



INTRODUCTION

HARLAND AND WOLFF PAPERS

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Harland and Wolff Papers (D2805)

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Summary

The Harland & Wolff archive in PRONI comprises c.2,000 files, c.200 volumes and c.16,000 documents, 1861-1987, documenting most aspects of the history of Belfast's famous shipbuilding firm.



Gustav Wilhelm Wolff

The Harland & Wolff archive is one of the most extensive business archives held in the Public Record Office. But it was not until Michael Moss and John R. Hume, who had earlier completed a similar account of the history of the Scottish shipbuilders, William Beardmore & Co. of Glasgow, undertook to write the company's official history published in 1986 as *Shipbuilders to the World*, that the various departments in Harland & Wolff began to yield up their records for ultimate deposit in PRONI.



Deposits of records, 1960s-1990s

Prior to the publication of *Shipbuilders to the World*, PRONI received only two significant deposits of business records from Harland & Wolff. In the late 1960s c.100 volumes were deposited. Almost all of them were wages books relating to Harland & Wolff's Belfast shipbuilding works, covering the period 1861-1952, with one volume relating to the firm's Londonderry works and three volumes relating to aircraft workers during the Second World War. There were also cash books, covering the period 1864-1869 and 1924-1932, and one relating to the firm's Recreation and Athletic Association, 1922-1933.

The second significant deposit, totalling 32 volumes and c.16,000 documents, arrived at PRONI in the late 1970s. These records comprise specifications for work on ships' repairs and renovations, 1950-1978; general correspondence of the same covering dates; memoranda and correspondence of various associations including the Shipbuilding and Repairers' National Association, the British Internal Combustion Engine Manufacturers' Association and the British Engineers' Association, 1956-1969; and, finally, minutes, reports and correspondence relating to contracts and insurance policies for ships and ships' engines, 1960-1965.

In the early 1980s some Harland & Wolff business records were listed *in situ* in preparation for their ultimate deposit in PRONI. However, as has already been noted, it was the work of business historians, Moss and Hume, which created an awareness of the importance of the archive and led to the deposit in PRONI of the most historically significant business records soon after the publication of *Shipbuilders to the World* in 1986.

The records, mostly files and volumes, filled two cars and a van. Once they were sorted into appropriate piles and pigeon holes, a classification scheme had to be devised to enable researchers to find their way round this huge archive. The minute books and private ledgers were easy enough to sort, as these were the company's principal records and therefore well preserved and with clearly marked titles. However, it took a great deal of time to classify the myriad general ledgers. Careful reading was necessary to differentiate between and among the functions documented in these ledgers and to identify how they related to one another. Complex too was the sorting and listing of the many series of letters of senior company officials which were not always contained in files and folders. Much of the correspondence was held loose in what were called 'permafiles' – huge cardboard boxes - and it became obvious that a few of Harland & Wolff's less conscientious clerical staff had stuffed papers into these boxes which were totally unrelated, in terms of subject matter, to the material already in them. Other hazards included dirt and the sheer weight of some of the ledgers.

Further deposits of records were made by Harland & Wolff in the 1990s. In 1990 two hundred additional items covering the period 1961 to 1987 were accessioned. And, in 1994, two deposits were made which included 230 boxes of documents covering a wide variety of material, for example, papers about trade unions, finance and personnel, correspondence, minutes, reports and proceedings, press cuttings and

press releases, and photographs. A number of items deserve a particular mention: a notebook listing owners' names, number and name of ships built or repaired, 1890-1914; notebooks listing owners' names, number and name of ships built or repaired, 1905-1973; a file dealing with completed contracts for the Foyle Bridge-Linkplan, 1982; and a file of papers relating to the 'Ro-Ro' ramp at Larne harbour, 1986.

The classification scheme and list of the Harland & Wolff archive is thus always being refined. As long as Harland & Wolff exists as a company, it is to be expected that further deposits will be made. The list of D2805 will therefore always be in a state of flux.



The content of the archive

It is easy to see why Moss and Hume entitled their book *Shipbuilders to the World*, because the records document Harland & Wolff's business links with virtually every part of the globe. The meticulously kept private ledgers of William James (Viscount Pirrie), the chairman of Harland & Wolff, 1896-1924, are superb. The researcher can use these to chart Harland & Wolff's path through the shipbuilding cycles and particularly the financial complications experienced by shipbuilding companies generally in the first quarter of the 20th century.



William James,
Lord Pirrie

Also illuminating are the 57 files and c.100 documents, dating from 1915, which comprise the papers accumulated by Sir Frederick Rebbeck, Harland & Wolff chairman and managing director, 1930-1962. These include correspondence, technical drawings, published articles, annual reports, photographs and newspaper cuttings. Perhaps the largest and most significant cache of personal papers deposited are those of his son, Dr Denis Rebbeck, Harland & Wolff managing director, 1962-1970. There are 962 files, covering the period 1960-1970, containing papers and correspondence, notes of meetings, newspaper cuttings, etc, pertaining to his career and his contacts with staff, the Admiralty, the Northern Ireland government, various companies and local business, universities, the Press and miscellaneous individuals.

