

NEWS OF THE PROFESSION

The Modern Records Centre

The Modern Records Centre of the University of Warwick Library in Coventry owes its existence to the foresight of a number of academics at this new university¹ in the early 1970s and the generosity of the Leverhulme Trust in responding to their proposals. However, even their foresight could scarcely have envisaged the situation reached by 1993, when the Centre, by now a national collection of primary sources in excess of 5 kilometres, was relocated in a new, purpose-built repository, shared with the independently functioning archives of a major international company.

Something of the background to the Centre's establishment is provided by a paper on the primary materials of industrial relations by George Bain (one of the leading figures in the Centre's foundation) and Gillian Woolven.² George Sayers Bain, who went on to become Principal of the London Business School, had as colleagues in the Centre's foundation, Professor Malcolm Anderson, Professor Keith Cowling, Professor Royden Harrison and the University Librarian, P. E. Tucker.³ As the Academic Committee for the Centre, they were for a time joined by Dr Chris Cook, then director of the Modern Political Records Project at the London School of Economics. This was a locating rather than a collecting project and Dr Cook's presence was of considerable help in a number of ways, not least in drawing the Centre's attention to the existence of the personal papers of Sir Victor Gollancz, for which his daughter was seeking an appropriate repository. The present writer is also privileged to have been a member of the Academic Committee of the Centre (not merely in attendance at its meetings) from the outset. Academic Committee members in turn serve on the Centre's Advisory Board, which includes distinguished outside academics and public figures.

Further context to the Centre's foundation is provided by a report presented to the Social Science Research Council by John Pemberton (of the University of Warwick Library) in 1971: "The national provision of printed ephemera in the social sciences".⁴ (Although the Modern Records Centre cannot simply be equated with the "National Documents Library" which Pemberton advocated.) Nationally a survey of trade union records, sponsored by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), begun in 1960, had ended prematurely, whereas a Scottish Labour History Society project commenced in 1964 eventually produced a major *Catalogue* in 1978.⁵

¹ M. Shattock, *Making a University. A celebration of Warwick's first 25 years*, the University, 1991.

² G.S. Bain and G.B. Woolven, "The primary materials of British industrial relations", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. ix, no. 3 (November 1971).

³ The Centre is a department of the University Library, its staffing and support costs being met from the Library's resources, with the University Librarian as Director.

⁴ University of Warwick Library Occasional Publications no. 1.

⁵ These and other developments were examined by the present writer in "Labour archives in the United Kingdom", *Archivum*, vol. xxvii (1980), pp. 147-167.

Research involvement in the records of employers' organisations had been manifested by an SSRC grant for preliminary work on the records of the predecessors of the Confederation of British Industry. This can be seen as an important step in the move towards their eventual full opening to research by deposit from 1979 onwards, the Modern Records Centre being selected as the place of deposit.⁶

Employers' and trade associations' and unions' records are, and have always been, the principal collecting objectives of the Centre, but within a potentially wider field. This has been defined as primary sources for British social, political and economic history, with especial reference to the history of industrial relations and of industrial politics and labour history, with some interest in pressure groups and political organisations and, more recently, the history of the motor industry, and the records of individuals in any of these contexts. As its collecting Policy Statement indicates, the Centre observes (and always has done) certain geographical and subject constraints on its collecting activity.

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Throughout its existence the Centre has relied on the voluntary co-operation of those organisations and individuals it has approached for the deposit of records, having no statutory powers, or special relationships with the organisations of either employers or employed⁷ to guarantee its success. Its present situation, as the designated repository for both the CBI and the TUC, and with ongoing relationships with both these bodies (as, indeed, with many of its depositors), means that the Centre has a standing which it is difficult to ignore. This position is enhanced by similarly ongoing and interactive relations with a number of major trade unions and several employers' and trade associations. It was, however, not always thus and initially the principal incentive which the Centre could offer was to relieve hard-pressed administrators of the burdens imposed on them by the care of archives and non-current records and research demands for access to these.

