

Association of Business Historians

The **Association of Business Historians (ABH)** is a British learned society concerned with "The study of all aspects of the historical development of enterprise, businesses and business activity generally and their inter-relationship with the social, cultural, economic and political environment."

In 2009 it was one of the National Archive's partners in the production of a *National Strategy for Business Archives (England and Wales) (2009)*.

Activities

The Association organises an annual conference and an annual [Tony Slaven Doctoral Workshop](#), named after [Tony Slaven](#), one of the ABH's founders. It awards the annual Coleman Prize, named for business historian [Donald Coleman](#), for a recent Ph.D. thesis in the area of business history, and the Tony Slaven Grant.

History

The Association of Business Historians was founded 22 years ago in 1990. What is now taken for granted, that we should have an established and respected professional academic association, was in its creation a bold step in the dark, and some might have said a pointless one. At that time there were many academics teaching and researching in some aspect of business history, but the institutional and network supports for the discipline were few and fragile. The study of business history, and especially of entrepreneurship, was institutionalised early in the United States from the 1920's, but the only hint of what was to come in Britain was the establishment of the Business Archives Council in 1934. This was our earliest attempt to safeguard our heritage, and discipline resource, of business records. The intellectual home of our pioneer business historians was the discipline of Economic History, but few, if any, of the pioneer writers would have called themselves business historians or have regarded business history as a discipline in its own right.

T S Ashton regarded business history as "simply a branch of economic history focusing on industry and the firm". Even in the 1960's Peter Payne argued that business history was "that branch of economic history that finds its source material primarily in company records and takes its starting point the entrepreneur and the firm...it is the grass roots approach to economic history".

Yet it was from these tentative and uncertain beginnings that the discipline began to slowly emerge at the end of the 1950's. At Liverpool in 1958, Francis Hyde launched the journal "Business History", and a year later, in 1959, Peter Payne was appointed as Colquhoun Lecturer in Business History at the University of Glasgow, under Sydney Checkland. This was the first named lectureship in business history in Britain. This led in 1960 to the establishment of the Business Archives Council (Scotland), to begin surveying and saving from destruction the records of Scottish Business. Tony Slaven was that year appointed as assistant to Peter Payne. In the 1960's the post Robbins expansion of the universities, especially of the social sciences, greatly increased academic posts in economic history and economics, and triggered much new research and writing in the history of business, but not then any demand for a separate identity for the subject.

A number of important initiatives followed in the 1970's, especially the founding of the annual Business History Seminar, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), and

hosted by Derek Oddy. This was first held at Ealing Technical College, and from 1978 at the Polytechnic of Central London. (Derek Oddy is now Emeritus Professor of Modern Economic History at the University of Westminster. The 1978 move to the Polytechnic of Central London coincided with the establishment of the Wadsworth Prize by the Business Archives Council, an annual award for a distinguished publication in business history. The momentum in developing the discipline was accelerating and was given a significant boost in 1978 with the establishment of the Business History Unit linked the Department of Economic & Social History in the London School of Economics. Support for this was mobilized by Theo Barker, and Leslie Hannah was appointed as Director of the Unit. The following year in Glasgow, Tony Slaven was appointed Professor of Business History, having succeeded Peter Payne as Colquhoun Lecturer from 1969.

From 1980 the Business History Unit launched its Newsletter to reach out to the growing community of researchers and teachers of business history, and to provide a forum for posting news of seminars, conferences, publications, and research initiatives. London was not the sole locus of growing activity in business history. In Scotland, at Glasgow, thirty years of investment in business history culminated in 1987 in the founding and funding of [The Centre for Business History in Scotland](#). Tony Slaven was appointed as Director of the Centre, the post also holding the Chair in Business History. This was a permanently funded research centre, the resources provided by the Aggregate Foundation. It was consequently independent of the need to secure funds by accepting commissioned business histories. Another significant innovation developed from 1988. Geoff Jones had moved from the Business History Unit to the Department of Economics at Reading. From there he initiated a highly fruitful and intensive series of business history workshop collaborations with the business historians at Lancaster University, who were also within the Department of Economics. These meetings, which resulted in multiple edited books, reflected the institutional locations of the groups with their emphasis on bringing together “history and theory”, and involving economists in their deliberations. Yet another encouraging venture followed in 1989 with the launch of the Accounting History Conference, underlining the growing interest in all aspects of the history of business.

