Using the Personal to Reconstruct the Corporate: The Case Example of Sanders Bros.

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**Introduction**

The reconstruction of the history of a business is often a difficult and painstaking task in the best of situations. But when no corporate archive has survived the task becomes even more difficult. Tracks of the company can be found in the business and national press but the perspective is resolutely corporate. Recent changes in the availability of online resources however have opened up a compendium of opportunities both to “reconstruct” the history of such a business generally, and to build more personal stories about its operation. This is particularly the case when the business is both significant in scale and with a multiplicity of locations and operations. Such is the case of research into Sanders Bros (Stores) Limited, once the UK’s largest retailer of cereal products.

This paper reflects on two central issues:

(i) the developing availability of increasingly digitised source materials with enhanced search functions, and their transformative effect on the timing, nature and results of research; and

(ii) the potential for a changing nature of our understanding of the history and development of businesses, from a “national” or “corporate” level or view, to a more “local” perspective of operational practices such as supply chain, logistics, pricing and marketing, and of the roles that individuals, not just the company’s directors, played in the day-to-day business.

**Reconstructing Sanders Bros.**

The 1925 prospectus listing Sanders Bros. (Stores) Limited on the London Stock Exchange, provides a short synopsis of the business:

*The business was founded about 38 years ago by the Vendors, Messrs. Thomas and Joseph Sanders, who have agreed to act as two of the Directors of this Company. After the first few years, a policy of opening Branch shops was adopted, and in 1900 twenty-two branches were open....The progress of the business has been continuous and the firm now has 154 shops in London and the neighbourhood. In consequence of the continued growth of the business, it was necessary in 1923 to secure much larger premises,....A large freehold site at 48 Thomas Street, Limehouse, was accordingly purchased, and in addition to offices, there have been erected a four-storey warehouse with reinforced concrete floor, large silos, capable of storing 900 tons of grain, a pneumatic suction plant for the unloading of grain from barges and the latest machinery for mixing and cleaning grain. Modern biscuit machinery, including all the latest hygienic devices, has been installed and there are now being manufactured high grade biscuits, which are already well-known and command a ready sale.*

The Times Digital Archive also sets out the Chairman’s statements to the company’s Annual General Meeting, which also presents a “corporate” view, providing only for a “global”-level understanding of how the business worked day-to-day. The prospectus provides a picture of a strongly expansionary
business from the early period of the 1890s to the flotation. This success continued and in the 1930s Sanders Bros was a major corn merchants and grocery retailer with more stores than Sainsbury or Tesco and with c.270 stores mainly in the South East of England. The Second World War and the immediate post-war period saw problems develop. After its takeover in 1950, a decision was taken in 1957 to wind up Sanders Bros, whose assets had by then been stripped. Its books and archives were destroyed.

But these corporate “bare bones” do not really reconstruct the company. However it is now possible to find missing pieces of the Sanders Bros. jigsaw puzzle allowing a different picture from the corporate overview.

From the ‘Corporate view’ to a ‘Personal view’

An important cornerstone: UK trade directories
Sanders Bros. developed from a network of 22 retail branches in 1900 to a high-point of c.270 branches. It has proved crucial to have an accurate and detailed picture of the exact location of the stores, and between which dates they were open. This list of stores (as well as headquarters, factories, warehouses and workshops) was built up from a number of sources, the principal one of which was the trade directories which were produced annually and typically for each county. Organised alphabetically in many cases by street and by trade (in Sanders Bros.’ case, Corn merchants), a certain number of UK trade directories are also available online through ancestry.com. These do not represent anything approaching a “full set” and thus online research had to be supplemented, as would have also been necessary in the past, with visits to the National Archives in Kew, County record offices and local studies libraries.

Building out a view of business practice: using the British Newspaper Archive
The British Newspaper Archive (“BNA”) available at britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk, is a partnership between the British Library and brightsolid online publishing, to digitise up to 40 million newspaper pages over the next 10 years. At the time of writing, the BNA has millions of high definition digital images of pages from approximately 900,000 copies of largely local newspapers covering a large number of counties in England, Wales and Scotland, with copies from the nineteenth century up to 1999, although over 99% of the images relate to the period 1700-1949.

