

A survey of business archives in the greater Milan area

by Duccio Bigazzi

Before describing the survey conducted among business archives in the greater Milan area, I feel that some prefacing remarks are in order, regarding similar surveys, carried out in Italy and abroad, in order to better delineate what might be expected from a study of this sort, and how best to accomplish it.

It is well known that Italy offers few models for rational scientific research. In the limited field of business archives, there are no established, clearly defined Italian models at all, unfortunately. When beginning our survey, we had to make a choice among different paths to follow. I shall describe three of them, taking Great Britain, Germany and France as examples of conditions quite similar to what we had to face.

In Great Britain, thanks to the traditional reverence accorded to industrial heritage, several projects have been created. These serve the nation as a whole – especially through the Business Archives Council (BAC), founded in 1934, whose members include archivists, scholars and business managers – as well as single geographical areas or business sectors, usually through centres for historical research or industrial associations. Such commitment is viewed by an increasing number of critics (perhaps rightly so) as turning industrial Britain into a sort of museum¹. However, despite what people may consider the sad industrial decline of a country that used to be the “cradle of the industrial revolution”, economic historians enjoy a remarkable advantage: in London, they have access to a general register of companies containing lists and inventories of about 32,500 archives held by companies, universities, documentation centres, and other institutions. In fact, based on this register, in 1986, the BAC coordinated a 4-year survey of the 1000 oldest companies of England and Wales².

Several guides are also available: for instance, a guide to bank archives (600 entries); insurance company archives (275 entries); shipyard archives (110 entries). Sources

¹ This most recent discussion of this subject was by Raphael Samuel in his brilliantly ironic speech *The Museum Movement and Disappearing Worlds in Britain*, at the meeting “La société industrielle et ses musées: demande sociale et choix politiques, 1890-1990”, Parigi, Centre de recherche en histoire des sciences et des techniques, March 14th-15th, 1991

² Lesley Richmond, Bridget Stockford, *Company Archives. The Survey of the Records of 1000 of the First Registered Companies in England and Wales*, (Aldershot, Gower, 1986).

concerning shipping firms and breweries are available as well³. Among territorial guides, I would like to point out the West Riding textile industry records in particular, and the catalogue concerning businesses (mainly car industries) in the Coventry area⁴.

It is quite obvious how much these finding aids facilitate the work of the historian. In Italy, we have a long way to go before even getting near to such results.

In Germany the first preservation projects were carried out more than 80 years ago. This very early commitment to industrial memory grew along with Germany's economic power and led to the foundation of the company archives of major industrial groups (e.g. Krupp in 1905 and Siemens and Bayer in 1907). Furthermore, in the early 1900s, the first regional economic archives were established, promoted by the Chambers of Commerce to collect records from small and medium companies, whose records were more vulnerable to dispersion or destruction⁵.

Starting from this solid tradition, the Association for Business History and the Institute for the Research on Banking History published three large volumes containing essential information about thousands of business archives⁶. Therefore, to sum up, in Great Britain there are several initiatives (mostly led and coordinated by the BAC), while in Germany this project was carried out by the two single private associations that had grown out of the common interests of scholars and the business world.

A different path was followed in France. There, until recently, the key role in preserving and cataloguing business archives was played by a strongly centralized State archival structure.

As a matter of fact, since 1949 the Paris National Archives have been collecting a large number of fonds belonging to companies that had either gone out of business or were no longer interested in managing their oldest records themselves. Nowadays, in Paris over 15 linear km of records from over 200 companies, 70 associations and 12 press companies are

³L. S. Pressnell - John Orbell *A Guide to the Historical Records of British Banking* (Aldershot, Gower, 1985); H.A.L. Cockerell - Edwin Green, *The British insurance business 1547- 1970*, London, Heinemann Educational, 1976; L. A. Ritchie, *Modern British shipbuilding: a guide to historical records*, London, National Maritime Museum, 1980; Peter Mathias - A.W.H. Pearsall (eds.), *Shipping: a survey of historical records*, Newton Abbot, David & Charles, 1971; Lesley Richmond - Alison Turton (eds.), *The brewing industry: a guide to historical records*, Manchester, Manchester University press, 1990.