Dr Rebbeck was himself very interested in history, and this is clearly reflected in his papers.

Another important collection of personal papers is that of Sir John Mallabar, Harland & Wolff chairman, 1966-1970. There are 58 files covering the period of his chairmanship containing accounts, general financial papers and correspondence. At senior management level there are 32 files covering the period 1963-1977 containing correspondence, technical drawings, articles of agreement, publications, agenda and minutes deriving from T.E. Murphy, a former Harland & Wolff secretary; and 8 files covering the period 1925-1957 containing papers and correspondence deriving from F.V. Spark, a former director, secretary and chief accountant.

Apart from papers deriving from individuals there are other significant records. The most extensive sections of the archive include technical records such as specifications of contracts for hull construction, electrical fittings, etc, in the various types of vessels which Harland & Wolff built, for example, liners, tankers, cargo ships, frigates, minesweepers, car ferries, whale catchers, etc. And there are over one hundred files, mostly 20th century, dealing with Harland & Wolff's liaison with trades unions such as the Shipbuilding Employers' Federation, the Engineering and Allied Employers' National Federation, the Ship Constructors and Shipwrights' Association, the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions and the Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff.

Records relating to Harland & Wolff's works and premises in Great Britain are also well represented in the archive. There are papers and correspondence concerning the London works, Scotstoun works, Govan works, Southampton works, Clyde Foundry, Finnieston works, and the Liverpool Ship Repairing and Engineering works. Also worthy of mention are seven boxes of research notes of Moss and Hume, 1983-1986, a box of photograph albums illustrating the damage caused by the air raids at Harland & Wolff in April and May 1941, and loose photographs of various launchings, royal visits, etc.



Terms of access

When the early deposits of Harland & Wolff business records were accessioned, a '50-year rule' was applied to them. In essence this means that a record - be it a file, minute book, ledger, etc - becomes eligible for release to the public 50 years from the date of its last paper. However, in practice, a '50-year rule' has not been operated. Instead, all members of the public are required to submit a written request to Harland & Wolff, through PRONI, seeking access to the records of whatever date. Although Harland & Wolff's administrative staff receive enquiries from all over the world concerning the history of the firm, most enquiries they receive come through PRONI and members of the public are advised by Harland & Wolff and PRONI to use PRONI as an intermediary in the processing of enquiries. This makes good sense.

Firstly, PRONI can establish quickly whether or not it has any material relevant to the enquiries received. Secondly, if it transpires that PRONI has relevant material and it is unlisted, then PRONI can advise as to its accessibility. In most cases unlisted material is not made available to the public. This is to ensure the security of the records concerned, for preservation of the records is PRONI's foremost concern. However, if a researcher is after something very specific then arrangements can sometimes be made to accommodate him or her. Last, but by no means least, PRONI can also advise Harland & Wolff as to the physical condition of the records, and whether or not they can be handled, photocopied or microfilmed. Again, preservation considerations are uppermost. Harland & Wolff tries to facilitate research and considers seriously all requests for access to their records. Understandably, it is not willing to make its personnel records available to the public under any conditions. Its clearly stated line is:

We [Harland & Wolff] regard all manner of personnel records and related material as strictly confidential and it is our strict company policy to refuse access for general research purposes.

If user demand were greater, both Harland & Wolff and PRONI would be encouraged to devote staff resources to 'sensitivity reviewing' of the records and establishing settled conditions of access (expressed in terms of years) to each file, volume and document. At present, however, user demand is low. The Harland & Wolff archive in PRONI is still very much an untapped primary source. Since the publication of *Shipbuilders to the World*, only a negligible amount of research work based upon it has been undertaken. This is a great pity.



Other Harland & Wolff records in PRONI

There are many government records in PRONI which concern the development of the Harland & Wolff shipyard. For example, a number of Cabinet Secretariat files, 1923-1945 (referenced CAB/9A), concern shipbuilding, the government loans guarantee scheme, government subsidies, a shortage of fitting-out workers and the importation of Irish Free State workers, and unemployment in the shipyard. Other files in the Cabinet Secretariat series (referenced CAB/9B) concern temperance legislation, including letters expressing shipyard workers' opposition to the activities of prohibitionists in 1923. The return of Roman Catholics to the shipyard in the same year following serious civil disturbances, is also well documented. Cabinet Conclusions files (referenced CAB/4) also contain references to Harland & Wolff. This file series provides an insight into the very heart of government and civil service activities and this undoubtedly explains why the archive is the most frequently consulted of all the official records held in PRONI. Several Cabinet Conclusions files document the help given to shipbuilding under the Loans Guarantee Acts of 1922-1936. It is clear from these files that although this government assistance may have helped slow the decline in the shipbuilding industry, it did not prevent the closure of the Workman Clark yard in 1935. A *Guide to Cabinet Conclusions* covering the period 1921 to 1943, published by PRONI in 1993, can be consulted in the Public Search Room or the Library at Balmoral Avenue. It is also available for purchase (price, £17.50).