It is not simply by lifting the burdens that the Centre has developed to its present size – it has benefited to an unforeseeable extent from the enormous structural change (to put it at its most neutral) which has affected industry and therefore the organisations related to it over the past two decades. At its simplest, the amalgamation movement within trade unionism⁸ has meant that as unions have merged so offices, both headquarters and regional, have become redundant and the papers they contained have been put at risk or become available for deposit, depending on the attitude of their administrators and the speed of approach of archivists. As with unions, so, to a lesser extent, with employers' organisations. In the area of actual manufacturing, rationalisation, asset-stripping, the effects of recessions and foreign competition, automation, singly or together, have led to mergers and closures of firms or plants, removing much of the United Kingdom's manufacturing

⁶ G. McDonald, "Insight into industrial politics: the Federation of British Industries papers, 1925", *Business Archives*, no. 38 (June 1973), pp. 22–28. M. Wilcox, *The Confederation of British Industry predecessor archive*, University of Warwick Library Occasional Publications no. 12.

⁷ Other than the valuable contacts provided by a number of academics, especially successive members of the Academic Committee.

⁸ This included, for example, the formation in 1993 of Unison from three public sector unions, the Confederation of Health Service Employees, NALGO, and the National Union of Public Employees.

capacity and its records with it. Traditionally local record offices have been regarded as the natural location for the records of businesses within their administrative areas, but the multi-site, in some cases, multi-national, concern poses special problems which cannot always be dealt with in the traditional context.⁹ The Centre's important holdings of motor industry business records, received under an agreement of 1983 with the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust, are a case in point. So, too, is an accession currently in preparation from a former engineering conglomerate based in the Black Country, but operating at its peak as a multi-site undertaking.

There was relatively little guidance for the Centre's staff in 1973 as to the exact nature and likely quantity of the records which were to be sought in its various fields of interest. The TUC survey mentioned above had identified minute books, but gave little indication of quantity and certainly did not prepare the Centre for the sheer volume of records which had survived in some cases, such as major unions with good basement storage (e.g. the National Union of Railwaymen at the original Unity House), or small unions resident in the same office for several decades (the Wallpaper Workers Union). General archival competence and experience facilitated the construction of a relatively simple scheme of arrangement (accession number + 1: minutes, 2: financial records, 3: correspondence, 4: archive set of publications of the organisation, etc.), which has stood the test of time quite well. It is applicable to union, employers' organisation or business records, and, to a lesser extent, to individuals' papers. It is not, however, applied to every accession in the Centre (for example, the papers of the Socialist activist, writer and historian, Reg Groves, were so diverse in content and arrangement that a different approach, using subjects as the basis of arrangement, was employed).

Even before the photo-copier, word-processor and laser-printer (which make the "paperless office" a humourless joke for the hard pressed archivist), the stencil duplicator and carbon paper were capable of creating paper mountains. These had often been destroyed before the Centre's staff arrived on the scene: for example, when seeking the records of some West Midlands MPs, we found that the limited office facilities available to Members of Parliament meant that those representing a constituency in several Parliaments tended to instruct their secretaries to destroy non-current files every five years. An MP's "papers" would therefore usually be those of the last five years representing a particular constituency. With institutions, too, the destruction of all but core records (minute books, annual accounts, a set of annual reports and monthly or quarterly journals, if issued) had also often been the course of action chosen (or forced by circumstance).