⁴Patricia Hudson, *The West Riding Textile Industry. A Catalogue of Business Records from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, Edington, Pasold Research Fund, 1975; Joan Lane, *Register of Business Records of Coventry and Related Areas*, Coventry, 1977 (distributed by Modern Records Centre, Univ. of Warwick, Coventry); Jane Lowe, *A Guide to Sources in the History of the Cycle and Motor Industries in Coventry. 1880-1939*, Coventry, Coventry Polytechnic, 1982 (mimeograph).

⁵ For business archives in Germany, see Horst A. Wessel, *Gli archivi d'impresa in Germania. Risultati e prospettive*, in "Rassegna degli Archivi di stato", 1984, n. 2-3, pp. 488-500 and Peter Hertner, *Le fonti d'archivio dell'industria tedesca*, in *Lingotto. "La memoria dell'industria". Convegno di studi. Torino, 25 maggio 1984*, Torino, Fiat Servizi per l'industria Spa, 1985, pp. 45-51.

⁶ The three volumes, edited by Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte and Institut für bankhistorische Forschung, have been published and then reprinted with updates by Stuttgart Franz Steiner Verlag from 1978 under the following titles: *Deutsche Wirtschafts Archive. Nachweis historischer Quellen in Unternehmen, Kammern und Verbänden der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Band 1.* (2 ed.: 1987); *Deutsche Wirtschafts Archive... Band 2: Kreditwirtschaft* (2 ed.: 1988); *Deutsche Wirtschafts Archive... . Band 3: Bestände von Unternehmen, Unternehmern, Kammern und Verbänden der Wirtschaft in öffentlichen Archiven der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (1991).

preserved. In addition, several finding aids concerning these records are available, either typescript or published within a series of printed inventories⁷. In Italy, at the present moment, we can only aspire to such an enviable result, because our State central archive has never been able to carry out an acquisition policy of this type, for reasons that I will explain shortly.

It should be pointed out, nevertheless, the French centralized model has been called into question for different reasons. For one thing, French regional archives had been collecting records from companies within their jurisdiction, but they could never provide enough resources to actually become significant aggregation points⁸. Then, in the 80s, it became clear that company records could be interpreted in several ways: not only do they record the business activity of a company or organization, but they reveal that entity's link, whether direct or indirect, to the society as a whole. From here, the idea of the "Archives of the Working World" was born. They were to be organized in five interregional centres to survey and catalogue company archives as well as trade union archives and materials concerning the history of technology, with special reference to the several different kinds of mediums currently studied by industrial archaeology. The first of these centres is going to be shortly opened in Roubaix, Nord-Pas-de-Calais..

Each of the three "paths" described has positive and negative features. In any case, in recent years, each model has contributed to the creation of its own national list, as well as several specific ones. At this point, I would like to address the reasons why, in Italy, we are currently unable to plan a national survey that can be carried out in the short term; and why, on the other hand, the regional surveys that have been planned up to now have been only partially accomplished.

It is not a new problem. With some philological effort, we could even trace back this subject – at least as far as preservation is concerned – to the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century. However, more formal proposals were put forward only in 1930s by Riccardo Bachi in some of his public speeches. At the 1929 National Congress of Libraries in Venice, he drew attention to the great importance of business grey literature (balance sheets, reports, various types of formal address, etc.) underlining the need for records of this sort to be collected in an "Italian economic archives", the core of which should be made up of records from defunct companies⁹.

