Trust me, I’m from the Archives: Building relationships with depositors of business archives

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For over 50 years, Australian archivists have been collecting business archives from companies and businesses, and making those records available for research. This paper examines the circumstances in which businesses entrust an archives with their history and the evidence of their past operations, and discusses the policies and procedures in regard to acquisition, documentation, disposal, access and outreach, that a collecting archives, such as the Noel Butlin Archives Centre at the Australian National University, adopts to encourage that trust.

The Reader’s Digest runs a survey each year of Australia’s most trusted professions – unsurprisingly, archivists do not appear in the 40 professions that participants are asked to rank, but I would like to think that we would be up there with paramedics, firefighters, nurses and teachers, rather than at the other end with journalists, car salesmen and telemarketers. While all archivists will hopefully inspire trust, for those working in a collecting archives, the issue of trust is a crucial one as we are asking external organisations to trust us with their records: to trust that we will preserve them, document them, administer access to them, and make decisions about their retention and disposal. In this paper I am referring specifically to trust in relation to the collecting of business archives.

In Australia, a number of archival institutions collect business archives: the Noel Butlin Archives Centre at the Australian National University collects Australia-wide and our collecting policy specifies business archives of national significance. The University of Melbourne Archives collects within the state of Victoria, State manuscript libraries which are part of State Libraries collect within their respective states, and other universities and regional archives collect business archives within their region. Some large businesses maintain their own archives, including banks, but increasingly these archives are becoming more inaccessible. For example, the BHP-Billiton Archives has divested itself of professional archivists and relocated its archives from a purpose-built repository to commercial records storage. Researchers report that their enquiries are unanswered.

Business archives in Australia, with the exception of those of government enterprises, are not subject to provisions of the Commonwealth and State archival legislation. Instead they are subject to provisions within company

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2 http://www.archives.anu.edu.au
and taxation legislation which, while they refer to the ‘maintaining’ and ‘keeping’ of records, such as a register of shareholders, minutes of directors meetings and general meetings, and financial books of accounts, they are remarkably silent on how long such records should be retained. One exception is section 286 of the Commonwealth Corporations Act 2001 which refers to the retention of financial records only: ‘The financial records must be retained for 7 years after the transactions covered by the records are completed.’

Many companies rely on the legal statute of limitations, which may be 6 years or a longer period, depending on the nature of the material, as a guide to an appropriate retention period. Records which are already or are likely to be involved in legal proceedings are required to be retained, but there is no legal requirement to retain business records for archival research. In these circumstances it may appear surprising that there are any business archives in Australia at all.

The first deposit of business archives in the Noel Butlin Archives Centre came in 1953. Noel Butlin, an economic historian at the Australian National University, was holidaying in Newcastle and called in at the offices of the Australian Agricultural Company. This company was formed in 1824 making it the second-oldest company in Australia (the Bank of New South Wales, now Westpac, was formed one year earlier). He asked about their records and was informed that he was just in time as they had gathered all the old records to dispose of as they were moving premises. In later years he would recall a large quantity of records covered in coal dust, piled in a loading bay ready to be sent to be incinerated. These records along with the records from the London office of the Company acquired later are now one of our most valuable and used collections and are listed on the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register.

It is significant to note that in 1953 the Australian National University was only seven years old and had no archives itself. Butlin arranged for the transfer of the records to Canberra to enable his own research, constructing a series of national accounting estimates and in particular calculating private investment by Australian companies in the nineteenth century. The records of other companies were systemically sought in the next few years: the records of Goldsbrough Mort and Company, Australian Estates Company, Australian Mercantile Land and Finance Company, Elder, Smith and Company, and Mort and Company are among those collected at this time. These records supported Butlin’s work and that of colleagues in the Economic History department particularly in relation to the pastoral industry. In these early days, deposit agreements were often simply conversations between the

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4 B Howarth and E Maidment (eds), Light from the Tunnel: Collecting the Archives of Australian Business and Labour at the Australian National University 1953-2003, Friends of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Canberra, 2004, p. 34
Professor (he became Professor of Economic History in 1962) and a member of staff with an exchange of correspondence to confirm transfer arrangements.

Obviously, trust is operating here: companies were trusting that Butlin and his academic colleagues would use the records responsibly to undertake research of national importance. The companies were happy not to have the problem of storing the records, and to make them available for this privileged but not public access. Butlin responded to an official visit by the National Librarian Harold White, saying ‘firms were not willing to surrender confidential records to a ‘public’ library while they were prepared to pass them over to a restricted access repository at a university.’\(^5\) White, by the way, had demanded that the State Libraries were the proper repositories for business archives and that the University should cease its operations in this area.

As the operation grew, professional archivists were employed and more formal arrangements developed: the basic terms were that the records continued to be owned by the company, that they were the final arbiters in terms of access and disposal, and that the Archives provided storage in return for which the records were available for access by bona fide researchers. Assurances were given that, if the company wished, any work resulting from research could be vetted by the company prior to publication or submission of the postgraduate thesis. In practice, few companies exercised this right. An important point to note here is that the records of commercial rivals were being collected, and the archives was also now collecting the records of trade unions.