An even greater problem than this paring down of records was for the Centre's staff to be faced on a short site visit with a cupboard or room of records which had been allowed to accumulate. In such circumstances the present writer devised an "ends to middle" method of assessment. Based on two assumptions: that something was likely to be worth preserving, but that not everything would or could be, the decision thus lay along a horizontal scale between 0 and 100% selection. Whether it was nearer 25, 50 or 75%, or some other figure, depended on the nature and significance of the organisation and of the records it had preserved. Crude as it may be, it does provide a *modus operandi*, which can then be refined

⁹ The present writer has attended with interest the first two international conferences on regional business archives in Europe, at Dortmund, 1991, and Mikkeli, 1993.

by the application of obvious criteria (e.g. elimination of piles of petty cash books, other papers relating to routine, minor, financial transactions, and files about conference organisation) and less obvious ones. Foremost amongst these is the search for what could be termed the records of inter-action (e.g. inter-union disputes or amalgamation negotiations, a manufacturer's relations with customers or suppliers, trade association relations with unions or with government), since these files often throw a strong light on the body creating the file.

On occasion bulk would be welcomed, as in the case of the long run of copy out-letters from the General Secretary's office of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, or the company secretary's and solicitor's files of the car, van and tractor manufacturer Standard-Triumph, left in a time-warp until the space which housed them was needed for other purposes. In each case, the substantial records (those of Standard-Triumph being extensively weeded) are valued not only for their specific information content, but as surviving representatives of types of records which other unions and other businesses have not preserved.

The Centre is not only interested in records in bulk. One of its prized possessions is the single diary of a letter-carrier in Victorian London, acquired by purchase from a manuscript-dealer and published in a popular, edited version (removing repetitive detail) as *A Postman's Round* (reprinted 1991). One may suppose that few postmen or their working-class colleagues kept diaries, that only a few of those written have survived, and that fewer still reach the market, but this kind of personal insight into the world of work and family relationships is a category of record for which the Centre is always on the look-out. As a general point of policy, the Centre is prepared to purchase records, if the transaction seems reasonable and necessary and the price asked is considered "fair". (Most accessions are received, as a matter of course, as deposits on indefinite loan, with ownership remaining with the individual or institutional depositor.) It is mainly personal papers which come on to the market, although one defunct trade union's records, those of the Federation of Sailmakers, were acquired from a bookseller.

At an early stage, conscious provision was made for the beginning of a collection in the Centre of printed ephemera, which now includes well over three and a half thousand catalogued items, acquired by gift, purchase, exchange, and casual "picking-up" from a variety of sources. Originally conceived as the catch-all for broadsheets, handbills and leaflets, its scope has widened to take in published pamphlets (including, for example, some British Union of Fascists items), industrial relations booklets, a Victorian shop assistant's letter, describing the vicissitudes of her working life in a London store, material on the UK debate on the question of Europe, railway mission publications, and material on environmental issues and Guild Socialism, to make a small selection from the variety of topics covered by the Miscellaneous Series (MSS.21).

Similar material, much of an ephemeral nature, supplemented by press-cuttings on the one hand, and by some monographs and issues of house journals on the other, has been built up as a secondary documentation collection on the motor industry (MSS.226X), side-by-side with the company records deposited by the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust. There is heavy collector demand for motor industry publicity and technical brochures, but by gift and occasional judicious purchase the Centre has built up a collection which is proving of use to the researcher. Especially sought are general introductions to a company, a particular works, or a specific product, or retrospective brochures on the anniversary of a

particular vehicle type. Small and specialised, as well as large, manufacturers are covered, as are those such as Ford and Vauxhall (GM), for which the Centre has no archives. So significant is the motor industry to the Centre's work, that a Sources Booklet on its relevant holdings is planned for 1996, the official centenary year of the British motor industry. As well as business records, this booklet will cover the Centre's extensive motor industry industrial relations holdings, such as the papers of Dick Etheridge, senior convenor at Austin, Longbridge,¹⁰ and the TUC files on unionisation at Fords.