⁷ *Etat sommaire des archives d'entreprises conservées aux Archives nationales. Tome I (1 AQ à 64 AQ)*, par Bertrand Gille, Paris, 1957; *Idem, Tome II (65 AQ à 119 AQ)*, par Isabelle Guérin – Brot, Paris, 1977, 2 vol; *Les Archives nationales. Etat général des fonds. Tome IV. Fonds divers*, Paris 1980 (pp. 222-264); *Les Archives nationales. Etat général des fonds. Tome IV. Fonds divers*, Paris, 1986 (pp. 173-199). For business archives in France, see Françoise Hidelsheimer, *Le iniziative degli archivi nazionali francesi*, in "Impresa e stato", n. 10, June 1990, pp. 60-63 e a Maurice Hamon-Félix Torres (ed.), *Mémoire d'avenir. L'histoire dans l'entreprise*, Paris, Economica, 1987.

⁸ Still in 1973 215 archives were known to be preserved; for information on printed aids, cfr. Hidelsheimer *Le iniziative degli archivi nazionali* cit., p. 61. For general information on locally available records, cfr. also Michel Dreyfus, *Les sources de l'histoire ouvrière, sociale et industrielle en France (XIXème et XXème siècles) Guide documentaire*, Paris, Ed. ouvrières, 1987.

⁹ For bibliography and further details, see my introduction to Riccardo Bachi, *Monografie storiche su imprese industriali italiane*, in "Archivi e imprese", n. 3, Jan.-June 1991, pp.72-73.

It is worth mentioning that in 1932, Armando Lodolini proposed rather drastically¹⁰ that if entrepreneurs were not able or didn't care to preserve the memory of their business activities, the State should provide for it through a forced centralization of those records at risk of dispersion or destruction. As we all know, that proposal was never implemented, and it showed a rather excessive trust in State intervention whose limitations were actually far more rigid than the Fascist regime's declarations would have ever admitted. Be that as it may, business culture was not at all eager to passively allow an uncontrolled and free use of their records.

Companies in this period were interested in their history only as far as it could provide them with prestige and "a seal of nobility". It is worth mentioning an enquiry carried out by Confindustria on companies with at least 100 years of business activity. A 1938 issue of the magazine "Il notiziario del dirigente di azienda industriale" refers to an abridged survey which exalted the industrial merits of Italian provinces and regions¹¹, including some rather dubious examples: a graphic arts company in Asti that allegedly began in 1479, a metallurgical one in Treviso in 1459, a chemical one in Padua in 1340. These are improbable data, and the continuity of those businesses was undoubtedly more a question of accident. Nevertheless, the almost total dispersion of the 19th century records of Italian companies – not to mention the loss of records concerning 18th century factories – is highly regrettable for a country so rich in archival traditions.

Apart from these examples and occasional statements by scholars like Antonio Fossati, Luigi Einaudi, and others, the subject was not discussed further until 1972, when a round table, held in Rome and promoted by the magazine "Rassegna degli archivi di Stato", became the turning point for reviving interest in historical business records¹². Giorgio Mori and Franco Bonelli delivered key speeches which drew attention to the need of verifying what had been destroyed or preserved, and suggested that a national survey be carried out without delay. Actually, some *soprintendenze* (bureaus of cultural assets) started working immediately, but obtained disappointing results. In Umbria, for instance, a first effort was made following the round table¹³. Out of 330 companies asked for data, only 25 responded, and a mere 15 among them "admitted that an archive existed". In any case, they were companies of recent foundation which kept only current records required by law.

A further and more productive step was taken in 1978, when a committee on industrial history was created at CNR (National Centre for Research) This committee no longer exists, but it did manage to initiate the first tangible surveys at a regional level. A first outcome was a survey carried out by the Tuscan *Soprintendenza* (bureau of cultural assets), the results of which were

¹⁰ Armando Lodolini, *Lo Stato e gli archivi delle aziende*, Roma, OSA, 1932 ("I quaderni de *L'Organizzazione*, rivista dei problemi di organizzazione scientifica aziendale", serie II, n. 11). My thanks to Fabio Del Giudice for bringing this paper to my attention.

¹¹ Silvio Zuddas, *L'industria italiana e le aziende secolari*, in "Il notiziario del dirigente di azienda industriale", aprile 1938, pp. 175-177.

¹² *Tavola rotonda sugli archivi delle imprese industriali*, in "Rassegna degli Archivi di stato", gennaio-aprile 1973, p. 10-76.

