

CASE STUDY: Records at Risk

Caledonian Brewery

Brewers, Edinburgh



In May 2022, it was announced via the media that Heineken was proposing the closure of the historic Caledonian brewery site located in Fountain Park, Edinburgh. The closure would mark the end of a site which had been home to brewing for over 150 years, and would see the last major brewery operating in Edinburgh come to a close, a historically significant moment for the city's industrial past.

The Business Archives Surveying Officer for Scotland regularly receives business news alerts, and monitors business closures, and situations where historical records may be at risk. This led to the Surveying Officer being able to proactively alert the University of Glasgow's Archives & Special Collections team (who hold earlier records for the brewery as part of the Scottish Business Archive) about the potential site closure.

On this occasion, due to the University of Glasgow's existing contacts with the brewery's owner, Heineken, it was relatively straightforward to liaise with the relevant members of staff for arranging physical access to the site. On arrival, what we found was an exciting variety of objects, paintings, branded mirrors, bottles, ephemera, as well as photographs, and the odd business records of the brewery.

Items were stored across a number of buildings, and the survey took us to several corners of the site, which included a walk past the well-maintained copper stills. Several larger framed paintings, posters, and an assortment of photographs were found in the old gatehouse keeper's cottage. Although derelict and in a bad condition with dampness and peeling walls, ornate cornicing could still be seen. Therefore, it was important that Historic Environment Scotland also had access to carry out a building survey to capture the last days of the site, before permanent changes were to occur as a result of the sale.

The material we collected filled a gap for us as our existing collection was weighted heavily towards the production process of brewing and told little about the complex nature of the business of brewing or of the social elements of beer drinking.

Caledonian Brewery played a huge role in the history of brewing in Edinburgh and we selected items which we feel reflect this. We collected material which highlights the complex history of the brewery (and brewing in Edinburgh in general) including material related to the various mergers and take-overs such as a celebratory bottle marking the management buy-out by staff, as well as wall plaques from the former Fountain Brewery and the opening of McEwen House.

We also collected a range of bottles, posters, and certificates which reflect how beer drinking has changed over time, including marketing posters aimed at women and the brewery's move into organic produce and more recently into the craft ale movement."

Gemma Henderson
Curator, Museums & Galleries Edinburgh



The University of Glasgow' Archives & Special Collections only collect documents and photographs relating to the brewery, so a solution had to be found for the larger objects. We were grateful that colleagues from Museums & Galleries Edinburgh were able to attend a second survey of the site along with colleagues from Historic Environment Scotland's Architecture and Industry team. This collaborative approach with colleagues representing three different organisations, ensured that not only were the brewery's records surveyed and identified for the archive, but that the building was photographed prior to any significant changes, and large objects such as artwork and items of machinery were transferred to Museums & Galleries Edinburgh. Eighty large objects were secured for the city's collections, along with four artworks, which has helped to provide more contemporary perspectives to Edinburgh's brewery heritage.

A follow-up to the survey resulted in a request for help from the site owners, Heineken, to survey a number of additional historical paintings and photos held at their offices in South Gyle. An initial survey confirmed no business records were present, and so the Surveying Officer was grateful to once again be able to liaise with colleagues at Museum & Galleries Edinburgh who identified items that were also of interest to Reading Museum.

Archive records including photographs, VHS tapes, CDs, and bottles that were surveyed and transferred to the University of Glasgow formed part of a cataloguing project that saw them added to the existing Caledonian brewery collection (archive reference GB248 CAL, Scottish Business Archive). This case certainly had a positive outcome with so many historically significant items saved for posterity.

