This position was enhanced after his appointment as the government's official contracts agent during the First World War.¹⁸ This may explain why, at the end of the war, Bednell was a director of at least two firms, T.G. John and Zephyr Carburettors, who had obtained large government contracts.¹⁹ On the other hand, Alick Hill had gained a reputation within the Coventry business community for both his commercial enterprise and engineering skills. Born into a wealthy Coventry watch making family, he perceived himself as both inventor and entrepreneur. However, Hill's greatest asset was his 'tactician's eye for financial battlefields and the cut and thrust of commerce'.²⁰ This came to prominence when he successfully retained a powerful position on the board of Coventry Chain, the firm he founded, despite its public flotation in 1907. Indeed, throughout his chairmanship of Coventry Chain he was well known as being a tough negotiator. Thus, while the Midland Bank manager regarded Hill as a 'thoroughly capable man who has good experience in America', he noted after one particular meeting that he was:

a most difficult customer to deal with and he was in one of his obstinate [and] impossible moods. He asked for an overdraft of £20,000 and not withstanding repeated efforts of mine to get him to reduce the proposal to lower figures, he refused to discuss any other amount.²¹

The appointment of key directors with an insight into the motor industry also enabled firms to share resources. For example, shortly after Alick Hill joined Bluemel's board in 1913, Coventry Chain and Bluemel jointly opened sales depots in London and Manchester.²² Significantly, Bluemel and Chain were not competing in the same markets, which enabled Hill to offer his experience in dealing with car assemblers to other firms within the car component industry. Consequently, by his death in 1921, Alick Hill had been a director of Coventry Chain since 1896, Bluemel Bros. from 1913, and Smith's Stamping since 1917.

The importance of the personal contacts within the motor industry should not be underestimated, especially since many of the Coventry component firms did not possess an elaborate sales organisation. Although the employment of agents throughout the country was fairly common, agents were an expensive commodity

and were often dispensed with at the slightest economic downturn. As a result, orders won by agents were often haphazard and few and far between during periods of recession.²³ Moreover, due to Coventry's importance as a centre for British car production, it was imperative for directors and managers of motor firms to integrate fully within the Coventry business community and participate in business networks. The importance of integrating personally in the business community was not lost on the car manufacturer William Morris, who purchased components from a wide range of firms in Coventry. In 1928, it was recalled that Morris was:

practically always on the doorstep of each of his manufacturers...otherwise he would find himself landed with, let us suppose, one hundred back axles and a dozen front engines, fifty frames and no bodies. Therefore, Coventry saw him at factories at six o'clock in the morning and ten o'clock at night...²⁴

Similarly, the Lloyds Bank manager considered that Edward J. Hardy's early success in the car components industry stemmed from being 'well known to the manufacturers.' Prior to manufacturing car components, Hardy had been a 'traveller' for E. Lycett Ltd, a Birmingham cycle supply firm, before producing cycle components himself until 1903.²⁵ Hardy's reputation with car manufacturers led directly to a personal friendship with Knight of Daimler, which resulted in large orders from the latter company. Furthermore, in 1915 the two firms arranged a joint venture to the United States to publicise Hardy's new universal joint. The successful trip not only confirmed Daimler's faith in Hardy's new patent, but also ensured that Hardy secured a 'very big business and large profits for his firm'.²⁶

Thus, the employment of formally educated managerial staff in the car component industry was rare. However, expertise and experience of another kind were valued in the trade: an intimate knowledge of firms operating in Coventry, an insight into the industry's practises and, crucially, a network of contacts in the local *manufacturing sector*. *Such networks are examined in further detail below.*

The Business Community Network: Clubs, Societies and Leisure

The motor industry's informality and emphasis on personal relations was ingrained in the very institutions of the Coventry business community. For example, business contacts were often made through the network of middle-class recreational institutions which were scattered across the Coventry region. Fred Rees, who worked at Automachinery during the 1930s, recalled that the top management of the Coventry motor industry lived in the locality and met at certain venues:

Major Dick [Automachinery's Managing Director] always went to lunch at Drapers Hall [in Coventry], always went every day...it was where all your top industrialists and professional people went.²⁷

Similarly, John Siddeley, the managing director of Armstrong Siddeley, organised lunches for the leading industrialists in Coventry. His son, Ernest Siddeley, remembered that:

