

Sources for the construction history of the Second World War

by Kate Davison

During the second world war, the construction sector experienced major disruption. Housebuilding virtually ceased; the government became the major consumer for changed products; there were widespread shortages, especially of timber, steel, and skilled labour; and the industry had to operate within the confines of strict controls. Yet initial reading on the history of the building and civil engineering industries reveals a paucity of information about the Second World War.

The work described here was started for a master's degree in historical studies. It is now being continued in the Department of Construction and Environmental Health at Bristol Polytechnic, where the writer has been given a half-time appointment for three years as a research assistant.

For any research topic to be viable, there must be a probability of identifying and locating suitable source material. The 'thirty years rule' means that official papers relating both to the war and to the period after when wartime building controls remained in force have become available only fairly recently. The same interval, however, means that much of what was unrecorded then has already been lost, and material which lives on in people's memories needs to be collected with some urgency. The first requirement was an overview of the period and a thorough literature search to ascertain the extent of secondary sources.

Literature on the subject is fairly limited. Mulberry Harbours and other prestige projects have attracted some attention, especially in 1984-85 with the commemoration of events of forty years ago², but histories of the construction industry tend to skip quickly over the war period. General economic histories usually pay scant attention to housebuilding and virtually ignore other

types of construction³, and even economic histories specific to building tend to neglect the period⁴. Soon after the war, Kohan's authoritative *History of the Second World War: Works and Buildings* appeared, and this is a mine of information; it is easily the most comprehensive work on the period⁵. However, it leaves many subjects untouched and, because of the time when it was written, it was unable to provide the names of many of the people and places it dealt with. Several other books in the official wartime histories series also provide valuable information not readily available elsewhere. For the postwar period there is a greater range of secondary material, much of it dealing with particular types of building; Rosenberg's *Economic Planning in the British Building Industry 1945-49* is useful for its attempt to put building into its broader economic context⁶.

Useful statistical material is available for part of the period. Feinstein's *National Income, Expenditure and Output of the U.K. 1855-1965*⁷ includes construction statistics, but the most important work is Fleming's *Statistics Collected by the Ministry of Works 1941-46*⁸, used in conjunction with his *Construction and the Related Professions*⁹. The latter is useful for pointing out the pitfalls which might otherwise be encountered when series of statistics change their coverage at different times, or fail to include large sections of the industry.

Putting together a bibliography has been rather like trying to put together the pieces of a jigsaw, with the added problem that the pieces first had to be found. Bibliographies of the Second World War have been scoured for occasional references to construction, and footnotes in readily available books, such as those by Marian Bowley¹⁰, have been followed up, often leading to other works.

Articles, too, are less numerous than they are in some other branches of history. Some good contemporary articles were written, but there is little of a historical nature¹¹. A search through the many volumes of the *Index to Theses*¹² produced about half a dozen works relevant in some respect, the most useful being Dr Smyth's 'The Historical Growth of Property Companies and the Construction Industry in Britain between 1939 and 1979'; and that part of Dr Smyth's bibliography dealing with the war years provided a useful checklist¹³.

So far no mention has been made of official documents. Government reports for the period are numerous, and many are still quite readily available at major libraries. These have been identified as a result of other reading, and also through *Serial Publications in the British Parliamentary Papers 1900-1968*, *A Breviate of Parliamentary Papers 1940-54*, and *Consolidated Indexes to British Government Publications 1936-1970*¹⁴. The Public Records Office houses a considerable amount of material relating to the various ministries involved with construction in one way or another¹⁵. Incidentally, this leads to another problem: papers from the Ministry of Works, the Ministry of Supply, Ministry of Aircraft Production, etc. are obviously relevant, but it is easy to miss the more restricted construction work done by the other ministries, and sometimes difficult to justify the amount of time needed to acquire fairly limited information.

The Public Records Office is not the only repository of useful material. The T.U.C. library at Congress House, described elsewhere in this issue, has a variety of material under the heading 'Building'. It also holds the annual reports for the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers from 1921 and a list of its members from 1942, annual conference details for the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives from 1929, and miscellaneous material on smaller unions. The Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, described in the first issue of *Construction History*, holds extensive records from the

Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians, and various other records relevant to this research¹⁶. The main records of the National Federation of Building Trades Operatives are held at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology.

Identifying museums and libraries likely to hold useful information is not always easy. The Imperial War Museum for example holds a few books which have not been located elsewhere, but which were only discovered by consulting their library's catalogue. The Property Services Agency library at Croydon and the Business Archives Council have still to be visited. The Royal Engineers and other groups within the services must also hold information, much of it unique, but gaining access is not easy. Local Records Offices and County Archives hold huge stores of material; time prevents most of it from being utilised for this project, except where it relates to a specific aspect of the work.

Professional journals, trade papers etc., have proved very useful. These are relatively easy to find and contain a wealth of detailed information. The problem is again one of selection, as the number available is vast. Which journals are to be consulted, and for what time span? How detailed should the reading be? It is a pity that an index for wartime editions of *The Builder*¹⁷ is not yet available!