While these initiatives were proliferating, the main forum for business historians still focused on the small annual seminar at the Polytechnic of London. Attendance was limited and by invitation only, but it did allow for informal exchanges on how to promote the discipline. Particularly involved in such discussions were Geoff Jones, Mary Rose and Tony Slaven, each representing a well established base in business history. The private funding available to Tony Slaven also made it possible for the CBH to lubricate exchanges. All three were in agreement that the key to taking Business History forward was institutionalisation through a new and separate professional organisation with regular conferences, these steps establishing for it an identity that was distinct from the Economic History Society.

There was a feeling at the time that the Economic History Conference had little to offer those with an interest in Business History, and that if a new association was established it would build beyond the London based seminars, and pull in a wider audience. The first meeting to establish a British organisation for business history took place on 27 September 1989, in the new premises of the Centre for Business History in Glasgow. The room was packed with business historians from across Britain, and was quite tense. This was partly because the meeting coincided with the editorial shift of Business History away from the BHU to Royal Holloway, Reading and Lancaster which heightened suspicions of empire building by some of the parties involved. By the end of the afternoon it had been agreed to form a pre-committee consisting of Tony Slaven, Geoff Jones, Terry Gourvish, Derek Oddy and Oliver Westall to develop a constitution, plan elections and launch a new Association.

The founders were also keen to build an association that would be less formal and more open than the Economic History Society. The drafting of the constitution stressed the need for a small set of active officers with a regular turnover, with all members entitled to vote. The objective of the Association of Business Historians is 'to promote the study, teaching and publication of all aspects of the history of business and industry, and of the environment in which they operate'. The first elections were held in September 1990 and the first Council was formed of Derek Oddy (President), Geoff Jones (Vice President), Tony Slaven (Secretary Treasurer), Terry Gourvish (Newsletter Editor), Mary Rose (Membership Secretary) and David Jeremy as Council Member.

The two challenges of that first year involved building the membership and launching the first ABH conference. It took place exactly two years after that first meeting on 27-28th September 1991, again at the Centre for Business History in Scotland. Peter Mathias did the inaugural address and we held the first AGM which was a relaxed affair, with none of the tensions of that meeting in 1989.

Until 2000 the conference was biennial but early the conference atmosphere became distinctive, with the move away from the norm of halls of residence accommodation. This was not trivial as it differentiated the atmosphere of the conferences from the norm in the UK at this time. From the 1993 conference held at the Queens Hotel in Leeds, conference venues offered a range of accommodation to improve the overall ambiance of the event.

The future of any research area depends on the recognition and involvement of new researchers. The ABH PhD prize was introduced in 1997 at the joint British/ American conference held in Glasgow and the first winner was Steve Toms. In 2000 the prize became annual and was named the Coleman Prize and attracts a very strong field each year see: past winners. Each year the prize winner joins the council to ensure that new researchers become embedded in the networks and practices of the ABH.

The ABH also had an early influence on the formation of the [European Business History Association](#). Discussions began in 1993 between Geoff Jones, Tony Slaven and Hans Pohl and were soon extended to include Mary Rose, Keetie Sluytermann, Rolv Petter Amdam and Per Boje at a meeting in Glasgow in the autumn of 1993. A series of meetings followed in Bonn, Rotterdam and Reading. The EBHA was formally launched at the business history conference held in Rotterdam in October 1994 with its inaugural conference following in Gothenburg in August 1996.

References

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