On many occasions he used to have lunch in his own private dining room at

the works. I think he called it politics and trade...my father would give a lunch one month, another would give a lunch another, but they were all leading industrialists in Coventry.²⁸

However, although a number of prominent car manufacturers, such as Percy Martin of Daimler and Captain Black of Standard, were members of the Ancient Fellowship of Cappers and Feltmakers of Coventry, the unofficial recreational centre for gentlemen involved in the motor industry was the Coventry and County Club.²⁹ This club was formed on January 3 1899 by a group of Coventry industrialists. Entry into the club was highly restrictive since the election of members was largely vested in the club committee. Prospective members could be refused entry if they were 'black balled' in the ballot, or if an existing member objected within two weeks of new names appearing on the notice board. The early club committees were dominated by the 'new' industrialists and included Alick Hill, who chaired the early meetings, George and William Du Cros and Alfred Bedrell, businessmen who all had strong links with the early cycle and motor industries.³⁰ However, despite the exclusive nature of the club, the institution did not discriminate against gentlemen from fairly small concerns. Thus, early members from modestly sized firms, such as C. Foster of Coventry Magneto, W.A. Oubridge of British Piston Ring and W.J. Grindlay, owner of Coventry Motor and Sundries, were able to mix socially with representatives from the major car manufacturers, which included Standard, Daimler and Rover. Moreover, entrepreneurs also had access to financial contacts as the Lloyds Bank manager noted in his reference book that both 'Mr Brown of Midland Bank and Mr Blackburn of District Bank were members of the club'.³¹ Certainly, the importance of the club for small firms was not lost on the new directors of Van Raden, who arrived in Coventry from London in 1919, having just purchased the firm, and immediately applied for membership.³²

Membership of the club rose dramatically during the First World War as firms saw an opportunity to make new contacts that could lead to munitions deals either with the government or firms sub-contracting out. Significantly, one of the founders of the club was Alfred Bedrell, the prominent manufacturing agent in Coventry and the Ministry of Munitions representative in the City during the First World War. Harold Nockolds vividly described the activities of Bedrell, who, by the 1920s, was the Coventry agent for Lucas:

Bedrell, who had been the Ministry of Munitions representative in Coventry during the war and knew everybody worth knowing in the district, operated largely from the bar at the County Club, which was the unofficial headquarters of the motor industry in Coventry and where all the real business was done between manufacturers and their suppliers.³³

The County Club's invaluable function as a meeting place where deals could be struck continued into the Second World War with businessmen joining from as far afield as Birmingham, London, Essex, Hertfordshire and Sheffield. Such was the reputation of the club that one firm in Stoke-on-Trent even wrote to the secretary to request membership for their commercial representative. In 1943 the club reached a

capacity of 300 members and consequently a waiting list of over 20 names was produced. Moreover, during this heightened time of popularity, applicants who resided outside a 50 mile radius of the club were refused entry³⁴

Therefore, the significance of the Coventry and County Club as the 'unofficial head quarters' of the Coventry's motor industry may be illustrated through the utilisation of oral evidence, bank archives, and the club's memberships details. Moreover, the sources demonstrate the importance of involvement in networks for the success of those operating in the local business community.

Conclusion

It has been argued that through the analysis of sources relating to the social background of the business elite, the composition of company boards and recreational institutions, it is possible to identify important networks within the business community. Clearly, within the context of the motor industry, both non-qualitative and qualitative research techniques and sources yield an insight into the nature of the Coventry business community. Through the creation of data bases, the non-qualitative evidence shed light on the structure of the business community, such as social class, directorates and shares held, highlighting important networks in the process. On the other hand, a number of qualitative sources, such as bank archives and oral history, provided a wealth of evidence relating to the individual characteristics of the business elite, their tacit and unwritten agreements and their unofficial meeting places. However, the structures and characteristics of a business community can only be understood against the backdrop of a wider academic debate. Thus, the sources and techniques described here can open the way to explore the validity of recent Chandlerian models that profess to explain the growth and development of the family firm in Britain.

