

Asia-Pacific Economic and Business History Conference,
(Faculty of Business, Queensland University of Technology,
Gardens Point Campus, Brisbane, Saturday 18th February 2006)

"Has anyone been to the archive? : Using business archives"

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Acknowledgment:

Before beginning my presentation today I would like to acknowledge the support provided by the National Archive of Australia through the Ian Maclean Award.¹ Receipt of this award has made it possible for me to undertake some intensive research on the use made of Australian business archives. Further it has also enabled me to significantly increase the coverage of the *Guide to Australian Business Records*².

Many institutions collect business archives. In my research to date I have identified over 70 archival institutions in Australia that are either in-house business archives or collecting archives with business archives amongst their collections.

Why do these institutions collect business archives?

In-house archive collections are set up to support the business activities of the particular company. As a by-product they add to Australia's archival heritage. This is particularly the case when access to these records is made available to the general public rather than just employees. The archival heritage aspect is not the prime motivator for in-house archives; the motivation is tied to business outcomes.

Collecting institutions have been acquiring business archives from at least the 1940s. In the first instance this activity was taken up by what we today call the Manuscript Collections of the State Libraries and the National Library. This activity moved into University Libraries/Archives and regional library services in the mid to late 1950s. The major University collectors are the Noel Butlin Archive Centre and the University of Melbourne Archives who together hold well over 50% of business archives collections in Australia.

Universities such as the University of New England, the University of Wollongong, James Cook University, Charles Sturt University and the University of Newcastle are amongst institutions at the next level of University collecting.

In recent times collecting activities in the area of business archives has declined. Some of the reasons for this decline were outlined by Piggott and McCausland in an article published in the UK journal *Business Archives Principle and Practice* in May 2004.³

If collecting institutions are collecting business archives is anyone using the records?

Using Business Archives

Statistics on the use of business archives are not readily available. There is anecdotal evidence that says that there is steady use of business archives by students and academics. Use by students is difficult to verify if that use does not result in a published article, conference paper or monograph.

The same argument applies to academics. For example in an article "Accounting History in Australia: A survey of published works, 1975-99" Carnegie and Potter⁴ discuss "studies of surviving business records of firms" and "using accounting records in business history". When looked at very carefully these discussions do not reveal extensive use of business archives. In fact they rely on a very small number of examples.

There are statistics available about archival holdings and the numbers of visitors to archive reading rooms. These are the *Australian Archival Statistics*. Unfortunately due to a change of emphasis the statistics currently only cover the public records sector. Statistics for collections such as the University of Melbourne and the Noel Butlin Archives Centre stop at 2001.

For internal management purposes both the Noel Butlin Archives Centre and the University of Melbourne Archives maintain statistical information on what records are used and who uses those records. This means that a picture could be developed of what use is made of the two institutions collections. The difficulty is that we are only talking about 50+% of the business archive collections in Australia. As mentioned earlier, over 70 archival institutions have been identified as holding business archives. This means that the remaining collections are spread across these 70 institutions.

As part of my research I wanted to discover, if possible, the level of use being made of business archives. In addition I also thought I might be able to learn something of what records were being used. This aspect of my work is still a work in progress. In the absence of statistics I decided to do a literature search to see if patterns of use could be determined. Journals that publish articles based on the use of business archive research were targeted. I was particularly keen to locate articles relating to Australian business.

Six referred journals for the period 1996 to 2004 were examined. The journals were:

- *Accounting Business & Finance History* (UK)
- *Accounting Historians Journal* (USA)
- *Accounting History* (Aus/NZ)
- *Australian Economic History Review*(Aus/NZ)
- *Business History* (UK)
- *Business History Review*(USA)

Business History, *Business History Review* and *Australian Economic History Review* were chosen for what I hope, are obvious reasons. The accounting history journals were chosen as this is an area has not been included to any

large degree in previous archival studies in the area of Australian business archives.

For each Journal I determined how many articles had been published, how many of these related to totally or substantially to Australia and how many of these Australian articles cited archives in footnotes and/or references.

	Articles	Aust Articles	Aust using Archives
Accounting Bus & Fin Hist (UK)	151	8	3
Accounting Hist Journal (USA)	110	1	1
Accounting History (Aust)	80	13	7
Aust Eco Hist Rev (Aus/NZ)	121	81	30
Business History (UK)	186	11	8
Business Hist Rev (USA)	121	0	0
Total	769	114	49

44.3% of Articles cited use of archives

Journal of the Historical Society of Queensland (2002 -2004)	41	41	23
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56.1% of Articles cited use of archives

From the data gathered it appears that less than half the articles published relating to Australia cite the use of archives. It should be noted that many of these articles cited records held in public archives, such as the national Archives of Australia. This means that fewer than the 44.3% cited use of business archives.

