

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP TO SAVE KEY BUSINESS RECORDS FOR THE NATION: Upper Clyde Shipbuilders

In 1971, when Upper Clyde Shipbuilders Ltd (UCS) went into liquidation, Michael Moss was the Surveying Officer for the Western Survey for the National Register of Archives (Scotland). He vividly recalls the campaign to rescue the records of UCS; reading the headlines, he knew instinctively that this was the big one. “These were iconic businesses whose names were familiar to households throughout the United Kingdom if not the world. They were not only long established but had a reputation for the excellence of their workmanship that was captured in two words – ‘Clyde Built’.”

However, securing the records of five major shipbuilders on the River Clyde was not an easy task. Upper Clyde Shipbuilders Ltd, was a consortium of the shipbuilding interests of: John Brown and Co. Ltd of Clydebank; the Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering Co. Ltd of Govan; Alexander Stephen and Sons of Linthouse; Charles Connell and Co. Ltd of Scotstoun; and Yarrow and Co. Ltd. It came into being in 1968 following upon the recommendations of the Geddes Committee of Inquiry into the Shipbuilding Industry (1965). The Upper Clyde Shipbuilders Yard was to set the bench mark not only for shipbuilding, but for industry as a whole in Britain. Yet, in 1971, the company went in to receivership and in 1972 Upper Clyde Shipbuilders Ltd was liquidated.

The eventual achievement of securing these collections was helped enormously by the fact that the liquidator appointed Robert C Smith, who was at the time chairman of the Business Archives Council of Scotland. From the outset, he had an understanding of the importance of these collections to the wider industrial heritage of Scotland, and as a result, despite his many pressing commitments, he was immensely supportive of the records being saved and preserved within the archive community. This demonstrated a need for communication between liquidators and archives.

Since the records were part of the assets of the now bankrupt enterprise, the liquidator was obliged to find a buyer; the records were therefore valued and advertised for sale. Fortunately when Prime Minister Edward Heath heard the news about the proposed sale, he immediately intervened and a deal was brokered whereby the records were secured for the nation. They were accepted in the autumn of 1972 by the National Records of Scotland (the then Scottish Records Office) as a gift and deposit, on the understanding they would remain permanently in the west.

The rescue of such voluminous records, which today stretch for over 300 linear metres in extent, was a challenge involving the survey of records in strong rooms, tunnels, basements, attics, and deserted offices. The persistence of those involved paid off with the discovery of many treasures, such as finding all the drawings of the Fairfield engines – including the very first triple expansion engines – and, at Charles Connell’s, the only extensive run of wage books to survive for any Clyde shipyard or engineering company. In John Brown’s yard it was discovered that the photographic department had an unrivalled collection of negatives dating back to the 1880s, and a huge strong room contained all the records of the yard back to the foundation of J & G Thomson in 1847, along with wartime utility underwear, and quantities of pickled fish ordered for some long-forgotten launch party!

In rescuing records it was empirical to capture material that related to every aspect of the companies – an early example of the holistic approach to collecting business archives in Scotland. This was particularly challenging, as none of the companies had a system for record keeping, apart from the drawing office stores. Due to the sheer volume of records and the time to secure funds to process the collections, it took many years, for the collections to be catalogued.

Today the UCS collections are divided between Glasgow City Archives who received the records of firms operating within the city boundaries – Connells and Fairfields – whilst those of Stephens joined records for the company already held by the University of Glasgow Archive Services, who also received the John Brown and Simon-Lobnitz records.

Since the transfer to the archives, the collections have been extensively exploited by researchers and enthusiasts, particularly model makers, and have formed the basis of several publications, as well as being used for academic research into the rise and fall of the shipbuilding industry, individual companies, industrial relations and wider social and economic histories. The key legacy for archivists and liquidators of the rescue of the UCS records is the excellent example it provides of the successful outcome from partnership working: that out of corporate failure something of the heritage of a business and its community can be preserved for future generations.

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