

## Your Family Tree Series: 18



### Business Records

The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland has one of the largest collections of business records in the British Isles. Among them can be found the names of firms that have made Ulster famous throughout the world for linen, ships and engineering. The records themselves represent a wide cross-section of the business life of the province ranging from the records of Harland & Wolff to the local corner shop. They can be studied along side related classes of archives deposited by employers, trade unions, public utilities, solicitors, banks and government departments.

The most extensive holdings of business records relate to the linen industry; more than 250 companies are represented. These date from the eighteenth century, when spinning and weaving were domestic in character and new methods of bleaching were being devised by the Ulster bleachers. They cover the whole range of business activity, from technical production and employment aspects to marketing on a worldwide scale.



*Mill interior, c.1910  
(PRONI Reference **D1422/B/7/6**)*

The records of firms representing a wide cross-section of the business life of the province are also in PRONI's custody. They range from the shipping records of the Head Line Shipping Co., Belfast, 1897-1970 (PRONI Reference **D3117**), to the records of the bakery firm of Bernard ('Barney') Hughes Ltd, 1886-1972 (PRONI Reference - **D3338**). Some of the earliest business records are found among family papers. These include papers relating to the shipment of linens to Jamaica, 1795-1840, and the Indian business and administrative papers, 1759-75, of James Alexander, later 1st Earl of Caledon, who made one of the great 'nabob' fortunes of the 18th century by the time he finally left Bengal in 1772 (PRONI Reference - **D2432**).

Business records often contain a great deal of detailed information relating to suppliers, customers, shareholders and, of course, company employees. If you know that your ancestor was employed by a particular company the Subject Index can be consulted under the relevant heading i.e. linen industry, shipbuilding, etc, to see if their records have been deposited at PRONI.

If you know where your family came from, check out the Ordnance Survey maps to identify what businesses were in the area where the family may have worked. If they

lived in Belfast the street directories will also show the location of businesses and industry in the vicinity of your ancestor's home.

Generally the most useful information relating to employees is to be found in the wages books. These contain such information as employees' names, days and hours worked, wage rates, overtime payments, details of work done, etc, and occasionally include their age and address. Information relating to the owners, directors or trustees of a company will generally be found in the minute books or annual reports of the company and the names of shareholders in shareholders' registers

It is important to note that the archives of chartered accountants and solicitors as well as private families often contain substantial business papers. Among the records of L'Estrange & Brett, solicitors, Belfast, for example, are the business records of the Larne and Ballymena Railway Co. and the Belfast Steamship Co., (PRONI Reference - **D1905** -see '*Your Family Tree*' Leaflet: 19 - *Solicitors Records*).

PRONI's collection of trade union archives include those of the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers, dating from 1883, and in part relating to branches in the Republic of Ireland (PRONI Reference - **D1050**). More unusual are the minutes from 1896 of an employers' association, that of the printers in Belfast (PRONI Reference - **D3759**).

For further information on business records see the PRONI publication *The Ulster Textile Industry*. Also check out the **subject index** and the indexes to the Deputy Keeper's Reports which are available in the Search Room in PRONI.

