

RESEARCH GUIDE: BUSINESS ARCHIVES

1. Why Use This Guide?

Researching business history in the UK and Ireland often requires access to historical documents and records stored in business archives. This guide is designed to help researchers effectively use business archives, providing valuable information on what these archives contain, where to find them, how to search for specific information, and how to properly reference your findings.

2. What is Generally in a Business Archive?

Business archives are treasure troves of historical records and documents that offer a comprehensive view of a company's journey, its impact on industries and communities, and the broader economic landscape. While the specific contents can vary widely depending on the organization and its history, here are some common types of materials often found in business archives:

- **Financial Records:** This may include balance sheets, income statements, and annual reports. These documents provide insights into a company's financial health, growth, and profitability over time.
- **Corporate Correspondence:** Letters, memos, and emails exchanged within the company and with external stakeholders offer a window into the decision-making processes, communication strategies, and relationships that shaped the business.
- **Meeting Minutes:** Records of board meetings, executive meetings, and other gatherings provide details on key decisions, strategies, and discussions that guided the company's direction.
- **Marketing and Advertising Materials:** Archives may contain a wealth of marketing and advertising materials, including old advertisements, promotional campaigns, product packaging, and branding materials. These materials reflect the company's efforts to connect with customers and build its brand.



Irn-Bru Logo, 1947, A G Barr & Co collection

- **Product Development and Innovation:** Archives may house records related to product development, research and development efforts, patents, and innovations. This can provide insights into how a company stayed competitive and adapted to market demands.
- **Employee Records:** Personnel files, employment contracts, and records related to labour relations can be found in business archives. They shed light on the company's workforce and its interactions with employees.
- **Legal Documents:** Contracts, lawsuits, intellectual property records, and other legal documents illustrate how the company navigated legal challenges and protected its interests.
- **Photographs and Visual Materials:** Archives often preserve a rich collection of photographs, illustrations, and audio visual materials. These

images offer a visual history of the company's operations, products, and people.

- **Corporate Publications:** Company newsletters, magazines, annual reports, and employee publications provide insights into corporate culture, achievements, and events.
- **Company Histories and Biographies:** Some business archives include written histories of the company, biographies of key figures, and autobiographies of company founders or leaders.
- **Community and Social Impact:** Records of a company's involvement in local communities, philanthropic activities, and corporate social responsibility efforts can reveal its broader societal impact.
- **Artifacts and Memorabilia:** In some cases, business archives may contain physical artifacts, such as product prototypes, awards, and memorabilia associated with the company's history.
- **Items relating to the industry of the company.** For example, if you were to visit the archive of a tile making company, you may find historic tiles which were purchased throughout the company's history. This may include items from previous competitors and items acquired to inspire the company's designers.



Liberty Art Prints, Liberty London Archive, Liberty London

Understanding the breadth of materials available in a business archive is crucial for researchers, historians, and those interested in exploring the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of a business's legacy. These archives not only provide historical context but also offer valuable insights into the evolution of industries and economies over time.

3. The Archives: What Kind of Things You May Be Able to Find

In business archives in the UK and Ireland, you may find materials related to various industries, including manufacturing, finance, retail, and more. These archives often house documents from both small local businesses and large multinational corporations. You may also discover information about business practices, innovations, and economic trends over time.

4. Where to Start

- **Identify Your Research Focus:** Clearly define your research topic or question before starting your archive exploration. Knowing what you're looking for will make your search more efficient.
- **Locate Relevant Archives:** Research which archives in the UK and Ireland hold materials related to your research topic. Universities, historical societies, and business organizations often maintain archives.
- **Contact Archivists:** Reach out to the archivists or staff at the archive you plan to visit. They can provide guidance on access, opening hours, and any specific procedures or requirements for using their collections.
- **Plan Your Visit:** Many business archives will not allow external

researchers access to the collections, it is worth contacting the archive directly to see if you are able to view certain items.

5. Searching the Archive and Using the Collections (if available online)

- **Catalogues and Finding Aids:** Utilise the archive's catalogues and finding aids to identify relevant collections and materials. These tools can help you locate specific documents or records related to your research.
- **Keyword Searches:** If available, use online search tools or databases provided by the archive to conduct keyword searches related to your research topic. Take note of collection names, reference numbers, and item locations.
- **Handling Materials:** Handle archival materials with care, following the archive's guidelines for preservation. Use gloves when necessary, and avoid causing damage to fragile documents.
- **Note-Taking:** Keep detailed notes during your research, recording the source, collection, and relevant information from the materials you consult.

6. Some Examples of Business Archives

Here are some notable business archives in the UK and Ireland:

Certainly, here are some better examples of business archives in the UK, along with the types of materials you might find in them:

- **The British Library Business & IP Centre (London, UK):**
Materials: This centre provides access to a vast collection of business-related resources. You can find market research reports, industry publications, business plans, and trade directories. Additionally, they offer workshops and support for entrepreneurs and small businesses.
- **London School of Economics (LSE) Library Business Archives (London, UK):**
Materials: LSE holds an extensive collection of business archives. You can find records of major British companies, including financial documents, board meeting minutes, and annual reports. It also includes materials related to economic history and policy.
- **Cadbury Archives at Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham (Birmingham, UK):**
Materials: The Cadbury Archives contain the historical records of the Cadbury chocolate company. You can explore documents related to the company's history, marketing materials, packaging designs, and even personal papers of the Cadbury family members.
- **BT Archives (London, UK):**
Materials: BT Archives house records related to the history of telecommunications in the UK. This includes technical drawings, photographs, corporate publications, and documents detailing the evolution of the British telecommunication industry.
- **The Guinness Archive (Dublin, Ireland):**

Materials: The Guinness Archive in Dublin holds a rich collection of records related to the Guinness brewing company. This includes historical brewing recipes, advertising materials, labels, and corporate records. It offers insights into the brewing industry and Irish history.

- Royal Mail Archive (London, UK):
Materials: The Royal Mail Archive preserves the history of the UK's postal service. You can find historical letters, postal routes, stamps, and even the development of postal technologies, providing a unique perspective on communication in the UK.



'Language of Stamps' Postcard, 1915, 2005-0082/7, The Postal Museum, London.

- BP Archive (Aberdeen, UK):
Materials: BP (British Petroleum) Archive contains records of one of the world's largest energy companies. You may find documents related to the oil and gas industry, including exploration reports, corporate communications, and photographs of oil rigs.

These archives often hold a combination of documents, photographs, advertisements, publications, and other materials that provide insights into the history, development, and operations of these businesses and industries. Researchers can explore these archives to gain a deeper understanding of economic and corporate history in the UK and Ireland.

7. Referencing Your Research

Properly referencing your research is essential for academic and professional integrity. Follow the citation style recommended by your institution or field (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago) and include the following information in your citations:

- **Business Name:** Include the name of the business or organization.
- **Document Title:** Specify the title of the document or record.
- **Archive Name:** Mention the name of the archive where you found the material.
- **Reference Number:** Include any reference or catalogue number assigned to the material.
- **Access Date:** Note the date when you accessed the material.

Example Citation (APA Style):

Smith, J. (1950). Annual Report of XYZ Corporation. XYZ Business Archives, University of ABC. Reference Number: XYZ-AR-1950. Accessed on [Date].

By following this guide, researchers can navigate business archives in the UK and Ireland effectively, ensuring access to valuable historical materials and accurate referencing in their research endeavors.