Press-cuttings are referred to above, and collections of these feature in a number of accessions. To be acceptable to the Centre, they should be subject-specific, created by, or on behalf, of the organisation or individual concerned. Examples include the volumes compiled by the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants on the 1907 and 1911 rail strikes; the cuttings-albums of the white collar trade union, the Association of Scientific, Technical & Managerial Staffs; cuttings-albums of the Young Women's Christian Association and Amnesty International. As a matter of interest, a frequently consulted research source developed from a cuttings collection which began as the means by which the Centre followed developments in the sit-in at the Triumph motorcycle factory at Meriden, 1973–1974, which became for a time the Meriden Workers' Co-operative.

Ephemera, press-cuttings collections and secondary documentation are, in a way, fringe embellishments to the central core collection, from both employers and employed, which the Centre has built up over the past two decades, and which it is continuing to develop, under pressure from both its own collecting policies and from the depositors themselves. Major industries and areas of work covered by its holdings include construction, engineering and metal-working, printing, transport, public service including education and posts & telephones, and banking employment. Excluded, either by "demarcation" or by the conscious decision of organisations to retain their records, are agriculture, footwear, the furniture industry, the textile industry, and retail trade. The records of various other bodies connected with the world of work are also held, including the Institute of Personnel Management, the Industrial Society, the Industrial Participation Association, and the professional management body, the Operational Research Society. The Centre holds the records of only one international trade union organisation: those of the International Transport Workers Federation, which has its headquarters in London. These are, however, of special significance, given the truly international character of transport operations, and the ITF's strong fight against Fascism, well covered in its surviving records. Through its active membership of the International Association of Labour History Institutions, and contacts with the International Institute of Social History at Amsterdam the Centre's links to the international research and archive community are further strengthened.

Interest and political groups whose records are held are less easy to categorise, ranging as they do from the Anti-Concorde Project (which opposed supersonic travel on environmental grounds) to the Howard League for Penal Reform. The Left, especially the extra-parliamentary, Trotskyist left, is strongly represented, as is the issue of nuclear disarmament. A useful working distinction has evolved between the records of the political and industrial wings of the labour movement, the former being the concern of the National Museum of Labour History, Manchester, which holds the archive of the Labour Party. Good working relations exist

¹⁰ *Information Leaflet* no. 8.

between the National Museum and the Centre, and some rationalisation of holdings is in progress. Aspects of the welfare of children and young people feature in the records of Lady Allen of Hurtwood, campaigner for nursery school and adventure playground provision, and the welfare of children in institutions, and those of the Young Women's Christian Association. Holdings which are more difficult to categorise include the manuscript sermons of the Methodist minister and novelist, the Rev. Silas Hocking, although they do relate to such social issues as child welfare, temperance and business morality.¹¹

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From its earliest days publication, in the widest sense of the term, has been a major objective of the Centre, with the intention of informing the research community of the resources accumulating in the Centre.¹² During the period of the Centre's development advances in information technology, notably desk-top publishing, have facilitated a more professional-looking product, but the basic principles of the Centre's publication policy were established at an early stage and it has not proved necessary to alter them radically. Central to this policy has been the development of a summary description, if necessary on the basis of the first, basic shelf-arrangement, supplemented by further analysis, but in many cases prior to full cataloguing (which remains, however, the ultimate objective for each and every accession).

Given the deteriorating financial climate during much of its existence, the Centre was fortunate to be able to draw on a Library publications fund, from which its publications could be financed, with sales revenue renewing the fund for future titles. Costing in a specialised and limited market, with a primary objective to get copies into the hands of individual researchers, has been a difficult act of "guesstimating", especially as normal trade rates have always been allowed for. However, sixteen years after publication of the *Guide* (1977), this side of the Centre's activity still flourishes, which suggests that some right decisions have been made.

Six months after its foundation, the Centre's first *Information Leaflet* appeared, initially a quarterly A4 sheet, which has now evolved into a twice-yearly A5 folded leaflet. The Centre's Academic Committee has chosen A5 as the preferred format for the Centre's publications, with the exception of its *Guide* and *Supplement* series, where the quantity and complexity of information involved require the space of A4. This format is also used for the detailed lists, which are the ultimate objective for all accessions and which are used as the input to the *National Inventory of Documentary Sources* microfiche series, as well as to the National Register of Archives.

