Business Leaders Hall of Fame at the State Library of Queensland

An Overview

The *Queensland Business Leaders Hall of Fame* project was launched in 2009 as a means of recognising those companies, businesses or business leaders which have made a significant contribution to Queensland’s business and economic development, as well as recording or documenting this contribution and ensuring the retention of the relevant records of business into the future. From the perspective of the John Oxley Library, the State Library of Queensland’s Queensland history library, this means the collection and preservation of the company’s or business’s records, but more about this later in this paper.

Firstly, which businesses or business representatives are nominated to the *Queensland Business Leaders Hall of Fame* and how does the nomination process work?

Each year since the project’s launch in 2009, various Queensland based business leaders, businesses, companies or similar business entities, either past or present, are nominated for induction by the *Queensland Business Leaders Hall of Fame* project governing committee. The criteria which are applied through the nomination process are:

- They have demonstrated leadership which has sustained or significantly enhanced the Queensland economy.
- The business or individual has made a major contribution to the Queensland economy, either financially or otherwise.
- The business or individual has pioneered the establishment of the modern Queensland economy or an industry
- The business or individual has made an outstanding contribution to the reputation of the Queensland economy
• The business or individual has achieved iconic status as a leader, a business, a product or brand.

As previously mentioned, this contribution may be within the context of the present Queensland economy, or it may be a contribution which was made in the past, with the nominee individual or business already having achieved a significant level of historical stature, for instance Castlemaine Perkins (the well known makers of Fourex beer) or QANTAS.

Listed as follows is a selection of the Queensland businesses or business leaders already nominated and inducted into the Queensland Business Leaders Hall of Fame:

• Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia (Queensland Division)
• Bundaberg Distilling Company (the makers of the famous "Bundaberg Rum", which has achieved iconic status as a product)
• Queensland Institute of Medical Research (for on-going research, with a particular area of expertise being within the field of tropical medicine).
• The Ray White Group – a long standing and successful real estate company
• Terry White AO – a leader within the pharmaceutical industry, chemists etc
• Thiess Pty Ltd – a major contracting and construction enterprise
• Burns, Philp & Co – shipping, transport etc
• Xstrata Mount Isa Mines – mining and related activity
• Castlemaine Perkins Limited – (Fourex Beer)
• QANTAS – a company which has made a significant contribution beyond Queensland’s borders, both nationally and internationally
The project itself is a cooperative initiative between the Queensland Government, the Queensland University of Technology Business School and the State Library of Queensland, with the Queensland University of Technology Business School taking the role of lead project partner. There are a number of clear or identifiable outcomes for each of the project partners in terms of role, profile, marketability as well as the outcome which is of particular importance to the State Library, this being the means to create a permanent public record of business and business leadership in Queensland.

In terms of specific outcomes for the State Library of Queensland and its Queensland history focused John Oxley Library, we see the collecting of material and information which documents the history of business and economic development within Queensland, as being of particular importance. As well, the State Library is able to raise business and general community awareness of the importance of business and the sector’s contribution to Queensland’s economic well being, its culture and its history. Also, those library staff members who are responsible for this activity, learn more about Queensland’s economic and business history, which enables them in turn to better develop, document and interpret our existing or newly acquired business history collections. The State Library of Queensland’s John Oxley Library, as the unit responsible for the Queensland history collections, has been given the primary responsibility for the Business Leaders Hall of Fame project’s relevant goals and outcomes. Also, the John Oxley Library is the actual location of the physical Hall of Fame. Located within the John Oxley Library Reading Room, it is a dedicated space where visitors to the library can view some of the Queensland business related material we have collected, as well as undertaking research into the Business Leaders Hall of Fame inductees, or Queensland’s business history in general. An online presence, where digital stories are available, complements the project. These digital stories and the related oral histories will be discussed in a little more detail later in this paper.
Keeping all this in mind, when we at the library look at the issue of collecting the records of business, or describing and interpreting these for researchers, it becomes clear that there are sound reasons for the library being involved in this project.

Let us look a little more closely at some of the reasons for our involvement in the project…

Firstly, the project provides a means for the library to develop a better understanding and awareness of Queensland’s business and economic community, in particular the sector’s role in Queensland progress and development. As well, we are better able to understand the range and scope of records produced within the business sector and available for us to acquire for the library’s collections. However, achieving such an understanding will always be a challenge in a rapidly developing and changing business environment, either within the Queensland context or elsewhere! Further, looking at what is happening in today’s business world, it is often difficult to identify those businesses or business trends which will be important in Queensland’s on-going history and development. To a significant degree, this will always be a somewhat subjective process, but we at the library need to make these assessments as best we can, as this will, in turn, inform our collecting initiatives as well as the ways in which we interpret and present the material to researchers.

