

Profile of a South African Company Archive

by MARYNA FRASER

The growing interest in Southern African studies, particularly during the past ten years in the United Kingdom¹ has focussed attention on the research value of South African business records for the economic and business historian. Yet, little attention has been paid to the systematic collection, preservation and proper exploitation of these records despite several articles on the subject in recent years.²

In the National Archives of Rhodesia in Salisbury business records created by the British South Africa Company in its capacity as administrator of Rhodesia between 1890 and 1923³ form the basis of the public archives. Its historical manuscripts division includes business records, particularly of mining companies in the territory. Each of the six government archive depots in South Africa has large holdings of business records. South African university libraries, particularly the Universities of the Witwatersrand and Cape Town, have outstanding holdings in many subject fields but business records are sparsely represented.

There are clear indications, however, that South African companies are beginning to show an interest in the preservation of their old records. This interest, manifested mainly in company histories and commemorative brochures, is often tied to an important anniversary celebration after which the records are once again relegated to dead storage and left to gather dust. There is also a tendency to concentrate too much on the preservation of memorabilia such as plaques, addresses, photographs and other paraphernalia accumulated in haphazard fashion by a public relations department or of museum items and material for displays. Without diminishing either the value or the desirability of such collections, an emphasis on material of this kind does obscure the need to preserve the textual records of a company.

- 1 Robert W. Baldock, "A Survey of Southern African Manuscripts in the United Kingdom," *Communications from the Basel Africa Bibliography* no. 16 (1976): 3-6.
- 2 B.A. le Cordeur, "Business Records," *South African Archives Journal* no. 2 (1960): 46-49; Maryna Fraser, "The Barlow Rand Archives, Johannesburg," *South African Archives Journal* no. 17 (1975): 7-18; Maryna Fraser, "The Organisation of Business Archives," *Boardroom* 24, no. 6 (June 1977): 3-4, 6-8.
- 3 T.W. Baxter, *Guide to the Public Archives of Rhodesia 1, 1890-1923* (Salisbury, 1969), pp. xi-xxxii; John S. Galbraith, *Crown and Charter: The Early Years of the British South Africa Company* (Berkeley, 1974).

On the positive side there are a few organizations, principally banking, insurance and mining companies, which have introduced archival programmes. Two old South African banks have established archives in Johannesburg since 1974. The Barclays Bank Museum houses a wide range of material from correspondence, signature books and minute books to desks, clocks, revolvers, photographs and coins from 1800 to date. The Standard Bank Archives concentrates almost exclusively upon textual records, which date from 1862, and on photographs. This institution offers facilities to researchers and is particularly concerned with a wide dissemination of information about its holdings. To this end, the bank plans to publish a pictorial volume and history of the bank in South Africa. One large assurance company, Sanlam, has established archives at its head office in Cape Town. Two other mining houses, Anglo American Corporation of South Africa Limited, Johannesburg, and De Beers Consolidated Mines Limited, Kimberley, have recently implemented archival programmes. These archives, together with records in the Barlow Rand Archives, will provide excellent coverage of the history of the South African diamond and gold mining industry from its beginnings in the 1880s. It would be admirable if the other mining houses were to follow such examples rather than that of Consolidated Gold Fields of South Africa which donated the miscellaneous residue of their old records to Rhodes University Library, Grahamstown.

The pioneer and leader in South African business archives was a mining house, Rand Mines Limited, which established the Rand Mines Archives in June 1963. The resolution to create an Archives Department was influenced by the decision to write a history commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of Rand Mines and by planning for an imminent relocation. The company had occupied one building since 1904 with its parent companies, H. Eckstein & Co. and Central Mining and Investment Corporation Limited. The bulk of parent company records dating back to 1887 had been stored in the basement of the building, while Rand Mines Limited has preserved its own records since its 1893 founding in Johannesburg. Thus, an excellent archival nucleus existed. An acquisition programme was introduced which resulted in the donation of textual, pictorial, and cartographic records from within the group as well as from former employees. Museum items were held in safekeeping for the Chamber of Mines' proposed mining museum which was never brought to fruition. After the appointment of the present archivist, it was felt that these items should rather be donated to the city's Africana Museum where the general public would be able to view them.

