

The Noel Butlin Archives Centre and the Australian Memory of the World Register

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The Noel Butlin Archives Centre was established in the early 1950s through the collecting efforts of economic historians in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. Professor Noel Butlin and others such as Bob Gollan located records of companies – particularly financial records – to provide the raw material, the primary sources, for their research into Australia's economic history.

The collection became known as the ANU Archives of Business and Labour but was later renamed in honour of Noel Butlin. Its business has expanded to collect not just company records but business archives in general, the records of unions, peak bodies (such as the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the National Farmers Federation), industry councils and associations, and 'business and labour' people. There are currently 17.5 kilometres of records.

Entry no. 5 on the Australian Memory of the World register is the records of the Australian Agricultural Company, held by the Noel Butlin Archives Centre. This was one of the earliest record groups to be collected. In 1955 Noel Butlin was on holidays and paid a visit to the Australian Agricultural Company offices located in Newcastle. His timing was fortuitous as the office was shortly to move, and staff were considering what to do with 'old that old stuff', the records of many years of operations in the Newcastle and Port Stephens area.¹ Butlin organised for them to come to the fledgling collection at the Australian National University. The collection has been added to regularly over the years and is now about 300 metres.

The Australian Agricultural Company is the oldest company in Australia still operating under its original name, or Australia's oldest agricultural company, or to put it another way, the second oldest Australian company behind Westpac (which began a year earlier as the Bank of New South Wales). The Company had received a one million acre grant of land, from Port Stephens north to the Manning River, in return for the employment of convicts. It was originally concerned with raising sheep for wool, but branched out into coal-mining and cattle and expanded its pastoral properties into New South Wales, and eventually Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. It still operates today with its headquarters in Brisbane.

The records document the activities of the Company including its London and Australian offices and the communication between them, the early exploration of its land grant, the building of infrastructure such as roads and railways, its use of convict labour, the migration of skilled workers such as miners and shepherds² (up till the 1850s the Company employed more people than the government of NSW), its interaction with Aboriginal people, and the management of its pastoral stations.

So what does it mean to the Noel Butlin Archives Centre to have the Australian Agricultural Company records listed on the Australian Register? I haven't mentioned that the Archives was threatened with closure several times in the 1990s: as the study of economic history waned and its supporters retired, the Research School of Social Sciences sought to move it on elsewhere, and various rescue packages were formulated including a proposal that it be self-funding. This uncertainty for depositors, researchers and staff was not resolved until 2001 with the arrival of the current Vice-Chancellor and the positioning of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre with the University Archives. I mention this because although the depositors of collections, the staff, the researchers and the Friends of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre were convinced of the worth of the archives, they spent many stressful years trying to convince bean-counters of its value.

In 2003 the University Archivist, Dr Sigrid McCausland, nominated the most significant company collection, the Australian Agricultural Company records, for the Australian Memory of the World Register. The nomination was successful and the presentation was made by Barry Jones, former Labour Minister, at the National Library. Barry said to Sigrid at the presentation 'you're on our party platform - how many staff do you have now?'. For the staff of the Archives the occasion was a proud moment, both a vindication of their struggle and an answer to those bean-counters. The Assessment Committee for the Australian Memory of the World Register had recognised that the Noel Butlin Archives Centre held a nationally-significant collection, and being an independent assessment by professional peers, this couldn't be interpreted as the staff overstating the value of the collection in order to save their jobs.

The Australian Agricultural Company was represented by Lyn Cole, a long-serving member of the executive staff and the event was reported in the Company's staff newsletter. In the same issue the Chief Executive Officer Peter Holmes à Court wrote in his 'CEO Thoughts' column:

I remember exactly where I was when Don told me that AACo's history was to be inducted into an elite group of only six documents considered to be the most important records in our country's history. Don and I were driving half way up a hill just beyond Toowoomba on our way to the Aronui Feedlot Christmas Party.

My first reaction was of great honour to be associated with this Company, and be one of the thousands of people who have grown it to the Company it is today.³

The listing became a tangible connection between the Archives and the Company which encouraged further interaction. The Company supported the transcription and preservation of two early letterbooks. These were the letters of the Commissioner Sir Edward Parry from 1829-1834. Two volumes of letters were published, both in hard copy and online by the ANU E Press.⁴

The author Marian Halligan, who had grown up in Newcastle, launched the first volume, and Tim Fischer, a current Director of the Australian Agricultural Company and former Deputy Prime Minister, was invited to launch the second volume published in 2005. This proved to be a good choice as at the launch the Vice-Chancellor announced that Fischer would be awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University later that year. As it happened, Tim is also a railway buff and was excited to find at the launch drawings on display of the early railway for transporting coal from the mine-head to be loaded onto ships. Dr Pennie Pemberton, an archivist at the Noel Butlin Archives Centre, was able to pass on her knowledge about this topic to him.

The photographs of the event indicate the goodwill that flowed to the Archives as a result, from the Vice-Chancellor, the Australian Agricultural Company and the Butlin family. At that event, Tim Fischer who is also the Chairman of the Australian Agricultural Company Foundation, which supports cultural activities associated with the Company, suggested that we might apply for a grant from the Foundation. Shortly after this the Chairman of the Australian Agricultural Company Board, Nick Burton Taylor, was in Canberra and dropped in to see the Noel Butlin Archives Centre. Last year we applied for a grant from the Foundation and were successful. We are digitising maps and plans from the collection of past and current Company properties and putting these on our website, linking to the Company's website.

Also last year, Archives staff were invited to participate in the 150th anniversary celebrations for the Great Northern Railway and Dr Pennie Pemberton represented the Archives at that event.

While it's true that these things could have happened without the successful Australian Memory of the World nomination, I believe that it provided a catalyst for the later events and the occasions for interaction with the Company which have strengthened our relationship.

At the time the Noel Butlin Archives Centre was listed on the Australian Memory of the World Register, the other successful nominations were all from major national cultural institutions: the National Library, the National Archives and the National Film and Sound Archives. One of the arguments used in the defence of the Archives when threatened with closure was that it was a nationally-significant collection, up with the best, and the listing confirmed that position. We now use the tagline: 'a national collection' as a reminder that this is not just a University collection or a Canberra collection, but one that includes material from every State and Territory, and just by the way, significant Pacific material as well. I also like to make sure that everyone knows that our collection at 17.5 kilometres is larger than the National Library's Manuscript Collection and the Mitchell Library Manuscript Collection.

I mentioned earlier that the Archives not only collects business archives but also union records. Considering the tangible and intangible benefits that have resulted from our first successful nomination, don't be at all surprised if in the next round there isn't an irresistible nomination for the records of one of our significant union collections.

¹ Chapters by Bob Gollan and Selwyn Cornish in *Light from the Tunnel: Collecting the Archives of Australian Business and Labour at the Australian National University 1953–2003*, ed. B Howarth and E Maidment, Friends of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Canberra, 2004

² Pennie Pemberton, *Pure Merinos and Others: the 'Shipping Lists' of the Australian Agricultural Company*, ANU, 1986

³ 'CEO Thoughts' in *AACo News: Staff Newsletter*, No. 28, May 2003

⁴ *In the Service of the Company: Letters of Sir Edward Parry, Commissioner to the Australian Agricultural Company*, Vol. 1, December 1829 – June 1832 and Vol. 2, June 1832 – March 1834, ANU E Press, 2003–05, http://epress.anu.edu.au/isc1_citation.html and http://epress.anu.edu.au/isc_citation.html.