The Ministry of Finance Treasury 'A' files series (referenced FIN/18) is worth checking for financial information on Harland & Wolff, and there may also be material on Harland & Wolff in the Ministry of Home Affairs files series (referenced HA). Access to these files by members of the public is governed by the '30-year rule'. This means that a file becomes eligible for release to the public 30 years from the date of its last paper. The vast majority of these files are over 30 years old and are therefore open to the public.

It is clear from the coroners' records held by PRONI that work in the shipyard was very dangerous at times. Many men have died over the years as a result of industrial accidents. PRONI receives coroners' inquest files 10 years after such files have been closed, it being assumed that virtually all administrative and legal enquiries have been exhausted by the end of that period of time. PRONI staff then have to decide which inquest files should be preserved permanently for historical research purposes. All files concerning industrial accidents in Harland & Wolff are retained because they relate to a firm which has always been one of the biggest employers in Belfast throughout its history and, as has been said, because they describe the treacherous working conditions shipyard workers have had to endure. To apply for access to coroners' records on deposit at PRONI, write to the Head of Access Section, who will, in turn, refer the applicant's request to the Northern Ireland Court Service's Departmental Record Officer for a decision. Do not write directly to the Court Service.



Sir Edward Harland

Apart from these official records there are miscellaneous privately deposited records documenting the history of Harland & Wolff. Of particular interest are the engineering notes of the Ulster Unionist gun-runner, Colonel Fred H. Crawford, 1883-1896, who was an employee of Harland & Wolff (D1700/3/11). Another interesting item, which was displayed in PRONI's *Belfast Blitz* exhibition in 1991, is a Luftwaffe bombing target - that is to say an annotated photograph - showing the shipyard's various works in December 1940 (D1896). There are apprenticeship indentures of John Carr of Ballymacarrett as a millwright, dated 1872 (D3540/1); Robert Russe as a fitter, dated 1913 (D3704); and Andrew Boyd as a turner, dated 1937 (D2389).

And there is an album containing obituaries of Sir Edward Harland taken from British and Irish newspapers published in 1895 and 1896 (D3661). He was Lord Mayor of Belfast and MP for North Belfast as well as a businessman and engineer.



Harland & Wolff records held elsewhere

Beyond PRONI there are two major collections of Harland & Wolff records held by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (UFTM): a photographic collection and a ships' plans collection (ie, technical drawings).

The photographic collection was formally presented to the UFTM in 1987 by Mr T. John Parker, the Harland & Wolff Chairman and Chief Executive. In his book, *Steel Ships and Iron Men: Shipbuilding in Belfast, 1894-1912* (Belfast, 1989), Michael McCaughan describes the collection as 'a remarkable visual record of the development and achievements of the world famous shipbuilding firm, from the 1890s to almost the present day'. Around 8,000 prints of the most popular Harland & Wolff built ships covering the period 1890-1945, bound in a series of volumes, are available for consultation in the UFTM's library. The library is open to the public Monday to Friday (closing for one hour every lunchtime).

There is a card index to the negatives from which prints (costing roughly £5 each) can be ordered by members of the public. The UFTM also holds a substantial collection of glass plate negatives but these are not available to the public for inspection. This is for preservation reasons. However, if a researcher is interested in obtaining a print of a ship for which a negative has not been made, the Museum staff will have a negative and print processed if a glass plate negative exists for the ship in question. It is interesting to note that most public enquiries about the Harland & Wolff photographic collection held by the Museum come from outside Northern Ireland. This underlines again Harland & Wolff's standing in the international community.

The UFTM's collection of ships' plans are not available to the public in any shape or form at the moment. There is no copy service. Resources are going into the provision of accommodation for, and the preservation of, these technical drawings, which in the early 1980s were in danger of being destroyed. Just in time, the UFTM stepped in and agreed to accommodate many of them. Thousands of ships' plans covering the period c.1913 to 1950, and some plans of the Belfast and Glasgow yards (no date) were subsequently transferred to the UFTM headquarters at Cultra, Co. Down. However, thousands of plans are also accommodated in Harland & Wolff premises rented by the UFTM! It should be said that rigging, accommodation and general arrangement plans relating to the 'Titanic' are on public display, and that there is a catalogue of rigging plans held by the UFTM which can be consulted by members of the public.