In 1971 Rand Mines Limited merged with Thos. Barlow and Sons, a company which had originated in 1902 as a small merchandising house in Durban dealing in a range of industrial felts and textiles. The principal activities of the resulting Barlow Rand Group are divided into the following categories: distribution and merchandising, manufacturing, property and other interests, and mining and exploration. The group's mining interests in gold, uranium, coal, chrome, platinum and asbestos fall under Rand Mines while Barlow's controls the commercial and industrial interests. Soon after the merger, it was decided that the archives should be retained rather than be donated to the local university or public library. In this way the work begun by Rand Mines Limited would be continued in the preservation of the written

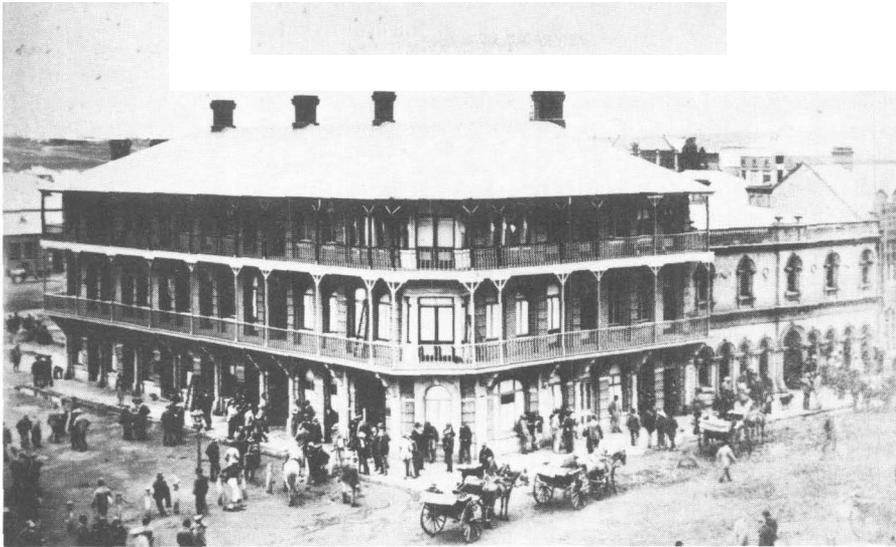
legacy of companies which played such an important part in virtually every sphere of activity in Johannesburg, if not the country as a whole.

The archives became a department of the Office of Group Administration of Barlow Rand Limited and a full-time archivist was appointed early in 1973 to report directly through the Group Administrative and Financial Manager to the Chairman. An Archives Committee composed of the Chairman, Deputy Chairman, Group Administrative and Financial Manager and an executive representative from Rand Mines Limited was formed in 1974 to ratify the archivist's programme and to ensure the funding necessary for implementation. Consequently the archivist enjoys the support of top management and great latitude in choice and priority of projects.

The Archives Department's main objectives are to arrange and to describe, in accordance with standard archival practice, the archives of three major companies and some of their subsidiaries as well as a large collection of personal papers or historical manuscripts, from about 1880 to 1930; to reproduce a limited number of copies of finding aids for distribution to a selected number of local and overseas archival institutions and libraries; to collect records of historical interest throughout the Barlow Rand Group of companies, and particularly any surviving records of Thos. Barlow & Sons which celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1977; and to ensure the preservation of current records with a potential archival interest, for example the documents dealing with the Rand Mines take-over.

The nucleus of the Barlow Rand Archives consists of the records of H. Eckstein and Company, Wernher, Beit and Company of London, and Central Mining and Investment Corporation which became internationally known not only for the part they played in the development of mining and other industries in South Africa, but also for a very wide range of other business interests—from financing tramways in Mexico and St. Petersburg, Russia, to oil in Trinidad and cotton plantations in Egypt and the Sudan.

