

## Chapter 11

# The National Business Archives Strategy: England and Wales

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*Leveraging Corporate Assets: New Global Directions for Business Archives.*  
([http://www.shibusawa.or.jp/english/center/network/01\\_icasbl/Tokyo/leveraging.html](http://www.shibusawa.or.jp/english/center/network/01_icasbl/Tokyo/leveraging.html)) April 2012.

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# Alex Ritchie

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Alex Ritchie is currently the Business Archives Advice Manager at The National Archives of the United Kingdom. He has had a long involvement with business history and archives during his career at The National Archives and, before that, the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts. He is best known as the author of *The Shipbuilding Industry: a Guide to Historical Records* (1992) and has been a major contributor to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

## The National Archives (UK)

The National Archives is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice. As the official archives of the UK government, it cares for and makes available a vast collection of over 1,000 years of historical records, including the treasured *Domesday Book*. In addition to its role as custodian of government records, The National Archives also manages current digital information and devises new technological solutions for keeping modern records readable now and in the future. It provides world class research facilities and expert advice, publishes all UK legislation and official publications, and is a leading advocate for the archive sector.

In recent years The National Archives has worked with partners to formulate a National Strategy for Business Archives in England and Wales. Since the launch of the strategy in 2009 and the appointment of a dedicated Business Archives Advice Manager, it has sought to encourage businesses to make proper provision for their archives, to raise awareness and promote the use of business collections, and to raise standards in the care of corporate archives by promoting best practice, principally through the Managing Business Archives website.



Image 1 – Exterior of  
The National Archives  
(Photograph: The  
National Archives)

# The National Strategy for Business Archives (England & Wales)

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In the summer of 2009, the National Strategy for Business Archives was launched at a parliamentary reception in London, attended by a wide range of business and archival representatives. The speakers included Sir Mervyn King, Governor of the Bank of England, Sir Stuart Rose, chairman of Marks & Spencer, the major British food and clothing retailer, and Dame Stella Rimington, former head of the British Security Service (MI5), who started her career as an archivist. The launch was the culmination of five year's work by interested parties, including the Business Archives Council and The National Archives of the United Kingdom, to produce an agreed plan to promote the care and to increase awareness of the value of business records. The year 2009 marked the transition from the planning phase of the strategy to the implementation phase.

My own involvement with the national strategy only began at this time, though I have had a long association with business records, particularly in the shipbuilding industry, and I became the dedicated Business Archives Advice Manager at The National Archives. As such, I am responsible for taking forward the strategy with our partners and in such matters in which The National Archives is best equipped to act.

In January 2011 a parallel National Strategy for Business Archives in Scotland was launched at a reception in Edinburgh and since that time there has been close co-operation between the implementation groups of the two strategies.

Before we consider the goals of the strategies, let us look for a moment at the current state of the corporate archive sector in the UK. The number of businesses that are known to make some provision for their archives is around 80. Among the 100 largest companies, as defined by the London Stock Exchange, about 20 companies have such arrangements, although the so-called FTSE 100 is perhaps not such a good representation of British business since it includes so many giant corporations that are essentially foreign concerns, but which have opted to list on the London Stock Exchange. Corporate archives are particularly strong in the banking and retail sectors, especially in the area of luxury goods. After that, with the exception of beverages, there is no other single, strong sector. Increasingly, businesses are employing qualified, professional archivists. However, there is still a strong tradition of

long-serving employees, with a passion for the history and heritage of their company, who bear the title of archivist on a courtesy basis or act in that role under some other designation.

Many business archivists are members of the Business Archives Council, the Business Records Group of the Archives and Records Association, or are members of an informal group of retail archivists that meets occasionally. But some business archivists find themselves isolated either by geography, because they do not belong to any of the bodies mentioned above, or because the sector in which they operate is so small. Insurance company archivists used to have a dedicated group, but now there are only two such companies with archivists in post. Outside of the known world of business archives there may be further arrangements for the care of archives, of which we remain unaware. Several interesting developments have been revealed through contacts with business archivists who passed on information that a certain person in a company was active with their archives. This led to an approach by me and the start of an ongoing dialogue about how the heritage assets of the company could be looked after in a sustainable way.

