

Business Archives in the UK: Current Initiatives and Developments

In July 2009, the National Strategy for Business Archives (England and Wales) was launched, the result of five year's work by interested parties, including the Business Archives Council, The National Archives of the United Kingdom and the Archives and Records Association. The strategy was a plan to promote the care of business records and to increase awareness of their value. At that time The National Archives created the post of Business Archives Advice Manager, with responsibility for advancing the strategy when The National Archives is best placed to act. In January 2011 a parallel National Strategy for Business Archives in Scotland was launched.

The business index

The business index of the National Register of Archives provides the most comprehensive data about business records in the UK, with details of over 34,500 businesses. These are mainly held in repositories whose contact details are listed in the associated online directory ARCHON, on The National Archives website. ARCHON holds information on over 3,000 repositories, mainly in the UK. Increasingly, entries on the business index are linked to online networks and repository catalogues, so that in over 40% of cases further, detailed information is accessible online.

In England and Wales around 75% of known business records are held by local government repositories in the area to which they relate. Of the rest, 22% are held either by national institutions, universities or specialist repositories. Around 3% are held by corporate archives. The distribution of business records in Scotland is different to England and Wales, with a more balanced division of collections between national, university and local repositories.

The number of businesses in the UK known to make provision for their archives is around 100. It is not possible to reflect this exactly on the ARCHON directory because many choose not to be listed. At the edges of the corporate archive sector, there are also many informal arrangements in companies by which their historic records are managed.

UK Corporate archives are strong in three sectors: banking, alcoholic beverages and retailers. The management of the corporate archive sector is subject to considerable variation. It is almost true to say that no two corporate archives are alike, though the model first established by the oil company BP, where a company archive is located on a university campus, was later adopted by the retailer Marks & Spencer.

In its classic form, the corporate archive is usually embedded in the structure of the company. At other times it may be governed by a charitable trust or foundation. This is the case with the British Postal Museum and Archive, the food retailer Sainsburys and the Rothschild banking archive. Trust status protects the records and is an appropriate safeguard against business failure.

The most vulnerable corporate archives are those where a single employee is in post. Their retirement is often the moment when a company considers deposit of their collection rather than seeking a new archivist. Increasingly, businesses are employing qualified, professional archivists, but there is still a strong tradition of long-serving employees who bear the title of archivist on a courtesy basis.

Business archivists

Business archivists are often members of the Business Archives Council (BAC), established in 1934 to promote the preservation of historical business records. The BAC has 280 corporate, institutional and individual members. Business archivists may also be members of the Archives and Records Association, the professional body for archivists. This numbers 2,180 members in total and has a dedicated Business Records Group. There is also an informal group of retail archivists, mostly in London, that meets occasionally. However, some business archivists find themselves isolated, either by geography, or because the sector in which they operate is small. So UK corporate archives are not uniform, not always robust, not always connected and, in some cases, not even visible to the public.

National strategies

There have been many positive developments over the past five years and the existence of the national strategies has been a factor in improving the state of business archives in the UK. Let us look at what has been achieved in that time.

First, the strategies exist and that is important in itself. Issues that have been discussed randomly in the past, and often in response to a sudden crisis, have now been defined and dealt with consistently. The number of people with an interest in business archives and history is modest and they have often existed as separate groupings, with little communication between them. Now they have something that binds their interests together and gives their views greater weight. Through the Managing Business Archives website, there is a permanent way to carry the message of the strategy to a wider audience. Most of all, the effects of the strategies are cumulative. Awareness of the strategies had had time to spread and initiatives such as the crisis management team have had time to establish themselves.

Second, corporate archivists have been helped by the recognition of the value of their archives and by the interest and concern of The National Archives itself. Until now corporate archives existed at the edge of the archive sector, now they are more integrated. Corporate archives such as Unilever and Network Rail achieve standards of care equal to the highest in the public sector. This has been recognised by their inclusion among the first group of repositories to have reached the Archive Service Accreditation standard under a new scheme.

Third, UK corporate archives have made progress in a number of areas. In saying this, we must accept that the sector is dynamic and that growth in one area is often balanced by loss elsewhere. Despite a long recession the corporate archive sector has proved robust and resilient. In many ways it has been a time of remarkable growth. Major building projects have been undertaken by Marks & Spencer and Clarks Shoes. Banking giant HSBC has moved to new and better premises. The John Lewis Partnership is currently celebrating its 150th anniversary and has moved its corporate and textile collections to an entirely new facility. A £1.5 million project to extend the Diageo archives in Scotland has just been completed. The telecommunications company BT has completed a massive digitisation programme, the Bank of England put their archive catalogue online and Network Rail has launched a virtual archive to great acclaim. It is unrealistic to think that we will preserve all the corporate archives that exist at present. However, there has been a change in sentiment. Companies are more likely to treat their archives as a resource to exploit rather than a cost to bear.

A tradition of surveys

In the UK there is a tradition of survey work on business archives. This involved surveys carried out on the records of individual companies, conducted by the BAC or its Scottish equivalent. There has also been a series of published sector surveys, which began in 1971 with shipping and has since covered banking and the brewing, pharmaceutical and shipbuilding industries.