The mining division of the Barlow Rand Group is the best represented in the Archives and most records are in English, German and French. The origins of H. Eckstein & Co., popularly known as "The Corner House", can be traced back to the Kimberley diamond fields and the firm of Jules Porges & Company. H. Eckstein and Company was established at the inception of the gold mining industry on the Witwatersrand by men who had played a major role in laying the foundations of a stable and profitable diamond mining industry in South Africa. Remarkably well preserved, its records are a fine source for the economic and technical history of the gold mining industry of the Witwatersrand, reflecting several of the major stages of its development and crises. Light is shed on the striking of pyritic ore in 1889 and the successful introduction of the MacArthur Forrest cyanide process, the development of deep-level mines, the South African War and subsequent reorganization of the mines after the 1907 Strike. The Company also witnessed the establishment of other operations connected with the mines, for instance, the power supply industry and was active in the period of amalgamations from 1906 onwards when the subsidiary companies of various mining houses with adjoining ground were amalgamated into single companies. The archives also contains information on the early history of Johannesburg since H. Eckstein and Com-



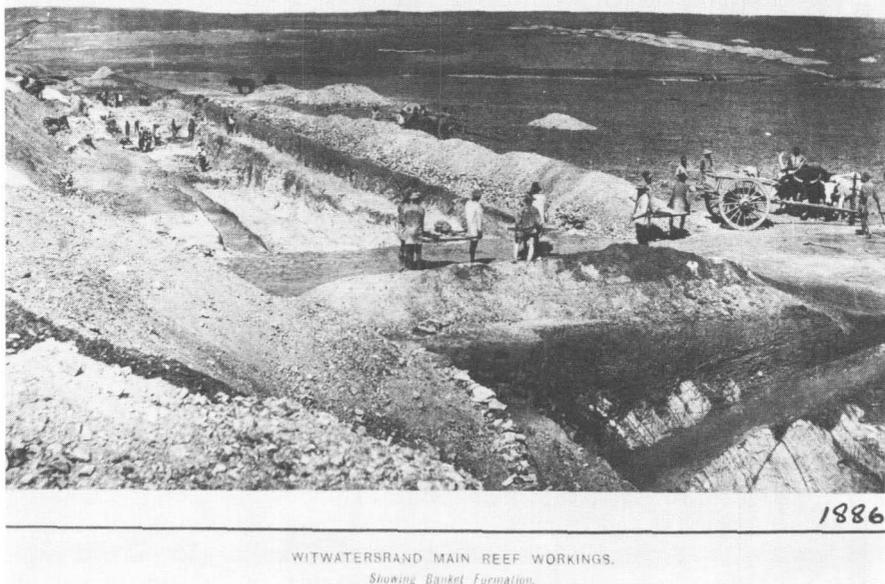
The first Corner House, Johannesburg, ca. 1890. (Barlow Rand Archives).

pany was, for example, responsible for the establishment of townships through its subsidiary the Braamfontein Company Limited, the supply of water to Parktown and the gift of the ground for the establishment of the Johannesburg Zoological Gardens. The partners in the firm actively participated in the social, cultural and educational affairs of the community and their correspondence, particularly the London letters, contain lively commentaries on local events and politics.

At the point where it was possible to start arranging and describing the records of one company, it was decided to begin with the archives of H. Eckstein and Company which is the oldest company and contains material most in demand by researchers. The arrangement of the records proved to be difficult and challenging. One of the greatest problems which confronted the archivist was the absence of any trace of the original arrangement; however, the first archivist provided very useful information and clues were also found in the records themselves. An instruction to a filing clerk on one of the letters, for instance, revealed that each partner retained sets of files in his office. Therefore it was decided that the introduction of a sub-series for the correspondence of each partner would not only be logical, but would aid the researcher. The London letters formed another natural sub-series. Once all the scattered material held by the Record Department was collected, a definite subject filing system was discernible and the original order of the files was restored. The *Inventory of the Archives of H. Eckstein & Co., 1887-1910* was privately published by Barlow Rand Limited in October 1975 and copies were distributed to all the archives depots and major research libraries in the Republic of South Africa as well as to a few in the United Kingdom and the United States of

America.⁴ This archive was opened to researchers with no restrictions on any of the records.

