

In pursuit of construction history: historical material held by building firms

by *T.F.M. Hinchcliffe*

It has been recognised that the study of building history is hampered by our ignorance of what records remain from the past and where they can be found. There is a feeling that building firms themselves ought to have some records, but it is also acknowledged that anything they did have would be the result of a very haphazard selection process and that the task of making a register of existing records would be an enormous undertaking. An attempt at identifying the records held by some building firms was undertaken by the National Federation of Building Trades Employers (N.F.B.T.E.) as part of its centennial celebrations, and the results of that exercise may be useful to others interested in pursuing the elusive history of the building industry.

The year 1978 was the centennial of the N.F.B.T.E. and the main celebration of this occasion took place at their annual conference that year in Birmingham. One of the events planned for the conference was an exhibition of building history, assembled from historical material held by the member firms. This project was a great act of faith that the firms had any historical material and that it would be suitable for an exhibition.

It was decided to ask only those firms which had been established prior to 1878 if they had material suitable for exhibition. Early in 1977 a letter went out to the 11,000 member firms announcing the centennial celebrations, requesting the date of foundation and asking whether the firm had any historical material they were willing to lend for an exhibition. Approximately 285 firms (2.6 per cent of the total membership) claimed foundation by 1878. Of these, 115 indicated that they had items they thought would be of interest and that they were willing to lend. This, of course, discounts

those who had historical material, but who thought it not suitable for exhibition or who were unwilling to allow it to travel.

At this point I was hired by the N.F.B.T.E. to select the exhibits and organise the exhibition. Another letter was sent to those 115 firms who had responded positively to the query about historical items. This time it was explained what sort of material we were seeking and they were requested to send a list of those items they thought would be of interest. This meant that the firms were not asked for a list of all the historical material they held, but only what *they* thought would be suitable for the centennial exhibition.

From this group of 115 we had just over a 60 per cent return (70 replies). I made lists of what these 70 firms held and visited 20 whose holdings appeared to be most varied. When the final choice of exhibits was made, items from 44 firms were actually used. Most of the exhibits were photographs of the originals and are probably still to be found somewhere in N.F.B.T.E. headquarters in New Cavendish Street.

From this brief outline of method are apparent the limitations inherent in the project. Only 2.6 per cent of the membership of the N.F.B.T.E. was asked about their historical records, although this small number represented those most likely to have early records. It was also largely left up to the firms to decide what was of historical interest. When I visited the firms I discovered that their ideas of historical relevance were not always the same as mine. I would often be attracted to ledgers and day books while they were trying to interest me in silver trowels for topping-out ceremonies — although these, of course, have their own significance.

Furthermore the end in view — an exhibi-

tion limited in both size and presentation — made me focus on specific sorts of material. This meant that for example a continuous run of ledgers was discovered by chance, and then only noted in passing as interesting to the historian, but not suitable for exhibiting. So the survey of holdings we did succeed in making was based on expediency rather than scholarly method and thoroughness.

Given all the reservations about the method used to gather our list of historical material held by building firms, here is a brief description of what was found. I divided the material into four basic categories: organisation; daily running; photographs; and miscellaneous. Under 'organisation' I included apprenticeship deeds, partnership deeds and records of local associations. The apprenticeship deeds are a favourite object for builders to keep, partly because they are attractive documents, but also because apprenticeship has played an important part in the organisation of the building industry, and older members of firms in particular consider them important. The earliest apprenticeship deed, dated 1780, was held by William Anelay of York; most of the other seventeen deeds are spread over the years 1830 to 1922.

There were six partnership deeds including incorporation documents of the two companies Holland & Hannen and William Cubitt (1909). These documents are just as relevant to business history as to building history.

The records of local associations could be divided into those held by the associations themselves and those held by the building firms. The branches of the N.F.B.T.E. were able to supply early minute books and in addition Bristol had material from the Operative Bricklayers Society and the Master Builders. The member firms had rules of local Master Builders Associations and N.F.B.T.E. branches, and also wage schedules and recommended hours of work, either for their own locality or for the whole country.

