

Inspiring success



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## **Introducing ... the British Steel Collection**

Joan K F Heggie

A recent initiative by the University of Teesside and Teesside Archives, both located in Middlesbrough in the north east of England, has secured the future of an important and significant archive of national and international importance. The British Steel Collection was gifted to Teesside Archives almost twenty years ago by British Steel plc (now Corus) but lack of resources prevented making it available to the public. No catalogue existed and very little was known about the full size of the deposit, the complexity or the variety of its contents. Indeed, due to lack of space, most of the Collection remained in storage at Corus until the University and the Archives joined forces. In the summer of 2006, the whole Collection was moved into its new home on the 4th floor of Teesside Archives and a basic shelf listing was completed. On the basis of that endeavour, funding bids were submitted to finance the work needed to make this extensive resource available to the public.

Led by the University of Teesside, the £1.6 million British Steel Archive Project has been running since April 2008 and is due to finish at the end of 2010. Partially funded by a £250,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the project has also been successful in gaining financial support from Corus, as the current steel industrial presence on Teesside, and Community trade union (formerly the Iron & Steel Trades Federation). However, about £400,000 still needs to be raised in order to achieve all the objectives. Individual and corporate donations to the project are most welcome. The British Steel Collection contains the records of forty or more iron and steel companies based in the Teesside area of the North East of England and covers the period c. 1840-1970. The history of Teesside, especially its rapid growth during the nineteenth century, is directly linked to the expansion of the railways from Darlington and Stockton towards the mouth of the Tees estuary and the subsequent discovery of ironstone in the Cleveland Hills which attracted iron companies to the area.

The Collection includes selected company records of many companies such as Bolckow & Vaughan, Bell Brothers, Cochrane & Co. Ltd., Dorman, Long & Co. Ltd., South Durham Steel & Iron Co. Ltd., Cargo Fleet Iron Company and Skinningrove Iron Co. Ltd. In addition, records of associated institutions as the Middlesbrough Exchange Co. Ltd. and the Cleveland Mineowners' Association have been preserved. In its current, un-catalogued state, the Collection fills nearly 700 linear feet of shelving and it is anticipated that, once the repackaging is complete, it will double in size. As such, it is the biggest single deposit held by Teesside Archives.

In addition to the traditional business records, there are thousands of images (in various formats e.g. glass plate negatives), especially of construction projects around the world such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge, built by Dorman, Long & Co. Ltd. and opened in 1932. Engineering drawings, blueprints, maps and plans also feature significantly in the Collection. Of interest to family historians will be the many records pertaining to employees, directors and shareholders of the companies.

There are three main project aims:

To create an electronic, searchable catalogue of the entire collection;

To preserve and conserve vulnerable, damaged and high interest items within the collection; and

To raise awareness about the collection via community engagement and outreach activities.

The project team were recruited between April and August 2008 and have made significant progress to date. The archivist is over half way through compiling a full list of the contents of each box. This list will form the basis for the catalogue by sorting the records by company, by date and by type. From this list, the details of each record will be entered into the electronic cataloguing software which will be made available to the public via the internet. The conservation survey is underway which will help to prioritise items requiring repair, cleaning and repackaging. Outreach activities have been successfully raising awareness about the project and encouraging people to get involved with the project as a volunteer. Since October 2008, over 60 volunteers have been trained and over 40 are actively working on digitisation, indexing, collection care, small research projects, oral history interviews & public engagement activities.

Anyone with an interest in Teesside or industrial heritage will welcome the availability of this new resource, as will family historians with ancestors who migrated to this area to work in the ironstone mines, quarries, coal mines or the iron and steel companies which employed so many. As well as the catalogue, many items will be indexed and made available through the project website, together with a searchable gallery of images from the Collection.

For more information, go to: [www.britishsteelcollection.org.uk](http://www.britishsteelcollection.org.uk)

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