On completion of this project, the arrangement and description of the archives of Wernher, Beit and Company was postponed temporarily in favour of editing for publication a selection of the correspondence of Sir Lionel Phillips,⁵ who had been a partner in H. Eckstein and Company, Wernher, Beit and Company, and Director and Chairman of Central Mining and Investment Corporation Limited. He was also the Chairman of Rand Mines Limited. The letters were selected from his personal papers and the archives of Eckstein and Company, Wernher, Beit and Company and Central Mining & Investment Corporation Limited, London and Johannesburg. This volume provides an insight into the career of a key figure in the development of the South African gold mining industry and related topics, as well as general political, economic and social developments between 1890 and 1924 when Phillips retired from an active business life. The publication was generously sponsored and supported by the Company and in particular, the chairman, C.S. Barlow.



WITWATERSRAND MAIN REEF WORKINGS.
Showing Basket Formation.

View of the Witwatersrand main reef workings, ca. 1886. (Barlow Rand Archives)

- 4 Maryna Fraser, comp., *Inventory of the Archives of H. Eckstein & Co., 1887-1910* (Johannesburg, 1975). This publication was reviewed in *The American Archivist* 39, no. 4 (October 1976): 498, and *South African Archives Journal* no. 17 (1975): 19-22. Copies are available in the United States of America at the Baker Library, Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, and at the Krannert Library, Purdue University; in Canada: Dr. A.H. Jeeves, Department of History, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.
- 5 Maryna Fraser and Alan Jeeves, eds., *All that Glittered: Selected Correspondence of Lionel Phillips, 1890-1924* (Cape Town, 1977).

Work is now in progress on the records of Wernher, Beit and Company of London, named after two great financiers of the nineteenth century, Alfred Beit and Julius Wernher, which succeeded Jules Porges and Company of Paris, London and Kimberley. When its successor, the Central Mining & Investment Corporation Limited, merged with Charter Consolidated Limited in the 1960s, all the records were deposited in the Rand Mines Archives. Central Mining & Investment Corporation had acquired in 1910 all the assets, except the diamond business, of Wernher, Beit and Company and H. Eckstein and Company which then became known as Central Mining & Investment Corporation, Johannesburg and Central Mining & Investment Corporation, London. The records of these companies and their forerunners reflect the continuous history of the establishment and development of the South African gold mining industry from 1887. Their history and that of a few of their well-known subsidiary companies was published in two volumes at the time of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Rand Mines Limited.⁶

In addition to company archives and private papers, the Barlow Rand Archives include a few literary manuscripts, a large collection of photographs, maps, government publications, pamphlets and a book collection. The specialized book collection which forms part of the archives focusses on the subjects and personalities reflected in the archives and private papers. Several of the oldest companies are still functioning, for example, Thesen & Co. (Pty.) Limited established in 1892, Rand Mines Limited established in 1893, and Thos. Barlow and Sons Limited established in 1902.

In a highly decentralized organization such as Barlow Rand it is difficult to ensure that the old records are preserved either by the companies themselves or by the archives. Articles on the activities of the archives published periodically in the house journal, *Round Up*, with a circulation of 8,000, create an awareness of the value of older records. Three of the oldest gold mining companies in the group were wound up during the course of 1977: Crown Mines Limited (established in 1909), City Deep Limited (1899), and Consolidated Main Reef Mines and Estate Limited (1896) providing an occasion for the archivist to visit their management to salvage any remaining records of interest.

A separation of interest between the mining division and the commercial side of Barlow Rand is reflected in the archives holdings. Rand Mines Limited has a tradition of sound records management embodied in a central registry with proper retention and disposal schedules for non-current records and a good working relationship exists between this department and the archives. Barlow's has never subscribed to records management; hence the paucity of their archival holdings. Companies within the group are autonomous and are responsible for the organization of their own records although the archivist is always available to provide advice. The archivist's recommendations for a records management programme for the Office of Group Administration was firmly rejected in favour of preserving the *status quo* whereby executives' records are kept by their secretaries with no central coordination or control. Preparatory to the Office of Group Administration's move to Barlow Park

⁶ Cartwright, A.P., *The Corner House: The Early History of Johannesburg* (Cape Town, 1965); *Golden Age: The Story of the Industrialization of South Africa and the part played in it by the Corner House Group of Companies, 1910-1967* (Cape Town, 1968).

toward the end of 1977, departments and secretaries did ask for disposal and retention guidelines for their records and a fair amount of material was deposited in the archives. It is hoped that the physical centralization of the Office of Group Administration at Barlow Park will eventually result in at least a loosely-knit coordination of records since the chances of introducing a proper records management programme appear to be remote.