So the UK corporate archives sector is not uniform, not always robust and not always connected within itself. The UK archive sector as a whole is small and corporate archives exist on the edge of it. Nevertheless, there are some signs of healthy growth.

### **Strategic Goals**

The two strategies share four strategic goals:

*Raise awareness among businesses of the value of their records and archives, and provide guidance and support from the professional archive community*

There is strong evidence that many companies have realised that their history, and therefore their archives, represents a huge resource to be exploited, especially where the celebration of anniversaries are involved. Thus Marks & Spencer made much of their 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2009. Following on from that, the company will open a new purpose-built archive repository on the campus of Leeds University in November 2011. A less-developed, but nonetheless interesting archive, underpins the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Butlin's holiday camps (1936-2011), and their anniversary brochure exploits the huge nostalgia and affection felt by their customers. That archive is still undeveloped, but until recently its very existence was scarcely known and it offers an important source for the history of the changing character of British seaside holidays. As one business exploits its heritage effectively, this can lead to emulation by other businesses, especially if they are competitors in the same market.



Image 2 – The Michael Marks Building, new home of the M&S Company Archive.  
(Photograph provided courtesy of the M&S Company Archive)

*Increase the number of corporate sector business archives and of business collections in public repositories.*

This is a particular challenge for two reasons. There are few incentives one can deploy to encourage the average business to run their own archives operation if they are reluctant to do so. But where the idea and the desire already exist within a business to exploit this resource, the strategy can guide companies in a positive way. A good example of a business re-discovering its archives is that of Selfridges, the London department store. Some years ago the archives were looked after in-house by a retired employee. Then it was decided to deposit the collection with the History of Advertising Trust. By 2010 Selfridges decided that it wanted to have the collection back under its own control and readily accessible. Later this year, the company will open a new archive facility within its flagship London store. In this case we can see some of the themes of the strategy in operation: the renewed appreciation and re-use of past heritage in today's conditions, the desire of the business to use the archive as a dynamic resource to inspire future innovation.

However successful the strategy is in encouraging businesses to make their own arrangements, it will still be necessary for many collections to be looked after by the network of the UK's national, local and university repositories. These vary in the provision that they make for business records. Until now, they have been an effective safety-net against outright loss of records. But in the current financial climate, we cannot assume that they will continue

to welcome large collections with potentially low usage. The fear has always been that, at a time when some businesses are most likely to fail, the repositories that might save the records will themselves be unable, through financial pressures, to respond. Local authority repositories in England and Wales, who hold around 75% of all deposited business records, are particularly under strain in the present climate. It will be necessary to encourage new entrants in the field or to hope that significant institutions, with more secure funding, will take greater responsibility.

*Raise the profile of business records with the public, and throughout the national archival network, while promoting wider usage and exploitation*