Searches using the BNA’s database of information, which is provided on a pay per view basis, has provided some outstanding examples of information about Sanders Bros. operations and employees. It is to be noted that it is only through their digitisation that the research of these sorts of printed sources has become practical; before this, the only route available would have been to trawl through old copies of newspapers, often on microfilm, at the British Newspaper Library in Colindale, North London or at county record offices and local studies libraries. Often with little or no assurance of finding anything which referred to Sanders Bros. in any given periodical, such research really would have been painstaking in the extreme, but with the digital search function which the BNA offers, the number of “hits” is vastly increased, and in a fraction of the time. Multiple searches, using variant terms and spelling have also proved necessary to get the most from the resource.

The BNA research has shown that it is surprising which newspaper titles actually contained articles and advertisements on Sanders Bros. For example, it was the Herts Advertiser rather than other papers which carried a notice for the opening of Sanders Bros.’ store in St Albans in January 1925 (Herts Advertiser, 3 January 1925). Similarly, articles and advertisements were found in the Devon, Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and even Angus (Scotland) press, even though Sanders Bros. never had stores in these counties, and provided information about Sanders Bros.’ food manufacturing and wholesaling activities as well as their customers and suppliers.

Research using the BNA has also provided a variety of reports involving Sanders Bros., which taken both in isolation and in combination allow a picture of their operational practices to be built up. These include: (i) court cases involving the business including the short-changing of customers and libel cases about rival managers (ii) local advertising practices and wholesaling activities (iii) incident reporting as for example in a Sanders Bros. lorry crash which reveals names and backgrounds of the driver and assistant and details of the load and routes. Combining this information with certain genealogical research methods which have used, as referred to below, have also led to contacts with descendants providing further recollections about Sanders Bros. (iv) robberies and muggings which provide details of products and takings and (v) staff recruitment and vacancy advertisements.
The newspaper articles made available through the BNA website have allowed a view of the “how” rather than just the “what” of the Sanders Bros. business.

**Marketing materials**

The internet has allowed despositories to “display” a number of archive documents which in the past may well have been difficult to identify. Similarly, the flow of items on ebay.com is allowing the researcher to identify marketing items and ephemera which might not have been identified in the past. In the case of Sanders Bros. this includes three series of trade cards sold with their packets of custard and crystal jelly, as illustrated in Figure 1:

![Buff Orpington trade card](image)

Figure 1: Buff Orpington trade card included in packets of Sanders Custard De luxe. From the series “Birds, Fowls, Pigeons and Rabbits"

In the case of Sanders Bros. this has allowed “obscure” items to be identified: amongst them a Sanders Bros. paper bag from the 1920s in the John Johnson collection in Oxford and a catalogue of Sanders Bros. biscuits at the Blaise Castle Museum in Bristol (Figure 2):
Store working conditions: using the UK 1911 census returns
The 1911 censuses of England and Wales became publicly available in January 2009; the official census website and now ancestry.com provides details of the people residing at each property in England and Wales on the night of Sunday 2 April 1911.

The 1911 official census website provides two methods of searching the census: the first of which is searching for an individual, as would be the approach adopted by most family historians. However, the second function, a search by place, allows the business historian to search for exact business locations. In the case of the Sanders Bros. research, this has allowed 22 Sanders Bros. stores to be identified where branch managers and their families were living above the store in which they worked. It is estimated that this represents approximately 25% of all Sanders Bros. stores at this time.

The 1911 census of England offered a detailed view in each of the stores thus identified, including:

- personal details of each person (full name, age, gender, place of birth and nationality);
- for each married woman, the number of years they have been married, total children born and numbers still living;
- details of the profession for each person enumerated (personal occupation and the industry of service with which the person is connected), as well as details of whether they were an employer, worker, or working on their own account; and
- number of rooms in the dwelling.