¹³ Mario Squadroni, *Archivi d'impresa in Umbria: l'attività della Soprintendenza archivistica*, in *Archivi d'impresa: un problema aperto. Atti del seminario di Perugia. 27 marzo 1987*, edited by G. Gallo, Foligno, Editoriale umbra, 1987, p.82.

published in 1982. It proved beyond any doubt how useful such research could be, despite several problems pointed out by the superintendent Francesca Morandini and the researchers themselves. A second regional survey for the Lazio region followed in 1987, and two small volumes were published by the Veneto region about city-owned companies and the institutes for subsidized housing¹⁴. The regions of Umbria and Emilia Romagna began surveys of their own, but did not publish their results.

In Lombardy, in 1983 former superintendent Giuseppe Scarazzini confronted the issue with a group of scholars on economic history. After much discussion and several unsuccessful attempts to involve companies, the superintendent decided there weren't enough resources available for a systematic survey, and focused rather on contacting those companies most sensitive to preserving their business heritage. This led to the actual recovery of some archives – e.g., those of Monteponi and Montevicchio (later given to the City of Iglesias), of Cucirini Cantoni Coats and recently of Ercole Marelli. Meanwhile, several archives were declared of relevant historical interest, and this made it possible to scholars to gain access to them.

The survey of business archives in the greater Milan area, which is the focal point of my talk, was carried out by the Istituto lombardo per la storia del movimento di liberazione (Lombardy Institute for the History of the Liberation Movement) together with the Department for Archives and the Region of Lombardy, who sponsored the project. It began in 1985 and resulted in the publication of a book in 1990¹⁵. I would like to describe the problems encountered by the team of about 20 people – scholars, archivists, and young researchers – during their work. I hope this will help to encourage a similar project to be carried out in the area of Bergamo and elsewhere – for instance, a project planned in and around Brescia . If it were it carried out, we would be on our way to a regional survey, considering that also in other provinces (Como and Cremona) valuable lists of printed sources for contemporary history have recently been completed, letting us hope for further research concerning archival records. Allow me to reiterate that the lack of a central policy for the preservation of cultural heritage always results in higher costs and wasted effort.

Returning to the Milan project, the first step in planning the project was to decide which companies had to be surveyed. The answer to this question lay in the high level of integration which characterizes the Milan and Lombardy model, as illustrated by a great historiographical tradition whose most prominent representative is Gino Luzzatto (described a few minutes ago by Edoardo Borruso). Therefore, we couldn't limit our research only to industrial companies, but we had to consider banking, insurance, transport, trade; in other words, the entire tertiary sector. We also decided we would consider companies founded before 1950, whatever their business organization. Finally, we decided not to exclude small business, because we are

¹⁴ Cfr. Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche - Soprintendenza archivistica per la Toscana, *Archivi di imprese industriali in Toscana*, Firenze, All'Insegna del Giglio, 1982 e Soprintendenza archivistica per il Lazio, *Guida degli archivi economici a Roma e nel Lazio*, a cura di Maria Guercio, Roma, Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, 1987; Regione del Veneto - Soprintendenza archivistica per il Veneto, *Archivi delle Aziende municipalizzate*, ed., Giorgetta Bonfiglio Dosio, Venezia, Giunta Regionale del Veneto, 1987; Idem, *Archivi delle Aziende municipalizzate*, ed., Giorgetta Bonfiglio Dosio, Venezia, Giunta Regionale del Veneto, 1989.

