

BUSINESS ARCHIVES OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE: UNESCO's UK Memory of the World Register

Sometimes business archives can tell a story of huge national importance. Such records need to be identified, celebrated and made accessible to both scholars and the public at large. One way to do that is to raise awareness through a programme that recognises and promotes significant archive collections and the care and access provided by their owners.

One such scheme is the UK Memory of the World Register run by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). Protecting, preserving and promoting culture and cultural diversity is one of the central pillars of the work of UNESCO. The vision of its Memory of the World Programme is that the world's documentary heritage belongs to all and should be accessible to all. An international register recognising globally-important archive items and collections had existed for some time, but in 2009 UNESCO announced a brand new UK Memory of the World register which would celebrate important, but little-known, archive collections in this country. RBS Group Archives and National Library of Scotland (NLS) quickly embarked on a partnership to make a case for inclusion of the important records of the Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies 1695-1707 which each owned.

The Company of Scotland's plan to establish trading a colony on the Isthmus of Darien in Central America in the 1690s was a bid for Scotland – at that time still an independent nation – to establish an empire for itself. It proved to be enormously popular and what began as a business venture was soon transformed into a popular patriotic cause. The scheme's catastrophic failure forced Scotland towards political Union with England, finally enacted in 1707. Darien, therefore, was a key contributing factor in the formation of Great Britain; the consequent dissolution of the independent Scottish parliament; and the resulting shift in Scots' identity which, as Robert Burns saw it, turned his beloved homeland into 'England's province'. The Darien story was also of particular significance to RBS as it was the failure of the Company of Scotland that indirectly gave rise to the bank's foundation in 1727.

The joint submission was successful and in 2010 the records of Company of Scotland became one of the first ten archival collections placed on UNESCO's UK Memory of the World Register. For both institutions UNESCO's recognition of their Company of Scotland collections has been wholly advantageous. It does not carry any obligations beyond those which a good archive would anyway fulfil, but has raised their profile and spread awareness of the importance of the historical records they hold. In turn it is hoped that this will encourage more research into the Darien story. The announcement of the inscription also attracted positive coverage in national newspapers and on regional television channels.

To support the submission RBS Group Archives has made available more detailed online descriptions of its Company of Scotland records (microfilm copies of some of NLS's records had already been published). The award of UNESCO status was also followed up with a joint exhibition in NLS's exhibition space on George IV Bridge in central Edinburgh during the international arts festival in 2011. It attracted almost 27,000 visitors and brought together the two record holdings for the first time since the eighteenth century. Since 2010 further Scottish business archive collections have been similarly recognised by UNESCO.