Before describing information systems at the Business Archives Council it would be appropriate for me to outline briefly the origins and activities of the Council.

The formation of a Council for the Preservation of Business Archives was announced in a letter to The Times on 21 June 1934, signed by prominent businessmen, academics and legal men who were acutely aware that many records of great historical value were being lost as businesses went out of existence in the aftermath of the slump. The aim of the new Council was to locate and preserve the records of British business. Companies would be encouraged to make provision for their records where possible and otherwise to deposit collections with suitable repositories. The Council in its early years operated on a purely voluntary basis, but its activities expanded steadily until in 1975 the Council’s Advisory Service was established. The Service was to approach old established businesses in order to locate, sort and list their records. During the following decade more and more companies became aware of the value of their records for management purposes, public relations and advertising and in staff training as well as their academic interest. This increase has led to numerous approaches to the Council, not only for help with historical archives, but also for advice on modern records management. The Advisory Service, which now employs professional staff, offers a variety of services including review, the production of finding aids, establishing an in-house archive as well as advice on the development of archival and records management policies. It also negotiates for the deposit of records with an appropriate repository.

In recent years, the Economic & Social Research Council (formerly the Social Science Research Council) has provided major financial backing for a survey of the records of the thousand oldest registered companies in England and Wales, which was carried out by a team of Survey staff based at the Business Archives Council. The results of this Survey will be published in the autumn of this year.

In addition to these major surveying activities, the Council provides a Liquidations Monitoring Service which monitors notices of companies going into liquidation as they appear in the London Gazette. The notices are despatched to local Record Offices, who then follow any businesses with potentially valuable records.

The Council runs training days, an Annual Conference and produces a wide range of publications, including a Journal, Business Archives; a quarterly Newsletter; and a series of pamphlets covering technical aspects of archive policy and records management, called Record Aids.

So this is the Business Archives Council, its membership made up of individuals, institutions and corporate members. What information has the Council accumulated and in what forms is it accessible? It is important to remember that the main information systems within the Council are working tools for the staff and are organized as such. Information is available in several forms:

1) Surveys and Reports. These are a prime source of information, generated by the Council. The Survey list is the end product of a project undertaken by the Advisory Service. In most cases this will take the form of an archival list of the holdings of the company, and is accompanied by a report making recommendations as to the future of the records. Every company is different and the records reflect this, but nevertheless there are categories of records which will be found in most collections, for example corporate records, financial records, property, production, sales, personnel records and so on. Within a list records are arranged according to such categories.

Many of these lists are available for consultation at the Council’s offices. A company’s permission is sought before lists are made available. Once permission has been granted, a copy of the list is deposited with the National Register of Archives at the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts in Chancery Lane, London. Lists of surveys carried out are published each year in the Council’s Annual Report. Lists are not usually indexed, since the Contents page will give sufficient references and lists are usually concise and self-explanatory. In some instances, problems arise over company names, where there have been many name changes or where company names have been manipulated within a group. In these circumstances, the records tend to be listed under the most recent name of the company. A short list of name changes is included at the beginning of the entry and an index of company names is produced, so comprehensive that no matter what name the user looks for he will be able to locate it!

Individual entries in a list consist of a reference
number (basically a location reference) covering dates and a brief description of the records. They are not intended to be a substitute for consulting records themselves.

2) Library. The Council has a library of around two thousand company histories and a similar number of pamphlets and periodicals. Many of these are privately published and not readily available elsewhere. These are available for consultation at the Council's offices.

3) Reference books. These are mainly directories of various descriptions, both current and past copies, including general directories such as Kelly's as well as trade directories, Stock Exchange Yearbooks and the like, all of which are in daily use by Council staff. Also held are directories of archival holdings.

4) Other published information. A good deal of this information is in the form of annual reports from County Record Offices and other similar institutions. From these, information on deposits of business records may be gleaned.

5) Indexes. The major index is an alphabetical company index. Again, this is the main office index system, not a pure academic tool. It takes the form of a card index arranged alphabetically by company and includes references to every company with whom the Council has contact in the course of its work, references to 'unsolicited lists' that is, lists received from other bodies, for information, liquidated companies whose records have been deposited. Not all subsidiaries of a company will be separately entered in the index, but this information is readily obtainable elsewhere, so this does not cause too many problems. This, and indeed, the other sources of information, rely on the user having a good idea of what he is looking for.

The minor indexes are a trade index, a subject index in the Journal, and a rather elderly geographical index. The trade index was begun anew around eighteen months ago and is still in a fairly embryonic state! There are problems in how to classify businesses, as anyone who has ever used the different volumes of Kompass will appreciate. This trade index uses a combination of the classification used by Professor Peter Payne in his book The early Scottish Limited Companies 1856-1895 and categories arising from experience over the years.

There is in each edition of Business Archives a section entitled Business Records Deposited. Entries are arranged by trade and within that alphabetically by repository. In a rudimentary way, this information has been extracted and filed.

The geographical index was compiled initially before local government reorganization and so is now rather out of date, although it can still be useful for earlier corrections.

These, then, are the sources of information at the Business Archives Council. They serve as working tools for staff, research tools for enquirers, and the survey lists as the Council's 'product' for companies. The emphasis on the main company index can be explained by the fact that for at least 99% of the time the Council's staff (the major users) start with a company name and only extremely rarely with a location or a trade.

There are no plans at present for computerizing the indexes, although this will really have to be a long-term aim as volume increases and as the number of enquiries continues to grow. The Council has in its possession the raw material for a magnificent data base and research tool, and the expertise to realize its potential.

Enquiries regarding membership of the Council and use of its facilities should be addressed to the Secretary General, Business Archives Council, 185 Tower Bridge Road, London SE1 2PN. Telephone: 01-407 6110.

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Father, my

'I have just looked over the index of the last volume of the War memoirs of David Lloyd George, the Prime Minister and the driving force in the conduct of the First World War during its last two years. There are four pages, eight packed columns of tiny type, in reference to Haig, whose relation to Lloyd George was that of General Westmoreland's to President Johnson, except that President Johnson admired and trusted Westmoreland, whereas Haig was Lloyd George's least favourite soldier, in the First World War or any other. I quote some of the saltier references to Haig in Lloyd George's index: "failure of his strategy at the Somme . . . misleads Cabinet about Italian front . . . prefers to gamble with men's lives than to admit error . . . his fanciful estimates of manpower . . . neglects defences of Fifth Army . . . his conspiracy to destroy General Reserve . . . his attempt to shirk blame for March 1918 defeat . . . misstatements about Italian reinforcements". And so on and on, through a catalogue of charges that could provide fuel for a dozen lawsuits.'