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Pastoral industry records

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Introduction

The Archives of Business and Labour was created to provide primary source material for the writing of the economic history of Australia from the gold rushes on. It was inevitable, therefore, that there should be a concentration on records relating to the pastoral industry.

Two of the earliest deposits secured were from the Australian Agricultural Company and Goldsbrough Mort. From there, a comprehensive coverage of the major pastoral companies gradually developed. The purpose of this article is to give researchers an overview of these holdings, with some indication of their strengths and weaknesses.

The records

Australian Agricultural Company

Formed in 1824 with the aim of breeding fine-woolled sheep in New South Wales, the Australian Agricultural Company (AA Co.), began operations on a one million-acre grant at Port Stephens in 1826. The administrative history of the company was the subject of a more comprehensive article in a previous issue of ABLative. The company's records are amongst the most complete of any in Australia, in terms of both the operational Australian end and the London directorate and secretariat.

The company operated in four major New South Wales locations during the 19th century – Port Stephens, Tamworth, Quirindi and Newcastle. From the last quarter of that century it also operated in Queensland and eventually in northern Australia. Its interests expanded to include wool, wheat, cattle, coal, and land sales, and at one time or another it investigated sugar, tobacco, olives, silkworms, and alpacas. Unlike some such chartered companies it rarely failed to pay a dividend, and it survives today as one of the three largest land and cattle owners in the country.

Needless to say, no company can traverse 160 years of history without losing some records to fire, flood, vermin or human interference. The AA Co., however, has probably lost fewer significant records than most other organisations of a similar age.

In 1854, the AA Co. sold part of its land to daughter company the Peel River Land & Mineral Company. The two companies operated separately until 1932 when the managements were merged, and in 1959 the parent company acquired the whole shareholding of the Peel

Company. Together, the records of the two companies and subsidiaries amount to over 315 shelf metres and 100 reels of microfilm.

Goldsbrough Mort

Goldsbrough Mort was taken over by Elder Smith & Co. in 1962. It was itself the product of a merger between R Goldsbrough & Co. Ltd of Melbourne and Mort & Co. of Sydney in 1888. The earliest records date from 1855. Little remains of the records of Mort & Co., most of the earliest material being of R Goldsbrough & Co. With various subsidiaries the records occupy in excess of 650 shelf metres.

With this quantity of material it is difficult to pinpoint the highlights. However, the earliest material is certainly interesting for the light it throws on the commercial practices of the third quarter of the 19th century. Although Goldsbrough Mort never actively sought to own pastoral property some of the most important records are those relating to clients and other properties, some of which had come the company's way by foreclosure, while others were managed on behalf of owners. To these should be added the reports relating to properties which were owned neither by the company nor its clients, but which its pastoral inspectors reported on from time to time for one reason or another.

Altogether these provide a vast fund of information relating to a large number of sheep and cattle properties throughout New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. These records are supplemented by a large collection of manuscripts and annotated printed maps.

Other important but under-used sections of the Goldsbrough Mort collections are the records relating to wool sales. A very large collection of catalogues is supplemented by correspondence, clients' documents, indexes, etc.

Elder Smith & Co. Ltd

The records of Elder Smith & Co. Ltd are voluminous and important. Originating from a business founded by Alexander Elder in 1840, the company grew through several partnerships to become Elder Smith & Co. in 1863, becoming a public company in 1888. The records held by the Archives are essentially those of the public company, although a few predate 1888.

Elder Smith's records are important as regards South Australia and its pastoral industry, but their significance is far wider than that because of the importance of Elders' general merchandising role from an early date. This mercantile strain continues to recent times.

Dalgety's

Occupying over 400 shelf metres, the records of Dalgety's are undoubtedly the best illustration of the administration of a pastoral finance and agency company at the branch and sub-branch level, and are important also for their coverage of the agency and shipping activities that were a significant part of the company's business. Until the arrival of the last deposit of records from the London head office in 1980, however, they were amongst the most frustrating of records to use because of the lack of high-level managerial records. The London records, with broad coverage of board and general meetings, a very long series of

secretarial correspondence with branches, and various significant private and semi-official correspondence series, have largely remedied these problems.