Secondly, by engaging with a wide range of businesses and business representatives, through the Business Leaders Hall of Fame project, we are able to make more informed decisions or judgements about which are the important records or material to collect and preserve for the future. By way of example, the coal seam gas industry in Queensland, as well as elsewhere, is a new and rapidly developing industry and we need to have an understanding of it and have good connections within the industry to be able to collect and preserve what is relevant or important. The Business Leaders Hall of Fame project provides us with the means to engage in a relevant and effective way with the business sector and so
gain a greater understanding of its component areas. In addition to this partnering with the business community in general, it is also important for the library to engage with relevant representatives of the academic community, as universities or other related institutions also have an interest in material that will support research into business and economic development, both now and into the future.

Thirdly, it is important to ensure that the business sector itself sees or values its records and related material as important in a wider historical sense, and further, that the sector takes action to ensure that the relevant material is kept and hopefully passed to libraries such as the John Oxley Library. In this regard, the library advocates to the business community in general, consistently presenting the message that their records are important! Unfortunately, we at the John Oxley Library have often heard of important records and other material being dumped due to lack of space or some other reason of expediency and once gone, the records are gone forever! However, there are also successes, as was the case with the records of the old Brisbane retail firm, MacDonnell & East. The records representing some 120 years of the firm’s operations were about to be dumped by the company’s liquidators and it was only through a chance lead that we were able to make an approach to acquire the material, literally only a few hours before the records would have been lost.

As a practical example of this advocacy and the raising of awareness, we have taken the opportunity to mount a number of exhibitions and displays of historical business material at various Business Leaders Hall of Fame functions and events, including the actual Business Leaders Hall of Fame annual inductee function. As well, the library takes every opportunity to provide advice and guidance in terms of the management and preservation of business records in general as well as more specifically in terms of what is historically important and should be saved.
Moving beyond the initial acquisition of material, the next phase in the process is the actual preservation and management of these important business records for the future. In most scenarios, this responsibility falls to libraries or other institutions such as the John Oxley Library. In our case, this is very clear, as the John Oxley Library’s legislative role is to collect, preserve and make available for access, material which documents or illustrates Queensland’s history and development and this, of course, would include the records of business entities. In the past, the John Oxley Library has undertaken this activity with varying degrees of success, however, the Business Leaders Hall of Fame partnership provides us with new collecting opportunities and we are already receiving donations of relevant business records. But there is an important distinction to be made – the library is not a records manager for businesses and as such does not provide a records management service and the focus is always on business records as historical documents to support relevant historical or other research.

At this point, I’d like to put some of this into a more practical context by providing a relevant example of how the John Oxley Library has benefited from its involvement in the Business Leaders Hall of Fame project: To do this, I will discuss our recent involvement with the National Australia Bank, specifically with the bank’s archives facility in Melbourne.

The Queensland National Bank was established in 1872 and operated until 1948 when it was taken over by the National Bank of Australia, which is the predecessor of the present National Australia Bank. The Queensland National Bank was an important financial institution within the context of Queensland’s early economic development, at one time being the Queensland government’s banker. Further, the Queensland National Bank was recently inducted into the Business Leaders Hall of Fame. As the records of this important and early Queensland business institution are held within the archives of the present day National Australia Bank we approached the National about these records. With the way already opened to some degree through our involvement in the Business Leaders Hall of Fame, we
were given permission to visit the bank’s archives in Melbourne to view the Queensland National Bank material it held, as well as a range of other important early Queensland historical material. Subsequently, I spent a week at the National Australia Bank Archives in June last year and viewed a wide range of historic material NOT held in the John Oxley Library’s existing collections and therefore of particular importance for Queensland’s history.

Some examples of the material I viewed and listed during this visit included:

- Photographs of Queensland places, events, buildings, premises and businesses of all kinds. In addition to these images providing a documentary record of a wide range places or events, many of the photographs are original, and perhaps unique, examples of the work of many early regional Queensland photographers – I will say a little more about the value of photographs later in this paper.

- Building and architectural plans for bank owned buildings, including both branch building as well as staff residences. Many of these buildings, where they survive, may have undergone significant change, renovation or redevelopment, so these plans and drawings would be of particular interest to the present owners. Also, many of the buildings are heritage listed and this additional information will add to the story of the building.

- Ephemeral material, for instance invitations, programmes, greeting cards etc. Also sighted were a range of historical reminiscences and histories of places, written by bank staff members over the years.

