

Video transcript

A tour of HSBC's archives

Rachael Spree, UK Archives Manager and Sara Kinsey, Global History Manager

We're in the vault in the HSBC archive centre. The noise you can hear in the background is our air conditioning system. The vault keeps a stable temperature for the archive records at 15 degrees, to make sure they're preserved as well as possible.

In here we've got a mixture of boxes and ledgers with items dating back to the 1770s taking us right up to the current day where we are collecting current records at HSBC.

So one of the questions we're asked a lot here in the archives is 'What is our oldest item?' And the answer is this, it's the account book of Pocklington and Lacy banking company and it dates back to 1775. Pocklington and Lacy were taken over eventually by Midland Bank which in turn was then taken over by HSBC in 1992.

Bank notes are what you expect to find in a bank archive and we certainly have a collection of old bank notes. Some of my favourites are a whole series that was issued in the 1920s for the bank branches in China. Most of them have common features they obviously say the bank's name in English and at the top in Chinese. So this says 'Wayfoong' which means 'abundance of exchange' in Chinese. It also has the bank's crest that HSBC used to use and although it's very small on the note you can just make out that it's a real meeting of East and West. There is a Western sailing ship and a Chinese ship. What's amazing about these notes, in particular this one, is the size of them. If you compare them with a modern bank note for instance, you will see just how large they are. So you would really feel like a millionaire if you had one of those in your pocket.

This is a pretty ordinary looking book. It is the Godown Inspection Book from Tientsin branch in northern China. The bank would have had its own Godown, which was a warehouse and in that warehouse it would have stored the goods that were being held as security for customer loans.

Now most of these customers were loaned money to import and export goods. This list here shows you that in the Godown were 29 bales of goat's hair combings, 1,740 pieces of horse hides. Now what was coming in the other way? Radiators, boilers, graphite, condenser tubes and 39 packages of chocolate. Well most of those things, not the chocolate, but most of those things were destined for the new railways that China was building everywhere in the 1920s so I think this book is just a really fantastic little snapshot of what HSBC was doing, the real bread and butter of its business.

So one of the most emotive items we've got in the archive is this notebook. It's the notebook of an ex-employee called Max Haynes, and Max was interned in Santo Tomas and Los Baños internment camp in the Philippines during the Second World War. And this is his original notebook which he kept in the camp. Newspaper cuttings, recipes, and even sketches of himself and his wife Betty. And there's an image here of him and Betty just after their wedding which they held in camp.

Now this is quite heavy, and it's a piece of silver that would have been used as legal currency in China from the maybe the late 16th century up until 1935 when China introduced a new modern currency of notes and coins. Now unfortunately the Chinese characters are really quite worn away so I don't really know where this came from or how old it is. I don't even really know where the silver came from, but the silver could actually have come from the Spanish Americas as early as the 16th century as part of the first great South-South trade route of silver flowing out of Latin America and coming to China to pay for porcelain and silks. So, you know, if only this silver could talk you'd hear some tales.



Video transcript

There are lots of photos in the archives. Lots of them are of branches and places and quite a few of them are of staff. One of my favourite staff photos is this one. The staff of the Hankow branch of HSBC in 1934. Now I like this photo because it really shows a society at a moment of great change. Half of them are wearing native traditional costume; half of them wearing western business suits. There's also this mysterious lady sitting on the end of the front row. I think she's probably not the manager's wife because she'd be sat next to him. So she is probably the lone female member of staff. It's one of the last photos you see of people looking very solemn, because it's a very official photo. After the war you'll find in most group photos like this everyone is always smiling and jolly, so this is a very solemn photo.

The archives continue to grow. We take in records every day from head office and branches all around the world. So I wonder if archivists in 100 years' time were here, what they would pick as their favourite items?