To see if the economic/business history community was the same or different to the general historical community I had a quick look at the cited use of archives by authors in the *Journal of the Historical Society of Queensland* for the years 2002-2004. This brief examination revealed 56.1% of the articles published cited use of archives. It seems that the general historical community are making more use of archives than the economic/business history community.

Articles that reference business archives can also be found in other journals not specifically aimed at economic/business history. One such example is Catherine Welch "The archaeology of business networks: the use of archival records in case study research", *Journal of Strategic Marketing*. Articles can also be found in journals such as *Historical Records of Australian Science*, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, *Labour History* and *Archives and Manuscripts*.

With regard to published business histories I have identified about 80 as being published between 1996 and 2004. Many of these cited the use of archival records but the majority did not. Other published works on Australian business history reflected that same balance in non-use of business archives. One exception was *The Big End of Town*⁵. This is a study of corporate leadership in Australian in twentieth century Australia and makes extensive use of archival sources. In fact a by-product of the authors research was a

small book *Australian Business Records: An Archival Guide*. Data from this publication was very generously made available by the researchers and formed part of the initial data for the *Guide to Australian Business Records*.

The use made of business archives by genealogists and local historians is largely unknown. Increasingly labour historians and social historians are making use of business archives. Further research is required to determine the extent of these non-traditional users of business archives.

What does this say about the use being made of business archives? One interpretation is that business archives are under used. Alternatively it could mean that collecting institutions are not accessioning the right records. It may be that business/economic historians want to use records that are not held in collections.

Barriers to use of Business Archives

The perennial complaint from historians is that archivists do not document the records in their collections in a way that make the records easily accessible. There are any number of journal articles and conference papers that address this debate.

From an archivist's prospective the adequacy of arrangement and description of varies considerably between institutions. The level of resources and available professional archival expertise is a continuing problem. This is particularly so in the smaller institutions and some of those collections not managed by trained archival staff.

In manuscript collections records are often "catalogued" using library methods. This can mean that it is extremely difficult to identify archives of interest to researchers.

The larger archival institutions and some smaller institutions have published information on their archival holdings on the Internet. By doing this these institutions have highlighted the inadequacy in data which means it is not easily understood by potential users. Problems I have encountered include:

- Records creator is not clearly identified
- Transferring entity cited as the creator of the records when it clearly is not the creator
- Relationships between entities are either not expressed or not clearly expressed
- Non creating entities cited as creator eg a park and a river
- Records attributed to a creator when date ranges clearly indicate that the creator could not have created them
- Lack of a standard approach to documenting creating entities and records
- Web sites are not updated in a timely manner. In one case I found a web site that had not been updated since 1996.

Incomplete and/or poor documentation or inadequate database systems mean that use can be difficult. It also means that potential users of business archives are less likely to locate material that is of interest to their research.

The question of are archives collecting the right records is one that requires dialogue between archivists and historians/researchers.

Conclusion:

What does this say about the use made of business archives? It can be argued that the so-called traditional use made of business archives, the production of business histories has declined in recent years. However researchers have been thinking laterally and have begun to use business archives in new ways and in many cases these researchers come from a different branch of historical research to those normally associated with business archives.

I would like to think that the future of business archives can only be enhanced by greater use by business and economic historians. In addition new uses of business archives and new users, not just traditional users need to be encouraged.

¹ See Ian Maclean Award, National Archives of Australia
[http://www.naa.gov.au/about_us/ian_maclean_award.html]

² The *Guide to Australian Business Records* can be found at <http://www.gabr.net.au>

³ Michael Piggott and Dr Sigrid McCausland, The Australian Business Archives Scene: Comment and Comparisons, *Business Archives Principles and Practice*, No 87 May 2004, pp 1-15.

⁴ Garry D. Carnegie and Brad N. Potter, Accounting History in Australia: A Survey of Published Works, 1975-99, *Australian Economic History Review*, Vol 40, No 3, November 200, pp 287-313.

⁵ Grant Fleming, David Merrett and Simon Ville, *The Big End of Town, Big Business and Corporate Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.