¹⁵ *Gli archivi d'impresa nell'area milanese. Censimento descrittivo*, ed., Duccio Bigazzi, Milano, Bibliografica, 1990.

convinced of the potentially valuable and interesting archival heritage of smaller economic organizations

For our initial contact, we sent a questionnaire to about 900 companies chosen from the industrial annual report of the province, which contains basic data such as foundation year, capital, business organization and number of employees. 190 companies answered our request – rather a low number, considering also that 95 of the respondents simply stated that their historical records had been lost. Moreover, some of the most important businesses of the Milan province were among those who didn't even answer. Such scarce feedback is to be expected, and shouldn't be explained by simple indifference on the part of the companies. The structure of the questionnaire itself – overused, complicated and difficult to customize – is a hindrance to a wider response. Unfortunately, there is no alternative at the present; however, a firm endorsement from industrial associations would provide a channel for contacting the right persons within the companies and, at the same time lend prestige to the initiative. On the other hand, the 95 positive answers we received, plus 25 more by companies that had been personally contacted by our team, allowed us to carry out a survey that, although partial, helped broaden the field of available data –until then, very sparse indeed. We obviously hope to extend our range even further in the near future.

An even greater limit to the effectiveness of the survey lies in the reliability of the answers. Despite the competence and willingness of the company representative who responds to the questionnaire, this person is rarely able to assess the true **historical meaning** of an archive that was originally created for other purposes. (Let's not forget that) the goal of business archives is usually the **disposal** of records rather than their preservation: the aim is to reduce the space taken up by a steadily growing load of documents – especially when IT is used. The most valuable records, therefore, have to be looked for elsewhere, within departments or offices that operate separately from the central archives. For example, the minutes of the Board of Directors are usually held by the Legal office or by the Secretary's office of the Board itself; orders, regulations, organizational provisions, organization charts – valuable documents recording the changes within the company over time – are often held also by the Secretary's office of the Board of directors, or by the HR Department, or somewhere else. The most valuable records, such as the Director's correspondence, often remain at the single Secretary's office. Then, there are technical records, held by R&D or Plant Maintenance departments, and photographic documents held by Advertising or PR departments; and so on.

As a consequence, we can't expect a general questionnaire to provide complete answers. A visit from a member of the research team and even a cursory check of the actual size of the records, and their possible locations are needed. In other words, a personal contact is required in which the researcher provides a non-invasive contribution.

Contacting and visiting respondents, and then reviewing, combining and organizing records is laborious. I won't bother you with the numerous problems that slowed down the publication of our results. Five years is a long time from beginning to the end, but I hope no-one will be alarmed since this delay was partially due to our initial hesitations in planning. I suggest that 3 years is a reasonable time-frame, although demanding, in terms of both economic and human resources.

At this point, we should ask ourselves about the significance and the scientific value of such projects? What were the actual results of our work, and were they worth the cost? Among our findings, I would not underestimate those regarding the 95 totally negative responses. Naturally, I hope that they don't reflect the reality of those companies, but rather that employees who answered the questionnaires had no idea of the actual size or value of their records. It is regrettable that most of those answers came from companies of long-standing tradition (or, in some cases, more recent, but nonetheless top-level firms) such as Cotonificio Cantoni, Centenari e Zinelli, Cotonificio Ottolini, Bassetti, and Zucchi, all landmarks in the textile industry. Up to 10-15 years ago, some of them held records going back to their very first years of business activity. Cotonificio Cantoni is a well-known case in point: after having granted access to their archives to Roberto Romano, they "lost" it right about the time that interest in the company records grew a bit too ample. Totally negative answers also came from mechanical industries like Innocenti, food industries like Galbani, pioneers of Italian industrialization like Richard Ginori, and businesses with one hundred years of history like Manzoni, an advertising company that could have preserved real treasures regarding the history of graphics and design as well.

Luckily the negative results comprised only a part of our findings. We also reached several positive conclusions, thanks to the many commendable enterprises who opened their archives for examination. Some examples are Pirelli, who has granted access to its archives since the early 1970s, and, more recently, Banca Commerciale Italiana and the Institutes for Economic History at the Bocconi and Cattolica Universities, who acquired and partially restored the original order of some important archives like Brustio's (Rinascente) and Visconti di Modrone (Duca Visconti di Modrone Velvis).

Further archives became accessible that previously were known only to single researchers who had utilized them for individual monographs. Among them we find Agip Alfa Romeo, Manifattura Caprotti, Frette, Montedison, Riva, and Franco Tosi. Their dimensions have been described better now as a result of our survey, thus opening the way to more fruitful historical examination.