Under 'daily running' I included specifications, bills of quantities, and price books, as well as building contracts, ledgers, staff wages and day books. Another group of items

which falls under this heading is that of price lists, brochures and catalogues, including advertisements for the builders themselves and catalogues of material used in the industry. Corbens in Maidstone had a book compiled about 1890 of small ads. and brochures of suppliers in various parts of the country. Some firms had kept runs of wages or prime-cost books, but the size of their holdings seemed to depend to a large extent on how many times they had moved premises since their foundation. At each move another load of old ledgers would disappear. Altogether there were about 120 items within this category.

Photographs formed a large part of the builders' historical collections and the 75 I listed are only a selection. Some of the larger firms like William Moss and Trollope & Colls had used photography early on to record progress on jobs, while other photographs recorded special events, like the erection of the Stonehouse brickworks chimney in 1900 by Orchard & Peer, and its demolition in 1965. Where there was still a close family link with the firm, photographs showing previous generations and their workers had often survived.

The 'miscellaneous' group included a few patents (for greenhouse glazing, woodblock flooring, and improved methods of scaffolding), scrapbooks, insurance policies, and a letter of 1824 from the journeymen of the City of Canterbury to the Master Carpenters asking for higher wages.

In all these categories there were one or two items from as far back as the 1790s, but most of the material dated from around 1830 up to the 1930s. This was again symptomatic of the use to which the choice of items was subject.

In this brief description of the way in which the exhibits for the N.F.B.T.E. centennial exhibition were selected, I have emphasised the limitations imposed by the exercise. I hope that rather than discouraging further investigation into what must be a rich if chaotic area of historical research, my contribution will simply point out some of the historical problems that ought to be sorted out before embarking on a more thorough study in the future.

Partnership & partnership deeds	Estimates, tenders, bills of quantities	Accounts, wages & materials ledgers	Daybooks, job books, prime cost books	Contracts, certificates	Photographs	Advertisements, price lists, brochures	Catalogues of building materials & fittings	Handbooks & rules of professional bodies & unions	Drawings	Small pieces of equipment	Ceremonial equipment	Patents	Records deposited at local record office	Miscellaneous
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H. Hayward & Sons Ltd., Saxmundham, Suffolk
 Hayward & Wooster Ltd., Combe Down, Bath
 J.H. & W. Heal, London N.W.1
 Holland, Hannen & Cubitts, Iver, Bucks
 G. Hurst & Sons Ltd., Retford, Notts.
 William Irwin & Co. Ltd., Leeds
 Kerridge Ltd., Cambridge
 Kingierlee Ltd., Oxford
 J.W. Knight & Son, Combe Down, Bath
 Knowles & Son Management Ltd., Oxford
 John Laing & Son Ltd., London N.W.7
 James Longley & Co. Ltd., Crawley, W. Sussex
 J. & W. Lowry Ltd., Newcastle-upon-Tyne
 Sir Robert McAlpine & Sons Ltd., London W.C.1.

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McLaughlin & Harvey Ltd., Enfield, Middx.
 Messrs. Moreton & Sons, Winchester, Hants
 William Moss & Sons Ltd., London N.W.2
 John Mowlem & Co. Ltd., Brentford, Middx.
 T. & E. Neville Ltd., Luton, Beds.
 Henry Norris & Son Ltd., Hertford
 Orchard & Peer, Stroud, Glos.
 Wm Paton & Sons Ltd., Ayr, Scotland
 Pearce Bros. Builders Ltd., Bromley, Kent
 J. Preston & Sons Ltd., Fleetwood, Lancs.
 Rashley & Co. Ltd., Lymington, Hants.
 Rendell & Sons, Devizes, Wills.
 Rice & Sons Ltd., Brighton
 Riley of Nottingham