Gaining access to company records has proved an interesting exercise in its own right. A few firms know what records they hold and where they are stored. Others have published short company histories, often when the firm celebrated its centenary, and these provide a useful framework. Not unnaturally, many such histories give excessive credit to the work done by the firm in question. Nonetheless details of the war period are frequently brief, as in the centenary edition of Costain's staff journal (1965), which stated that 'much of the work carried out during World War II is still secret'¹⁸. Letters have been sent to over a hundred firms explaining the nature of the research and asking for assistance. Whenever possible the letters were sent to specific people rather than to the

firm in general as it was felt that a personal approach was more likely to be productive. Although sending out letters sounds a straightforward exercise, it has presented some problems, especially in identifying the current ownership of firms known to be operating in the 1940s but no longer trading under the same name. Old copies of *Who Owns Whom* have proved useful, as have people with a long memory of the industry.

The response to inquiries has been varied, though as replies are still being received it is not yet possible to give a proper analysis. In some cases no reply has arrived, and follow-up letters will be needed. Many firms have lost their records of forty years ago, having thrown them out on changing premises or being taken over by another firm, or else they have no idea of what material they own and do not have the time to sort through it. A few have deposited their records for safe-keeping and have given permission for them to be consulted. Frequently permission is granted for a visit to be made to a firm, and for an interview to be arranged with older or recently retired members of staff who have direct knowledge of the period, and who in their turn often suggest further avenues of enquiry. In a few cases company accounts, lists of contracts, photograph albums, or other documentary material have been made available. At a later stage in the research Companies House in Cardiff will have to be visited for follow-up work.

Further contact with individuals with memories of the wartime construction industry has been established by means of a letter placed in a wide range of professional and trade journals, asking for any comments or information people felt able to give. The response has been most encouraging, encompassing a wide cross-section of the industry, including owners of small companies, academics, civil engineers, architects, surveyors and various tradesmen. Other individuals have been contacted directly and, without exception, have agreed to offer what help they can. A programme of interviews is now under way, to try to tap this valuable source of oral history.

The project has ascertained that plenty of material exists, but it needs to be located, collected and used effectively. Further sources may well be identified. It is to be hoped that they can be used to further our knowledge of the construction industry at this crucial period in its history.

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References

- 1 For the purposes of the research, the following definition of construction is being used.
The Ministry of Works in 1941 defined building and civil engineering contracting undertakings as consisting wholly or mainly in the carrying out of any of the following activities together with the carrying out, in conjunction with these activities, of any processes, operations or manufactures incidental to the carrying out of the said activities:
(1) the construction, alteration, repair, decoration or demolition of buildings;
(2) the construction, alteration, repair or demolition of docks, harbours, bridges, roads, viaducts, aqueducts, canals, inland navigations, pipe lines, plant foundations, cooling towers and ponds, cable trenches, cableducts, railways, aerodromes, sea defences, river works, piers, quays, wharves, reservoirs, filterbeds, sewage works, sewers, tunnels and gasholders, the erection of overhead line supports, and any works of similar nature.
- 2 See for example, A.R. Collins, '1939-1945: The War Years', *Concrete Quarterly*, 144 (Jan-March 1985), pp.12-15, and the film 'Mulberry', made by World Wide Pictures for the Federation of Civil Engineering Contractors and shown at the D-Day Museum at Portsmouth
- 3 S. Pollard, *The Development of the British Economy 1914-50* (1962).
- 4 C. Powell, *An Economic History of the British Building Industry 1815-1979* (1980).
- 5 C. Kohan, *History of the Second World War: Works and Buildings* (1952).

- 6 N. Rosenberg, *Economic Planning in the British Building Industry 1945-49* (Oxford, 1960).
- 7 C.H. Feinstein, *National Income, Expenditure and Output of the U.K. 1855-1965* (Cambridge, 1972).
- 8 M.C. Fleming, *Statistics Collected by the Ministry of Works 1941-1946* (Department of the Environment, 1980).
- 9 M.C. Fleming, *Construction and the Related Professions*, (Social Science Research Council and Royal Statistical Society, *Reviews of Statistical Sources*, xii (1980).
- 10 M. Bowley, *Housing and the State 1919-44* (1945); *Innovations in Building Materials* (1960); *The British Building Industry: Four Studies in Response and Resistance to Change* (1966).
- 11 For example, I. Bowen 'The Building Industry in Wartime', *Economic Journal*, 49 (1939) p.663.
- 12 *Aslib Index to Theses accepted for higher degrees by the universities of Great Britain and Ireland* (32 vols., 1950-1983).
- 13 H. Smyth, 'The Historical Growth of Property Companies and the Construction Industry in Britain between 1939 and 1979' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Bristol, 1982).
- 14 F. Rodgers, *Serial Publications in the British Parliamentary Papers 1900-68: a bibliography* (1971). P. & G. Ford, *A Breviate of Parliamentary Papers, Vol. 3: 1940-1954: War and Reconstruction* (Oxford, 1961). *Consolidated Indexes to British Government Publications 1936-1970* (Bishops Stortford, 1974).
- 15 Public Records Office, *The Second World War, a guide to documents in the Public Records Office* (1972).
- 16 A. Tough, 'Sources for construction history in the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick', *Construction History*, 1 (1985) pp.3-5.
- 17 *Now Building*.
- 18 Costain, *Bulletin*, June 1965, Richard Costain Centenary 1865-1965, special issue, p.19.