

The Ballast Trust

By Kiara King

The Ballast Trust is a charitable foundation established to provide a rescue, sorting and cataloguing service for business archives with an emphasis on technical records such as shipbuilding, railway and engineering plans, drawings and photographs. It is based in Johnstone in the west of Scotland and has 3 full-time members of staff, who are assisted by 3 regular volunteers plus occasional project volunteers.

In its twenty years of operation it has processed hundreds of tons of material and catalogued collections of technical records on behalf of national, university and local archive repositories and museums. This has included the records of Scott Lithgow Ltd, British Rail and Mavor & Coulson Ltd amongst others. It has played, and will continue to play, an important role in the preservation and provision of access to technical records in the United Kingdom.

Establishment

The Ballast Trust was founded by Dr William Lind in 1988. It was described in early documentation as «a unit which will have suitable premises for the selection, sorting, classification and history of records prior to their preservation in public archives».

William Lind was Director of the Ballast Trust from its establishment until his death in October 2007. For nearly twenty years the work and direction of Ballast Trust was shaped by him. He understood the risks to Scotland's industrial heritage and had a clear vision of the role that the Ballast Trust could provide to help preserve and protect these collections for the future.

Prior to establishing the Ballast Trust, William Lind had been Chairman of the Renfrewshire Archaeological Society and of the Scottish Society for Industrial Archaeology, and Honorary Secretary of the Business Archives Council of Scotland. As an enthusiastic industrial historian himself with a professional background in industry, he recognised the benefit of having passionate and knowledgeable individuals work with specialist records to unlock the information in them for future users.

Working method

The Ballast Trust exists to support the work of archive repositories to preserve records relating to business and industry in Scotland. It does this by providing the facilities and physical space to

process collections as well as the technical expertise and knowledge required to understand these collections and catalogue them fully.

The technical expertise is provided by staff and volunteers who possess a depth of knowledge about specific subjects that most archivists do not have. The system of working at the Ballast Trust is successful because it matches individuals with a collection that requires their subject knowledge. The requirements of the owning repository in terms of catalogue structure and appraisal methods are explained before processing starts.

Collections come to the Ballast Trust in a variety of ways. In the beginning many of the collections brought in for processing had been rescued by the Ballast Trust or other repositories directly from businesses. The number of collections brought to us in this way has reduced but the Ballast Trust continues to have a close relationship with the Surveying Officer for the Business Archives Council of Scotland who carries out surveying and rescue work for business archives. In the future it is more likely that collections will be sent to us by repositories that do not have the technical understanding to process them and where they would remain uncatalogued without our assistance.

All collections are processed at our offices and are catalogued to the standard of the owning repository. Once the collection is finished it is returned and the completed catalogue is added to the owning repository's database for users to access.

Volunteering at the Ballast Trust

The Ballast Trust relies on the specialist skills of its volunteers to help catalogue the collections. By using volunteers we have benefited from gaining the support of enthusiastic and knowledgeable individuals who donate their time to help understand archive collections and bring to them a depth of technical knowledge that archive repositories do not have.

We match volunteers with particular skill-sets to an appropriate and relevant archive collection. This ensures that volunteers are enthusiastic about the collection and importantly it means that they have the appropriate background knowledge to allow them to understand the subtleties of complicated technical drawings and records.

For the volunteers the benefits are slightly different, they are generally of retirement age and have a strong interest in a specific subject. Volunteering gives them an opportunity to fulfil that interest and provide a useful and valuable service to the Ballast Trust and the wider industrial history community.

Going forward

Although the Ballast Trust has been operating for over 20 years, not much is known about it outside archive and industrial history circles in Scotland. To remedy this we have launched a website at <http://www.ballasttrust.org.uk>. To complement the website, we have started an organisational blog that allows us to share the unique way we work, some of the images we have, provide updates about the cataloguing of collections and give us a space to reveal the interesting items we discover. Our blog can be found at <http://ballastblog.blogspot.com>.

In the future, we plan to develop and add resources to the website to help other custodians and owners of technical records understand and look after them. The archivist will work with volunteers to capture the knowledge they have about particular record types. This will allow us to produce guides to certain groups of records. For example, for shipbuilding plans we will record

what plans should form the core set of plans that are kept, how to recognise these plans and information about how they were used to construct a ship to help put them in context.

In time we hope to expand our volunteer numbers, this will allow us to extend our services to other types of records and help us to continue to fulfil the purpose of the Ballast Trust and contribute to the study of business history.