- Records, reports etc. with a particularly interesting example within this category being the bank’s early balance registers. These so called balance registers contain a wealth of detailed information about the bank’s clients including occupation, financial position, a description of the business being conducted as well as details of property
and other assets offered up as security by the client. These include land, buildings, houses etc.

- A range of miscellaneous information, records, photographs and related material about places in Queensland. Of particular importance here is the information held about many transient or temporary settlements in Queensland, these being the small towns or settlements that arose during the Far North Queensland gold rushes, and which were quickly abandoned when the gold ran out.

- Correspondence of all kinds, both to and from the bank

- A wide variety of objects and memorabilia suitable for display/exhibition purposes.

Now that this material has been identified, the next step is to negotiate with the National Australia Bank to obtain copies of this historic material for the John Oxley Library collections or to otherwise facilitate access, for example through the digitisation of selected material.

Another way of ensuring that information about the contribution of businesses or individual business people is recorded and preserved is through the recording of digital stories and oral histories. These are undertaken under the auspices of the Business Leaders Hall of Fame project with a professionally produced digital story being produced alongside an oral history. The digital story provides a succinct and professional summary of the business or individual’s contribution with the oral history component being a far more detailed and lengthy record. An example of a recent digital story and related oral history relates to Mount Isa Mines/Xstrata with Professional Geoffrey Blainey undertaking the interviews on behalf of the company. As you would no doubt be aware, Professor Blainey has an intimate knowledge of the history and development of Mount Isa Mines and wrote its history as Mines in the Spinifex, incidentally one of the first “commissioned” histories in Australia. The John Oxley Library is fortunate to hold both Professor Blainey’s research notes for this book as well as the manuscript itself.
The State Library of Queensland, through the John Oxley Library, also wishes to encourage the on-going research and interpretation of the records of business in Queensland as this will also assist us in understanding the records we already hold, in particular within the context of Queensland’s history and development. This involvement in research and interpretation also informs us when we are assessing business records in general for possible acquisition for the library’s collections. As a way of achieving this, an option presently being considered is to put in place an annual research fellowship, funded or facilitated through the Business Leaders Hall of Fame project, thereby encouraging research into aspects of Queensland’s economic and business history. This research fellowship would stand alongside our existing John Oxley Library fellowship which has been in existence for some years and which has successfully encouraged a wide range of research projects. Other options presently being considered as a means of encouraging the study of Queensland’s business or economic history include visiting scholar programmes, research residencies at the John Oxley Library as well as seminars on aspects of business history etc.

Before concluding, I would like to add a few comments about photographs as historical documents, especially within the context of business history. Businesses are constantly on the move as they grow and develop and are also integral parts of cities and towns as development and expansion progresses. They are an integral part of the landscape and knowledge of which businesses were located where and when can be the key to dating a particular structure or the streetscape itself. The people who work within businesses are also often documented in photographs, which then become a valuable source for those researching family histories etc. Of course, businesses themselves are increasingly documenting and presenting their own backgrounds and histories, so photographs and other sources of information also become increasingly important. Why do businesses do this? Maybe the cynics amongst us would suggest one reason is because the images look good on company or business websites or as illustrations in a glossy annual report. However, in my experience, businesses are becoming more interested in
researching, documenting and promoting their histories with photographs being a critical resource.

In conclusion, I’d like to briefly talk about some of the future options available to us, through the Hall of Fame project, again using the example of the National Australia Bank and the records it holds. I’ve talked about the importance of the National Australia Bank’s records and their place in the documentation and research of Queensland’s history and development. We’ve moved through a first stage by visiting the bank’s archives and identifying the relevant and important historical material held there. The next stage is to investigate options for facilitating wider public access to this important material and information. In working through this process, we need to consider the options carefully and then present these possibilities to the bank for its consideration. We know the bank is cooperative, but, in many ways, this sort of activity is some distance away from its usual core business and we need to argue our case effectively. As well, bank records, and indeed any business records, can be sensitive, particularly in terms of privacy, even the older records. Working within these boundaries, we do see some possibilities. For instance, digitisation provides us with an effective way of copying and later, providing access to material and information. Selected material such as photographs, excerpts from older records, reminiscences of staff members etc could also be digitised and made available through the State Library of Queensland’s website (via the catalogue) or through the actual Business Leaders Hall of Fame web site (alongside the Business Leaders digital stories/oral histories)

Finally, I invite you to visit the Business Leaders Hall of Fame website to view more details and information.

http://leaders.slq.qld.gov.au/home

Thank You