New Zealand Loan & Mercantile Agency Co. Ltd

Alongside the Dalgety records should be placed those of the New Zealand Loan & Mercantile Agency Co. Ltd, which merged with Dalgety in 1961. Once again, although records have been held in the Archives since 1968, they were somewhat disappointing until comparatively recently when the London records were deposited. The 120 shelf metres of records now cover virtually the entire operations of the company from its formation 1865 to its merger with Dalgety. Like Goldsbrough Mort, the New Zealand Loan & Mercantile Agency operated in the fields of wool-broking, pastoral investment and stock and station activities, generally eschewing the ownership of pastoral property.

New Zealand and Australian Land Co. Ltd

The New Zealand and Australian Land Co. Ltd, which was taken over by Dalgety in 1968, was a company devoted to the development, ownership and management of sheep and cattle stations. Arising out of an amalgamation of two early pastoral companies operating in New Zealand, the company gradually contracted its operations in New Zealand and expanded them in Australia from 1900, reaching a peak in the period 1910 to 1914. Although the company contracted considerably after this in the face of expiring leases and closer settlement resumptions, it was still the owner of 20 stations at the beginning of the 1960s. The records date principally from 1904 to 1968.

Australian Mercantile Land & Finance Co. Ltd

The roughly 240 shelf metres of records from this company are rich in financial and pastoral detail over the period 1874 to 1977. In particular, Deposit 162, the records of the London office, the Australian head office and Sydney office, is a marvellous resource. The company covered the broad spectrum of finance, agency and pastoral ownership and management.

Australian Estates Co. Ltd

The Australian Estates Co. Ltd began life as the Australian Estates and Mortgage Co. Ltd, a subsidiary of the Union Mortgage and Agency Co., which it replaced at the end of the 19th century, taking over its assets. The records are held partly by the Archives of Business and Labour and partly by the Melbourne University Archives. The 30 plus shelf metres of records held by the Archives of Business and Labour fall into two main parts: the London and Australian head office records of the company and its predecessors (Deposits 158 and 165), and Deposits 5 and M2 (also records of the Australian head office) which consist of the annual station reports – one of the most concentrated sources for local conditions known. The 21 shelf metres held at the University of Melbourne represent the remnant records of the Australian head office. Both collections include records of subsidiary companies. The Australian Estates is one of the few companies with an interest in sugar growing and milling whose records are known to be in archival custody (another is CSR Limited, which originally took over “The Estates”).

Squatting Investment Co. Ltd

One of the quietest companies on our shelves is the Squatting Investment Co. Ltd. Besides the 27 shelf metres of records in Deposit 3, there are substantial quantities of records amongst those of Goldsbrough Mort that supplement these.

Individual stations and smaller companies

Amongst the pastoral records held by the Archives are those of many individual stations and small pastoral companies. The only one of these that needs to be mentioned specifically is Victoria River Downs, which was dealt with in the first issue of ABLative. There are 9 shelf metres of records dealing with this famous station.

Pitt, Son & Badgery Ltd

For completeness it is desirable also to mention the 7 metres of Pitt, Son & Badgery Ltd records dealing with the company's stock, station and wool-broking business 1888-1972.

Bodalla Company

Finally, there is another set of "pastoral" records of a rather different type – those of the Bodalla Company. Thomas Sutcliffe Mort – famous as the progenitor of one of Australia's largest pastoral finance houses and founder of the frozen meat export trade - died in 1878 at his home at Bodalla on the south coast of New South Wales. For almost 20 years before his death, he had spent much of his time and wealth in developing a 24,000-acre property, which he envisaged as an integrated dairy-farming estate and butter and cheese manufacturing enterprise.

A company was formed by a Private Act of the New South Wales Parliament in 1886 to take over the running of the estate and continues to operate.

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