After that initial influx of records, transfers of business archives generally resulted from takeovers, mergers and reorganisations of companies. For example, the transfer of records by CSR Limited (formerly the Colonial Sugar Refining Company) concerned their extensive cane-growing and sugar refining operations in Australia and Fiji which were being sold off and are now wholly divested by the company. When Burns, Philp and Company, an existing depositor, imploded and was forced to vacate its substantial headquarters in Bridge Street, Sydney, a second much larger deposit of business records relating to their extensive operations in Australia and the Pacific was transferred to the Archives.

For our existing long-standing depositors, we seek to justify the original trust that they had in our academic colleagues and to demonstrate that archivists operate with professional standards and that we will honour the spirit of the original agreements made between academic staff and companies.

\(^5\) Noel Butlin, ‘Comments on Mr White’s visit to Director’, March 1957, reprinted in *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 19, no. 2, p. 151
One challenge has been the emergence of genealogists as researchers. Though not mentioned, it can be assumed that when companies originally agreed to access to their records by bona fide scholars, they would not have considered family historians within the definition of bona fide scholar. They would have been thinking of academic staff of the University, and postgraduate students under their supervision in the area of economic history or perhaps more broadly in Australian political history. Perhaps social historians, labour historians and local historians would have been included in the definition, but definitely not journalists. It is unlikely that they would have foreseen the use of their records by heritage architects, industrial archaeologists, railway enthusiasts, biographers, and other research specialisations that are common today. And of course, today our academic researchers come from universities all over Australia and from other countries.

So it has been necessary to renegotiate those informal agreements of the past. We have been successful in doing so in most cases by earning the trust of company depositors that we understand their interests and also the interests of researchers wanting access to their records.

The Australian Agricultural Company records for instance had until recently access conditions allowing access only to pre-1959 material. I have mentioned before that we successfully nominated the records of the Australian Agricultural Company for the Australian Memory of the World Register, and the Chairman of the Company announced this with obvious pride in the Company newsletter. With the support of the Company, we have preserved a number of early important archives of the Company – the despatches from the Australian to the London Office in the 1820s were transcribed and published by the University’s E Press. Early unique maps of the Company’s million-acre grant and other properties have been digitised and made available online, with the Company’s financial support. In this atmosphere of trust, after discussions with the company about the restrictive access conditions, we presented evidence of more liberal policies relating to potentially more sensitive records, and the Company agreed to a 30-year rule which has opened up important material relating to their more recent operations.

In relation to disposal, we also make recommendations to companies whose records we hold. An important part of building this trust is demonstrating our expertise and knowledge: indicating that, for instance, in other jurisdictions that records of this nature are authorised for disposal after a

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7 Available at [https://digitalcollections.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/31/browse?type=dateissued&submit_browse=Issue+date](https://digitalcollections.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/31/browse?type=dateissued&submit_browse=Issue+date)
similar period of time, and also that there has been no call to refer to the records for research either by the company itself or by researchers in the area.

Our recent dealings with companies have focused on highlighting the promotional value of their archives for their current operations. It is our practice to ask our depositors whenever we are asked to lend their records for an external exhibition: the Visions of Australia program has sponsored Australia-wide touring of a number of exhibitions featuring company records. For example, CSR Limited’s collection of photographs taken by celebrated Australian photographer Max Dupain have toured throughout Australia in a National Archives exhibition, and Elder, Smith and Company records featured in the ‘Muslim Cameleers’ exhibition developed and toured by the South Australian Museum. In both cases, the company benefited from the free publicity and good-will generated by their association with the exhibition.

Our original depositors would also not have foreseen that access could be provided online and remotely, rather than to researchers visiting our reading room. We have a program of digitisation of photographs and maps which are then available online: again we ask our company depositors before making these available to an online audience. Most are happy to give us blanket permission though some wish to approve each image that is put online.

Trust in the archives and in archivists is also valued by companies involved in current controversies and litigation. An active research area over the last few years relates to cases of workers exposed to asbestos. In the case of one company that was involved in the manufacture of asbestos sheeting, we refer all requests for access, whether they relate to that division of the company or not, to the company for permission.

We also hold the records of the Waterside Workers Federation and many members of this trade union were exposed to hazardous materials as part of their work. Not just from the loading and unloading of asbestos products but also bulk loading of wheat where the dust was injurious to workers’ health. In Australia, Dust Diseases Tribunals hear these cases and we are asked to produce the evidence of union membership. As for company records, we seek the permission of the current union the Maritime Union of Australia before releasing the records.

Another recent challenge for collectors of business archives has been the identification by liquidators of monetary value attached to business records. Where once the records of defunct companies would be happily donated (and some still are), liquidators are now more likely to identify that records with historic or nostalgic value might raise funds to offset demands by creditors

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9 [http://www.cameleers.net/?page_id=779](http://www.cameleers.net/?page_id=779)
and to fund staff entitlements. For current companies, we seek a donation to accompany the records and offset the initial cost of transportation, reboxing and documentation, and the ongoing costs of storage and access control. But if the company is in liquidation this is not possible, and increasingly we are asked if we would be prepared to purchase collections. It seems that the currency of trust is unfortunately losing value in the current economic climate.

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