

Reconstructing the historic global copper industry from business archives

Abstract

This paper presents research in progress that seeks to join up the fabulous wealth of information on the historic global copper industry held in local archives. It is primarily based on a survey that was made of copper company records held by the Richard Burton Archives at Swansea University, as part of an ESRC-funded knowledge exchange project on the Global and Local Worlds of Welsh Copper (2010-11).

The Richard Burton Archives are home to extensive business records containing leases, contracts, minute books, stock books, ledgers, letters, patents and more relating to international players on the global copper scene of the 18th to early 20th centuries. Concerns such as Vivian and Sons, Pascoe Grenfell and Sons and Williams, Foster and Company were, industrially speaking, household names in their day, not just in Swansea but far beyond.

The documents in these historical records add real value and colour to the official statistics and journals industrial historians have traditionally based their information on. These collections remain unexploited witnesses of our industrial heritage in copper. They demonstrate how business was done and with whom it was done. Those we previously assumed to be rivals are often seen working together in these documents. The widely held assumption that the global dimensions, at least, of the British copper industry had waned by the last two decades of the nineteenth century can be challenged: did you know Williams, Foster and Company were declared an enemy firm by the Australian government during the First World War for having German shareholders and their shipments of copper requisitioned?

All these collections are part of our industrial heritage and they provide essential insights into the activities that went on in the buildings and sites we campaign to preserve and interpret. This paper therefore seeks to raise awareness of these business archives and demonstrate their potential for improving our knowledge of historic copper.

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