The BAC and the National Archives have been keen to continue this activity. During the period of the strategy, we carried out the ABC survey, so called because it tried to map the archival heritage of the architecture, building and construction sectors. The sectors were chosen after an analysis of known records showed that we knew nothing of many of the key companies. The survey broke new ground and has increased our knowledge and contacts in those sectors. However, we faced tough challenges in a sector with little archival tradition. There were no professional archivists in construction and only two among the architects. Although we had assembled an advisory board drawn from professional associations, we lacked a key figure in the industry, who could open doors for us. We shall bear that lesson in mind for the next survey, which may be of aviation and aerospace industries.

A key part of the two strategies has been that there should be a quick and co-ordinated response when records were at risk due to business failures. The eightperson crisis management team never meets, but uses email to gather information and co-ordinate action. Swift intervention has ensured that administrators are aware of the wider interest that attaches to these records and that advice and practical help about options for deposit is available. The work of the ABC survey has helped that of the crisis management team by closely watching activity in the sector. Some 20% of crisis team cases have been in building and construction. To give an idea of how the team goes about its business, here are two short case studies.

The Comet Group was an electrical retailer that went into administration at the end of 2012. Founded in Hull in 1933, the company originally charged electrical batteries for customers. In 1968 it went from being a regional electrical chain to a national discount retailer, operating from out-of town sites. It was a pioneer, creating a new model for discount electrical retailing. But by 2012 there was no longer anything unique about Comet and its competitive advantage had disappeared. Speed was essential and we quickly made the key contacts. First, and most importantly, the administrators proved sympathetic and responsive. Second, there was a contact within the company who knew about the records and was there long enough to help. Third, the local archive office was only three minutes away from Comet's premises. Once contacted, their staff dealt with the situation from that point onwards. So a situation where records were at risk quickly progressed to one where they were safely deposited, catalogued and available for research. This was a big success for the team.

New challenges

A different set of challenges arose when The National Archives was contacted by a local record office. They had been approached by a construction company, who specialised in large concrete structures. The company was downsizing its offices and a quantity of technical records would be destroyed, if a new home could not be found for them. The local record office did not want to take these, because very few of these records related to the local area. Was there an alternative place of deposit? The specialist repository for such records is the Institution of Civil Engineers in London, but they have limited space and could not take in a collection of this size. The Science Museum was also a possible home and in due course the records were deposited there, where they fit very well with other, similar collections.

There are several points to be made about this case. One is that it was a challenge to find a repository which met the necessary criteria for deposit. It had to be suitable, in thematic terms. It had to be able to house and catalogue a large collection of technical records. It also had to be able to react quickly to secure the records before they were displaced from their offices. Fortunately, the need for disposal was not as urgent as had been feared. So there was enough time to conclude the deposit. This case also underlines the problem that there is no “repository of last resort” in the UK, which will accept records unwanted by anyone else. So far we have always been able to find a home for at-risk collections. Our concern is that, one day, we may not.

The English strategy has reached the end of its projected five years and we have the chance to reflect on what has been successful and in what areas we need to improve. There are some positive indicators:

- The crisis management team has been a success, having dealt with 72 cases, 11 of which have resulted in deposit.
- The number of corporate archives now on ARCHON, has reached an alltime high of 89.
- The Managing Business Archives website has been a valuable new resource for professional and non-professional practitioners, with over 3,000 visitors annually.

Companies have invested in building projects for their corporate archives. They have also innovated, especially in the area of online resources, and engaged with a wider public than before. Archival survey work has been taken forward in sectors where there was little information and no archival tradition.

There are still areas in which we may improve. We have failed to have a proper dialogue at national level with insolvency practitioners. Some crisis management cases remain unresolved. The strategy implementation group, by which the progress of the strategy was monitored, needs to be replaced by a new mechanism.

As the UK emerges from recession, and after five years of the strategy, it is encouraging to see these results. We look forward with satisfaction at the progress made, with many ideas for the future and with confidence that further successes lie in front of us.



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Résumé

Deutsch

Alex Ritchie, Berater für Firmenarchive beim britischen Nationalarchiv (TNA) beschäftigt sich mit den Ergebnissen der zwei nationalen Strategien in Sachen Firmenarchive, die in GB umgesetzt werden. Er beschreibt, wie sich die Situation bei den Firmenarchiven zur Zeit präsentiert und bewertet den Fortschritt in Bereichen wie dem Aufbau von Projekten, der Rettung von gefährdeten Beständen, dem verbesserten Zugang und Online-Diensten. Weiter geht er ein auf die Zunahme von Umfragen zu speziellen Geschäftsbereichen. Kurze Fallstudien illustrieren die Arbeit des Krisenmanagement-Teams, das zum Einsatz kommt, wenn Bestände als gefährdet eingestuft werden.

Français

Alex Ritchie, conseiller pour les archives d'entreprises auprès des Archives nationales britanniques (TNA) se penche dans cet article sur les résultats des deux stratégies nationales en matière d'archives d'entreprises, qui ont été récemment mises en oeuvre en Grande-Bretagne. Il décrit comment la situation se présente actuellement dans ce domaine et évalue les progrès réalisés dans des domaines tels que l'élaboration de projets, le sauvetage de fonds menacé et l'accès amélioré aux services en ligne. Il décrit ensuite l'augmentation des enquêtes concernant certains domaines commerciaux spécifiques. De brèves études de cas illustrent le travail de l'équipe chargée de la gestion des crises, qui intervient lorsque des fonds sont considérés comme menacés.