The Archives Project was headed in 1963 a retired member of staff. Although he excelled in tracing textual, pictorial and cartographic records for preservation and in collecting a considerable number of items for a future mining museum, he was succeeded in 1970 by a person who totally disregarded the principles of provenance and original order, and imposed a broad subject arrangement and the Universal Decimal Classification scheme on all the material in the archives. The record groups were thereby broken up and dispersed in a completely artificial subject arrangement which also included personal papers and published material.

This was the situation which confronted the present archivist when she took up her appointment in 1973. The first task was a detailed survey of all the records. Each item was carefully examined and an attempt was made to determine provenance. The only finding aid was a box of cards resembling something between a library card catalogue and a broad subject index. As no locations were given on the cards, each of the boxes containing the loose records had to be numbered, the contents matched to a subject in the index and the location noted. A detailed contents card was also made for each box, noting the provenance of the records. It was then possible to trace material, and to establish record groups based on each company being treated as a separate entity. The records of each company and an employee's personal papers, as distinct from his office records, had to be separated. It was a long and arduous task involving hundreds of thousands of items.

An awareness of the research value of the archives has existed since its inception in the 1960s. The publication in that period of A.P. Cartwright's numerous works⁷ based on these archives and the growing interest in Southern African studies in the English-speaking world since then has stimulated local and overseas scholars to seek access to the archives. The archives of the leading "Corner House" group reveal a remarkably complete record of decision-making at the highest level of a mining operation which was influential in South Africa, England and Europe. They also contain considerable information on its international operations and are, therefore, of general interest to students of nineteenth and early twentieth century business history. The light which they shed on politics, and industry-state relations complements official government records.

Several British and North American universities offer courses in South African history and many of their graduate students have used or propose to use the Barlow Rand Archives as a vital source for their research programmes. A.H. Jeeves⁸ of Queen's University, Kingston, and R.V. Kubicek⁹ of the Uni-

7 A.P. Cartwright, *op. cit.*

8 Dr. Jeeves teaches courses in South African history at undergraduate and post-graduate level at Queen's University. He used the Rand Mines Archives extensively for his doctoral thesis and subsequent articles.

9 Robert V. Kubicek, "The Randlords in 1895: A Reassessment", *The Journal of British Studies* XI, no. 2 (May 1972): 84-10.

versity of British Columbia were the first Canadian academics to use the archives in the 1960s. Dr. Jeeves subsequently used the archives again in 1975 and 1976.

The interest in the Barlow Rand Archives is by no means confined to textual records. The excellence of its pictorial records has become known and requests for illustrative material are frequently received from local and overseas authors, publishers, libraries, archives and museums. The photographic collection covers a wide range of subjects including mining and other companies, personalities, Johannesburg views and buildings, staff photographs and houses, mine hospitals, miners' recreational activities, transport, and buildings within the group. There are some rare maps in the cartographic collection which is divided into a general section and maps of archival interest. The latter, although stored separately, forms part of the various company archives and includes blueprints of early mine workings. The earliest known map of Johannesburg is one of the Archives' most treasured possessions. Drawn in 1889, three years after the founding of the town, it depicts the central area and surroundings in detail, including all the outcrop and deep level mining companies operating at the time.

The archives form a major part of the company's programme to promote education and scholarship, and to stimulate an interest in South African business history. The provision of professional advice and assistance to other South African companies in establishing their archives and assistance to researchers are services for which Barlow Rand Limited is receiving acclaim in South Africa and abroad.

Résumé

L'archiviste de la corporation de *Barlow Rand Limited*, Afrique du Sud, explique l'organisation de ce fonds d'archives et le travail qu'on effectue sur ce fonds. Elle nous montre la difficulté d'organiser les archives de compagnies en constante transformation suite à des fusions.