NOTES

- 1 My thanks to the following archivists: Richard Storey of the Modern Records Centre (hereafter MRC) University of Warwick, David Rimmer formerly of Coventry Record Office (hereafter CRO), Edwin Green of Midland Bank Archive (hereafter MBA) and John Booker of Lloyds Bank Archive (hereafter LBA).
- 2 A.P. Young managing director of Coventry branch of British Thomson-Houston. See MRC, MSS 242/BT/6/1, A.P. Young Collection, Production Department Report, 6 December 1921.
- 3 Brad Beaven, 'Growth and Significance of the Coventry Car Component Industry, 1895-1914', *Business History*, 18, 1993.
- 4 The years chosen to create a data base of component firms were, to some extent, dictated by the availability of surviving directories.
- 5 See Richard Storey (ed.), *Automotive History Sources in Coventry Archives*, Coventry, University of Warwick Library (1996).

- 6 Board of Trade files, series 31.
- 7 L. Hannah, 'The Visible and Invisible Hands in Great Britain', *Managerial Hierarchies*, A Chandler and H. Deams (eds.), (Cambridge, 1980), p. 55.
- 8 R. Church, 'The Family Firm in Industrial Capitalism: International Perspectives on Hypotheses and History', *Business History*, 35, 1993.
- 9 Geoffrey Jones used a similar methodology when encountering similar problems researching the foreign multinationals in Britain before 1945. See G. Jones, 'Foreign Multinationals and British Industry Before 1945', *Economic History Review*, 3, (1988).
- 10 David Jeremy (ed.), *Dictionary of Business Biography*, (1984-1986). The project's research methodology is examined in David Jeremy, 'Anatomy of the British Business Elite 1860-1980', *Business History*, 26, (1984).
- 11 For the problem of defining the 'family firm' see R. Church, 'Family Firms and Managerial Capitalism: The Case of the International Motor Industry', *Business History*, 28, (1986) and R. Church, 'The Family Firm in Industrial Capitalism: International Perspectives on Hypotheses and History', *Business History*, 35, (1993), pp. 17-43.
- 12 Brad Beaven, 'Growth and Significance of the Coventry Car Component Industry, 1895-1939', (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of De Montfort, 1994), Chapter 3.
- 13 A.E. Harrison, 'Competitiveness in the British Cycle Industry, 1890-1914', *Economic History Review*, 22, (1969), p. 302.
- 14 Lanchester Oral History Archive (hereafter LOHA), Interview with A.C. Farrer, former Riley worker, 24 August 1982.
- 15 LBA, B379a/19, 1 June 1911.
- 16 Richardson, *Twentieth-Century Coventry*, Coventry, City of Coventry, (1972), p.30. *Coventry Standard*, 5 January 1951. Lindley was a partner in the Coventry solicitors Rotherham & Sons.
- 17 LOHA, Interview with A. Jarrard, September 1973, Tape 132.
- 18 H. Nockolds, *The First 100 Years*, Vol. 1, (1976), p. 176.
- 19 MBA 358/615, October 1910.
- 20 B. Tripp, *Renold Chains. A History of the Company and the Rise of the Precision Chain Industry 1879-1955*, (1956), p. 132.
- 21 MBA, 358/5 18 April 1907 and 358/9, 21 December 1910.
- 22 Manchester Central Library, M501/560.0124/CC 902/1f, Coventry Chain Minute Book 1902-1931, 16 December 1913 and 21 October 1914.
- 23 A prime example of a firm which employed agents in an ad hoc manner was the Coventry Watch Movement Company, which relied on 'friends' in the motor industry. See Beaven, 'Growth and Significance of the Coventry Car Component Industry', p.110.

- 24 *Autocar*, 24 August 1928, p. 362.
- 25 LBA, B379a/13, 29 May 1903.
- 26 LBA, B379a/21, 6 October 1915. M. Adeney, *The Motor Makers: the turbulent history of Britain's car industry*, (1988), pp. 148-149.
- 27 Taped Interview with Fred Rees, a former manager of Automachinery, 26 March 1933.
- 28 University of Coventry, LOHA, Interview with Ernest Siddeley, former managing director of Armstrong Siddeley, Tape 121, 1969.
- 29 Richard Storey, 'Percy Martin', *Dictionary of Business Biography*, 4, 1985, pp. 167-168.
- 30 CRO, Acc 578, Coventry and County Club, *Minutes of General Meetings*, 3 January 1899.
- 31 LBA, B379a/13, 12 November 1903.
- 32 CRO, Coventry and County Club, MB 1911-21, 11 March 1919.
- 33 Nockolds, *The First 100 Years*, p.176.
- 34 CRO, Acc 578, Coventry and County Club, Minute Book 1937, 1 October 1942, 25 March 1943, and 27 June 1947