Finally, we received advance information about some large projects currently in progress. The most important is being carried out by Progetto Archivio Storico Fiat (Fiat Historical Archives Project). We all know that Fiat now controls a large part of Milan's industry and economy. As a result of this expansion – perhaps not the most important from a territorial point-of-view, but a very positive one as far as archives are concerned –, Progetto Archivio Storico Fiat has taken charge of the management of the archives, and is currently working on an internal survey whose goal is to make the recovered fonds accessible. Some of the archives that appear in the volume published by Fiat include: Borletti, Caffaro, Iveco (former OM), Telettra, and, of course, Alfa Romeo. Unfortunately, other firms such as Autobianchi, Impresit, Magneti Marelli, Rinascente, and Snia-BPD do not appear, as the work on them started by the Progetto Archivio Storico had just begun when our survey took place.

Other projects came to our attention ; for example, the Centro per la documentazione storica ed economica dell'impresa (Centre for the Historical and Economic Documentation of Enterprise) directed by Valerio Castronovo, is working on the restoration of the original order of the historical archives of Breda, Italtel and, as part of a national project, the Milan branch

of ENEL, (the Italian National Electricity Board), which also holds records of other leading companies in the history of electric industry in Italy.

Our work revealed several truly productive insights concerning businesses whose brands are quite well known: Bastogi, Carlo Erba, Campari, Ricordi, former Cascami di Seta, former Lepetit, and finally, former Tecnomasio Italiano Brown Boveri. None of these archives had ever been studied before, and now our research group has completed a survey for each of them.

I believe that one of the most important effects of a survey is its “spreading” role. The mention itself of the existence and size of important business archives, like the ones I have just spoken about, can lead to an imitative process by other companies. It often happens that a chance meeting of scholars and managers or entrepreneurs results in the creation of a historical archives – or at least its core. By issuing the first results of a survey, we may draw attention to initiatives that, up to now, were known only within the company or among professionals.

However, while the “spreading effect” may broaden the range of archives that are recovered and rescued, it would be a serious mistake to assume that the survey is a magic wand, or that the ascertainment of an archives’ existence will automatically lead to its preservation and accessibility.

In conclusion, I would like to mention some problems that turned up at the end of the survey. First of all, the problem of preserving what has been surveyed. Also for these records, the law provides nothing more than the standard 10-year retention period. One of the main tasks of the Departments for Archives, even though they too have suffered staff cuts, should be to help companies, through consultancies, to preserve archives of relevant historical interest and limit the damage that follows an indiscriminate disposal of records. Here, I would reiterate the lack of applicable regulations that should provide tax allowance on expenses incurred for safeguarding business archives of historical value.

Secondly, the problem of **accessibility**: a survey doesn’t imply access for scholarly research. Access is totally at the discretion of companies, although recently, some progress has been made. Often companies just ask for a reference from the academic institution on behalf of the scholar or student. In other cases, however, even those who had previous access to an archive may have difficulty gaining admission at a later date. An enduring attitude of reserve, if not secrecy, doesn’t contribute to the **free flow of ideas**, a basic condition for research development. Not to mention the precarious working methods of some archives – when the person-in-charge retires, records are lost simply because they used to be retrieved only through the archivist’s personal memory.

A further problem concerns **updating**. Things change very quickly in the business world, and companies undergo continuous organizational change to the point of complete re-structuring. Therefore, it is possible to lose track, even of surveyed archives. On the other hand, updating is also needed for new fonds that gradually become accessible. Sometimes, indirect business sources (i.e. records from other companies or from banks) help to retrieve information that company archives are unable to trace. Thus, the need for constantly updated information and

coordination of scattered news from professionals who are concerned with this type of work.

On a final note, let me mention the promising experience of “Archivi e imprese” (“Archives and Businesses”), our semi-annual bulletin of news and methodological discussion. We welcome the contributions of all those concerned in preserving the cultural and historical heritage of business archives.