In this way, it was possible to confirm, in almost all cases, that each person living above the Sanders Bros. store was in fact a store manager, working for a Corn dealer.

A number of Sanders Bros. store locations could not be identified through the place function search; the 1911 census “summary books” have proved useful in this circumstance, as it is possible to identify buildings which exist but which were not inhabited at the time of the census e.g. “lock up shops”.

Managers moving from one store to another: using the UK Electoral registers
With a detailed picture built up of the store network, it was possible to use the list of locations to run a number of searches by place using the search function now available for London electoral registers in ancestry.com.
Where, as has proved to be so in over 40 cases, the store manager was also living above a Sanders Bros. store, it is then possible to identify the person and their immediate family of voting age. As the electoral registers do not provide details of the voter’s profession, it is often not known at this stage whether the person is a Sanders Bros. employee, or merely living in one of the rooms above the store. Using research techniques similar to those employed by genealogists also allows, in almost all cases, the date, place of birth and other important identifying information about these individuals to be found.

Comparing electoral register records for SB stores over time and against the data from the 1911 census returns in this way has allowed some very rich, detailed information about individual Sanders Bros. store managers and not only where but also how they worked in the business over a period of time.

**Supporting searches: genesreunited.co.uk**

Genesreunited.co.uk is a UK family history website which allows genealogists to get in contact with people with a potential genealogical connection. At the time of writing, the website had approximately 236 million individuals listed, each with the first and last names, and year and place of birth, and the ability to send a message to the person who has posted the details on the website.

The site thus allows a search for the relatives and descendants of employees and managers identified through the methods described above. The descendants of a number of individuals of interest have been contacted and stories and information shared. One example is Charles William Orrow, the store manager of the Sanders Bros. stores in Walthamstow, Edmonton and later in Uxbridge, where Charles’ granddaughter was able to provide some valuable and rich information about her grandfather’s time in the business and even an account written by her mother of the day that they moved from the Edmonton store to the branch at Uxbridge, and impressions and description of the latter.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The Sanders Bros. example is of a large multiple retailer details of which had been lost since its closure in the 1950s, and had been all but lost from our collective memory; its corporate archive and records all destroyed in the late 1950s. It is one of a class of businesses broadly in this position.

The above techniques and resources, and others similar to them which have, or will surely become, possible and develop over the coming years, allows the reconstruction of a series of very detailed “personal” pictures and insights into a business. In this way, important lessons can be learned about how the retailer was operated and the demographics and personal history of the store staff. Similarly, a more representative view of the past can be built up, rather than considering – as we would otherwise be inclined or indeed forced to do – only those examples of retail businesses which have survived to the present day (e.g. UK food retailers J. Sainsbury or Tesco).

With the increasing reach of digital resources available online, coupled with the enormous and increasing popularity of family history worldwide, the resources available through the BNA, ancestry.com and other web-based resources is evolving very rapidly. The clear advantage of these resources being indexed and available electronically is that they can be researched quickly and efficiently, and without the need to travel to the physical archive in question, which was necessary in the past, and allow the proverbial “needle” to be picked from a number of historical “haystacks”. Detailed additional information will certainly become available when the UK 1921 census returns are made publicly available (around 2022). Interestingly, additional questions were added to the 1921 census, which included where each person works, which may help to be even more specific, and perhaps identify, not only branch managers, but also other employees not living above the store, or working in other parts of the identifiable distribution network.

By 2022, our view of the UK multiple retailers that did not survive could conceivably be very detailed and specific using these and other related research techniques. This will also fill an important gap – and remove an unnecessary bias – in our view and understanding of the development of UK retail in the first half of the twentieth century. This new lens, based on local-level primary source data and providing detailed insights into business practices, will surely complement the more macro views we have from important surveys of contemporary retail, such as J.B. Jefferys’ 1954 work “Retail Trading in Britain, 1850-1950”.

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