Both the Register, a central collection of finding-aids in London, and the commercial *Inventory*, launched in 1983, have played an important part in attracting researchers to the Centre, by facilitating access to its catalogues. Information on the Centre's holdings has also been disseminated through such published guides as *British Archives* and *Sources in British Political History* and by source articles contributed by the Centre's staff to a variety of journals.

¹¹ Richard Storey, "A note on business attitudes in the sermons of the Rev. Silas Hocking", *Business Archives* 48 (1982), pp. 31-34.

¹² In practice it has been found that the printed finding-aid series also serves as a useful *aide-mémoire* for staff and can assist the induction of new staff and expedite the answering of enquiries at a distance by the provision of photo-copied extracts.

The first *Guide* of 1977 was intended to serve a two-fold purpose: to render account to the Leverhulme Trust for its substantial start-up grant, which came to an end in that year, and to provide potential researchers with a concise overview of the Centre's holdings. No repository, other than one deliberately limited by policy to an in-house operation, can thrive in a vacuum and the Modern Records Centre was no exception. Rescue-preservation-exploitation are the three principal aims and the necessity of attracting researchers, from the campus and beyond, was soon realised.

The Centre's publications are not restricted to the *Guides* and the *Supplements*. Two archive groups have been the subject of published handlists, both the records of legal cases involving the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants and affecting important aspects of labour legislation: *The Taff Vale Case* of 1901 and the *Osborne Case* of 1909. In 1980 the perceived need to produce a guide to resources in the Centre for women's studies gave rise to the idea of a series of "Sources Booklets", the first of which, *Women at work and in society*, appeared in that year. The execution of the idea proved more difficult than was anticipated, involving not only abstracting from completed finding-aids, but also examining likely (and unlikely) uncatalogued holdings for relevant material. When the time came to prepare a new edition of *Women at work and in society* (1991) it required a researcher's work for a year, which would not have been possible without a grant from the Economic & Social Research Council. The scope of the Sources Booklet series has therefore been widened, to include the publication of outlines of, or introductions to, such major archives as those of the Confederation of British Industry's predecessors, the International Transport Workers' Federation, and the Trades Union Congress deposited registry files 1920-1960. The latter is in the form of an alphabetically arranged series of subject paragraphs, surveying the sources within the deposit for particular topics and giving the principal blocks of references.

The Centre's publications are designed to serve, and increase, its research community. Research use of the Centre is, in the nature of things, primarily academic, although not exclusively so, and international. Its facilities are available without restriction and without charge to all serious researchers.¹³ By "serious researcher" is understood anyone whose work is at an appropriate level and in an area likely to benefit from the Centre's resources. This may include a sixth-form school student preparing a detailed study for a public examination, a family historian seeking details of forebears in union records, an amateur local labour historian, perhaps writing the centenary history of a trades council, as well as professional biographers or non-academic historians of the motor industry. In the area of academic research, the most frequent users are postgraduates and established academics. Undergraduate use is by no means discouraged, especially on an individual basis for second and third year students working on longer assessed essays, but mass use at this level is considered neither feasible nor desirable.

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In conclusion, a short resumé of the Centre's funding and infra-structure may not be out of place. As already indicated, the generous start-up grant from the Leverhulme Trust paid for two archivists and a records assistant for the Centre's

¹³ Other than a restriction which may be imposed by a depositor, such as a thirty-year rule or the obtaining of prior written permission; other than charges for services, such as photo-copying or media use.

first four years. Using the simple concept of a person-year of employment, rather than trying to allow for the varying effects of inflation since 1973, it is noteworthy that outside funding, most notably from the Leverhulme Trust, but also from the British Library and the Economic & Social Research Council, has produced 20.25 professional and four back-up staff years. From the outset, the infra-structure (accommodation, communications, transport of accessions, administration) has been funded by the University Library, which since 1979 has provided the two permanent professional posts (three from 1 October 1993) and, with some interruptions, one support staff member. As a department of the University Library, the Centre has no separate budget allocation, costs being absorbed within the general Library budget (although professional staff are not interchangeable).