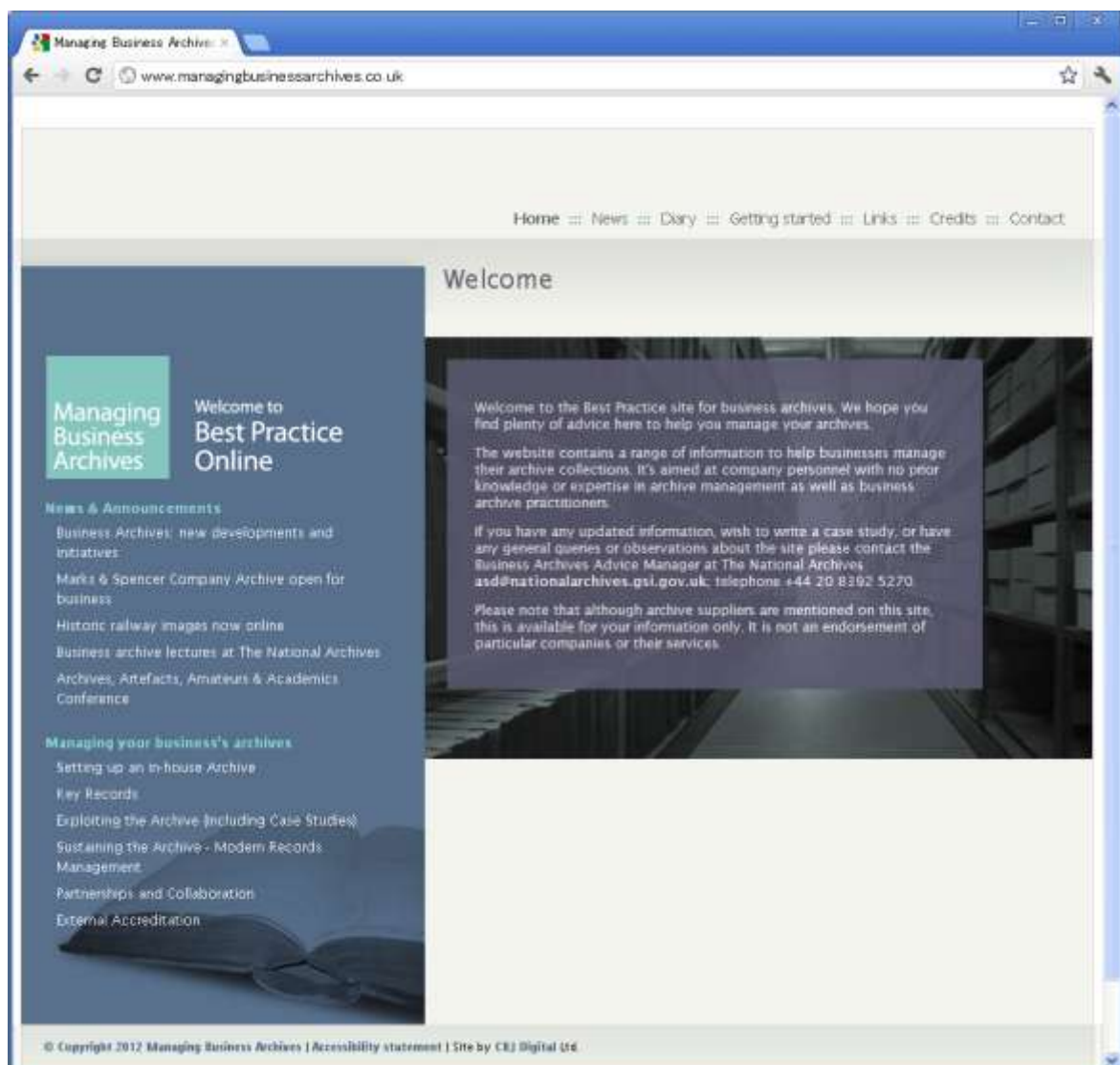
In the UK, business history has existed as a specialist discipline of interest to a very small number of practitioners. Yet business records chart wider trends in history and society and can be used in a variety of ways. This was recently illustrated in a television programme by the distinguished historian Niall Ferguson. The programme concerned the adoption of western modes of dress throughout the world. The example he used was taken from the customer records of the London tailor, Henry Poole & Co, effectively the founders of the Savile Row tailoring tradition. Their famous customer was none other than the Emperor Hirohito, when he was Crown Prince of Japan. So, Professor Ferguson made a point of global significance on the basis of the records of a small London firm, showing that business records can break out of the narrow field of use to which they have often been confined in the past. Professor Ferguson is perhaps unusually well equipped, by virtue of his past research in business history, to make such a point, but others may be encouraged by such an example to look beyond the normal range of sources used by mainstream historians.

At a more everyday level, several features of the Managing Business Archives website promote awareness of business archive news and events. The news section reports stories such as significant deposits of business records or the recent announcement by UNESCO of new inscriptions in the UK Memory of the World Register. Business archives, either as items or whole collections (such as the Bank of Scotland archives), contribute six out of the twenty new inscriptions. Also, there is a diary of business archive events, which maps out the year ahead in terms of local, national and international conferences, lectures and exhibitions. This information is also useful for planning purposes. It may seem a very obvious initiative to have such a diary of events, but it was only in recent months that the idea came to maturity.

