

AFRICAN SECTIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE
MANCHESTER CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY:
MINUTES, 1892-1926

INTRODUCTION TO THE MICROFILM

In 1794, a Commercial Society consisting of merchants and manufacturers trading with Europe was founded in Manchester, its objects being

- to resist and prevent, as much as possible, the depredations committed on mercantile property in foreign parts, detect swindlers, expose chicanes and persons void of principle and honour in their dealings
- to adopt such regulations as may tend to the benefit of their trade, add to its safety and promote more regular payments
- to watch over the interests of their trade at large, and co-operate jointly in all applications to Government, or in any measure which may, from time to time, be thought necessary for the good of the whole.

Similar bodies existed in Leeds and Halifax on the other side of the Pennines, in Birmingham in the West Midlands and in the South-West in Exeter.

The Manchester Society had many eminent and influential members (such as Lawrence Peel, brother of Sir Robert Peel, M.P., First Baronet and head of the family's calico-printing business in Lancashire) who were involved in the discussions with and petitions to the British and European Governments concerning matters prejudicing their trade; these led, in 1797, to a moderately successful attempt to establish a permanent union of commercial societies in the United Kingdom.

The Society initially held regular monthly meetings but, as members' interest in the work of the Society waned, these were reduced first to quarterly meetings and then to irregular, specially called meetings until 1801 when the minutes abruptly cease.

The Society was never actually dissolved and, in 1820, some of its former members took what remained of its funds and reconstructed it as the Manchester Chamber of Commerce. Its aims were outlined at a meeting in 1822:

... to attend proceedings in Parliament affecting the commercial interests of Manchester and its neighbours, and to promote, at proper seasons and by proper means, the removal of existing regulations injurious to the freedom of trade...

Great energy was put into the implementation of these aims and principles. Richard Cobden, later an M.P., was elected as a director in 1836 and the Chamber was in the forefront of the Anti-Corn Law movement.

In 1858, over half a century after its foundation it amalgamated with the Manchester Commercial Association (formed in 1845) and, some thirty years later, in 1887, was incorporated as a company limited by guarantee. Its objectives now were much wider:

- to promote and protect the Home, Colonial and Foreign trade and commerce and the manufactures of the U.K. and in particular...of the City of Manchester, the Borough of Salford and the surrounding district

- to consider all questions connected with such trade, commerce and manufactures
- to promote or oppose legislative or other measures affecting such trade, commerce and manufactures
- to collect and circulate statistics and other information relating to such trade, commerce and manufactures
- to act as arbitrator in the settlement of disputes arising out of commercial transactions

The Chamber changed its name to the Manchester Chamber of Commerce and Industry and, from 1890, published a monthly journal entitled Record; this journal is still published, but on a bi-monthly basis along with a monthly newsletter Bulletin.

Since its foundation, the Chamber has changed its premises a number of times. Its early meetings (in 1822) were held in the Manchester Police Office and after moving once in 1852, it moved again in 1887 into offices at 44 Moseley Street. From 1920 to 1926, the offices were at Danlee Buildings, Spring Gardens, and from 1927 until recently, they were in Ship Canal House, King Street. The offices are now in Oxford Road, Manchester.

Records of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Certain records of the Chamber are kept at the Chamber's office premises. These are:

board and committee minutes 1965 to date
 trade section minutes 1965 to date
 proceedings reports (annual report and accounts, list of members, copy laws, memoranda and correspondence) 1822-1889
 monthly Journal 1890 to date
 newspaper 1971 to date
 Manchester Commercial Association : Proceedings 1845 to date

The following records are housed in the Manchester Central Library Archives Department, St Peter's Square, Manchester M2 5PD:

Society of Merchants minutes 1794-1801
 Chamber of Commerce Proceedings 1821-1890
 board and general meeting proceedings 1890-1926
 board minutes 1927-1964
 directors' attendance book 1923-1941
 executive meeting minutes 1931-1939
 COMMITTEE MINUTES: general 1889-1964, East Africa 1920-1926, West Africa 1905-1919, telephone and telegraph advisory 1913-1923, testing house management 1899-1926, textile exports shipping 1918
 TRADE SECTION COMMITTEE MINUTES: Africa 1892-1926, Central and South America 1916-1926, chemical 1890-1926, China and Far East 1916-1926, Egypt, Greece and Levant 1916-1926, home and colonial 1910-1926, India cotton and rayon 1933-1938, leather 1909-1925, produce 1894-1926, sugar 1904-1926, yarn 1890-1926, general 1927-1964
 committee members' list 1928-1943
 Manchester yarn contract conference minutes 1896-1913
 members' registers 1889-1906
 members' list (n.d.)
 seal book 1889-1948
 Manchester Commercial Association minutes 1845-1858
 Manchester Association of Importers and Exporters: Proceedings 1907-1935

African Sectional Committee Minutes, 1892-1926

The African Sectional Committee first met on 1st March 1892 and, from the outset, the Minutes of its weekly meetings reflect the committee's wide-ranging concerns as its members pursued the Chamber's stated objectives throughout the continent of Africa. The variety of issues covered is enormous - from the detailed consideration of the administration and functioning of communication systems in the British colonies and protectorates (West African railways; air services in East Africa; telephone facilities in Freetown, Sierra Leone; telegraphic censorship in Aden; river and creek transport services, etc.), the operation of companies in the colonies (in particular the Royal Niger Company), the observance (or non-observance) of good trading practices (adulteration of produce in the Gold Coast; confiscation of goods wrongly marked in The Gambia; Lagos rubber regulations, etc.) to the study of much wider issues such as West African currency reform, tropical diseases, education in Nigeria and Anglo-French boundary arrangements in West Africa.

Quite frequently, there is discussion of political issues - the disturbances in Ashanti and on the Niger, the atrocities in the Congo, the rumoured cession of Gambia to France in 1911 - and the Minutes contain copies of numerous representations from the Committee to the Foreign and Colonial Offices regarding political situations having a direct bearing on trade and commerce with the continent of Africa.

The Committee continued to meet throughout the First World War and the Minutes record discussions on such topics as Insurance against Bombardment in West Africa, German debts in West Africa (Counsel's opinion), the sale of enemy cargoes in German steamers captured at Duala and the shortage of flour in British West Africa.

Although the African Sectional Committee acted, for the most part, independently, it sometimes joined forces with other Chambers of Commerce in the United Kingdom and in British Colonies in Africa in the interests of effective parliamentary lobbying. Indeed, in 1905, members of the Manchester Chamber joined formally with members of the London and Liverpool Chambers to form a Joint West African Committee which met weekly and whose Minutes were read at the respective Chambers. It is interesting to note the discussion, at the first meeting of this new Committee, of whether the committee should be regarded as a representative body in its own right or whether it would have to receive a mandate from each of the three Chambers before taking action.

Taken together, these Minutes provide an absorbing and detailed account of the trade and commerce of a colonial power at its height. The present microfilm edition will undoubtedly be of value to Africanists, economists, social and political historians alike for the light it throws on the background to the legislation and political decisions embodied in the official British and Colonial Government publications of the period.

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