Some years ago, the efforts of a funding working party of the Centre's Advisory Board produced a small sum from donations which the University's centralised financial administration has allowed the Centre to retain as a Development Fund. This gives welcome, if limited, freedom of action, for example in the purchase of extra items of equipment and sets of reference works, ephemera, and if the occasion arose, archives for the Centre's holdings, as well as permitting the occasional buying-in of cataloguing assistance. The Centre from time to time manages to secure "assistance in kind" with deposits – the provision of archive boxes or payment of transport costs – and occasionally receives an administration fee, in the form of an *ex gratia* payment; less frequently still, the gift of papers¹⁴ may be regarded as a form of financial gain.¹⁵ In the present financial climate affecting the functioning of public bodies, which has changed vastly since 1973, it is essential to seek every opportunity to reduce costs or create income and to be seen to be doing so.

A principal objective in the "search for a millionaire benefactor" which gave rise to the Centre's Development Fund was the need to finance adequate accommodation, for which central government funding of universities made no provision.¹⁶ This accommodation should be purpose-built for archive storage and consultation (British Standard 5454) and allow for at least some future expansion of holdings. The solution to the problem came in 1990 from an unexpected quarter. The British Petroleum Company plc had instituted a policy of decentralisation and had decided to open its archives to research for the first time (initially to 1954). To do this, BP management considered that association with an established repository on a university campus, with a good record of attracting researchers from the UK and abroad, was essential.

BP consulted three universities, none of which could be expected to have empty repository space sufficient for its current (2 miles of records) and future requirements. In the event Warwick's proposals were accepted and site clearance began in the autumn of 1991 for an extension to the University Library on four floors, two of which, more or less self-contained, would be for a record repository and

¹⁴ The most generous gift has been that of the personal papers of Sir Victor Gollancz, amounting to some tens of thousands of items, containing letters of intrinsic value, as well as adding up to a very rich source of political, social and literary history.

¹⁵ Most material in the Centre is held as a deposit on definite loan, with the transferring individual or institution retaining their right of ownership.

¹⁶ For the national context of this problem, not unique to Warwick, see the SCONUL/Society of Archivists Report and the Discussion Document, *The Role and Resources of University Repositories* (1989).

the upper two for expansion of the University Library. Financing of the new building was shared between the University and the Company, which leases its accommodation and employs its own archives staff and historian. The basic structure of the building was completed and the two lower floors fitted out by New Year 1993 and both repositories were in operation and the joint search-room open to the public in late April 1993. Each repository is an independent entity, but supervision of the shared search-room is undertaken by the Modern Records Centre staff, who call on their BP colleagues for assistance to researchers using the BP archive. Early experience suggests that there are no major difficulties inherent in such an arrangement, and each group of archivists benefits from the presence of colleagues working in different subject areas. Researchers potentially benefit from a further concentration of nationally and internationally significant records.

The Modern Records Office thus moves towards the millennium well housed, though not yet staffed at the numerical level which would enable it to carry out to the full its multiplying roles. The fact that it is already at the start of the third decade of its existence belies the doubts of some traditionalists within the archives profession, some of whom still view the "specialist repository" with distrust. For those responsible for the Modern Records Centre, the facts speak for themselves: over five kilometres of records (a figure which grows by the month) have been saved from neglect or likely destruction and, to a greater or lesser extent, made available for research. It would be difficult now to accommodate such extensive and complex holdings within a national archive structure which did not include the Modern Records Centre.

The address of the Modern Records Centre is: University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, Great Britain. Tel. -44-203-52 42 19. Fax -44-203-52 42 11.

Richard Storey