*Raise standards in the care of business archives through best practice exemplars, professional training and an improved funding and support infrastructure*

This has been the goal that has been most quickly addressed by the strategy. A best practice website (Managing Business Archives) was launched at the same time as the strategy. The website contains a range of information to help businesses manage their archive collections. It is aimed at company personnel with no prior knowledge or expertise in archive management, as well as more experienced practitioners. The site features case studies of the use of business archives, a table of companies with professionally-managed archives, a diary of business archive events, as well as a range of other links and professional information. There is currently considerable activity by companies in the construction of new accommodation that fully meets standards for archive storage and further details are given below.

Image 3 – Managing Business Archives Website



## **Progress**

Finally, I would like to consider what has changed and what has been achieved since the launch of the strategies.

First, the strategies exist and that in itself is important. Issues that have been discussed randomly in the past, and often in response to a sudden crisis, have now been properly defined and addressed. The final strategy is a product of long discussion and refinement and while implementation may present certain difficulties, there is at least a unanimity of purpose from the outset. The number of people with an interest in business archives and history is modest and their influence has been further weakened by the fact that they often exist as separate groupings. Now they have something that binds their interests together and, through the strategy, their views acquire greater weight.

Second, in my experience, business has been flattered and business archivists helped by the recognition, at a national level, of the value of their archives and by the interest and concern of The National Archives. Until now corporate archives have existed at the edge of the archive sector, now they may feel that they have the new and higher status that they have long sought. There is still an issue over how corporate archives can adapt themselves in order to be eligible to apply for grant funding, but progress is being made here also.

Third, UK corporate archives are moving forward. There are more of them and they are making better provision for their archives. Both the London-based banking giant HSBC and Marks & Spencer will shortly have new premises for their archives. The major retailer, the John Lewis Partnership, is in the early stages of planning new premises that will bring together the records of the main business and their Cummersdale Textile Collection (presently widely separated) on a single site. Another old-established business, Clarks Shoes, is in the middle of a £1.5 million project to construct a new museum and archive store for the Clark family and business heritage collections, administered by a family trust, the Alfred Gillett Trust. The scale and ambition of these building projects underline the commitment of the businesses behind them. The appointment of professional staff and the construction of archival storage to modern standards confirms the arrival of business archives as full members of the UK archive sector.

In spite of a challenging economic climate, businesses are more likely to establish or enhance their archives rather than to consider closure as a cost-saving measure. It would be optimistic to believe that we will manage to preserve indefinitely all the corporate archives that exist at present. It is not in the nature of business for that to happen. A perusal of the published *Directory of Corporate Archives* (1997), produced by the Business Archives



Council, and a comparison with the corporate archives currently listed on ARCHON, the online directory of repositories maintained by The National Archives, shows much change. However, that may reflect nothing more than the constant evolution that there is in business, which is inevitably reflected in arrangements for the care of their archives. The closure or merging of one corporate archive is often balanced by the creation or enhancement of another. So the overall situation may have changed over fourteen years, but that does not necessarily mean that the change has been for the worse. Arguably, there has been a positive shift in sentiment, with businesses increasingly recognising their archives as a resource to exploit rather than a cost to bear.

Fourth, there has been a co-ordinated response to business failures, administrations and takeovers. The strategy has seen the creation of a six-person crisis management team, who keep in touch by email and gather intelligence and co-ordinate action when business records are seen to be at risk. Swift intervention has ensured that administrators are aware of the wider interest that attaches to these assets and that advice and practical help about options for deposit is on offer, should they ask for it. The team is designed to provide a breadth of coverage across the United Kingdom and there is naturally close co-operation with local archive services, where necessary.

### **A Final Thought**

There is one area that was overlooked in the preparation of the strategy. It was perhaps so focused on being a national strategy that it had nothing to say about global companies, headquartered overseas but with operations in the UK. Recently, the archivist of the Swiss pharmaceutical company F Hoffmann – La Roche Ltd came to The National Archives and lectured about their history in the UK, going back over 100 years. There is much in their central archives in Basel of relevance to British business, architectural and social history. How much may we find in the records of Japanese businesses that have been so prominent in Britain in recent years? It would be a welcome development if, as a result of the ICA Symposium in Tokyo, contacts were developed with Japanese colleagues such as the Kao Corporation and Toyota Motor Corporation.