

# SIR FREDDIE LAKER ARCHIVE

## Project report

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# Sir Freddie Laker Archive

## SUMMARY

West Sussex Record Office (WSRO) was delighted to receive a grant of £4000 from the Business Archives Council in July 2020, which was used to employ an archivist for five weeks to catalogue the Sir Freddie Laker Archive. The grant was essential in making the archive accessible to researchers and the general public, and these records will form an invaluable part of the documentary history of British aviation. The catalogue was successfully made available via the Search Online feature on the WSRO website in February 2023, and documents are available to consult in the searchroom.

Although the grant was awarded in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in delays to work starting. The nature of the project required a project archivist, plus a supervisor, to be physically present in the building in order to catalogue the records. Until April 2022, when the Record Office fully reopened, WSRO was still limiting the number of staff who could be in the office at one time, with priority given to the Certificates and Registration team who share the building. Given the short length of the project, it was felt that recruitment to the project archivist post could not start until we were confident that the project archivist would be able to complete the cataloguing of the collection without interruption from lockdowns. Although this meant that the project did not start until January 2023, it has resulted in the successful completion of the project goals. It also meant that we were able to recruit a newly qualified archivist who had completed the Archives and Records Management qualification alongside working in WSRO's searchroom, giving her important post-course experience.

## BACKGROUND: SIR FREDDIE LAKER

In 1951, Sir Freddie bought the airline Air Charter which had been formed in 1947. It was the first airline that Freddie was involved with, and he oversaw its inaugural ferry service between Southend and Calais in 1955. Sir Freddie then became the first Managing Director of British United Airways (BUA), remaining in that position until 1965. Under Sir Freddie's leadership, BUA developed into a competitor to

British European Airways and British Overseas Airways Corporation who had previously monopolised the airline industry.



Laker Airways was formed in 1966 as a wholesale airline that dealt with package tour operators. It became known for its cost cutting measures which enabled many people to fly transatlantic for the first time. It was through Laker Airways that Sir Freddie introduced Skytrain Holidays. This service flew passengers from London to New York and was the very first airline to offer such a service for low-cost fares. However, getting

approval for Skytrain was difficult, and Laker Airways faced opposition from other airlines as well as government ministers.

Despite popularity with the public, Laker Airways went bankrupt in 1982 and during this time Sir Freddie sued airlines belonging to the International Air Transport Association under antitrust law for predatory pricing. This was a landmark case and formed a complex but unforgettable part of Laker's legacy.

## THE ARCHIVE

In 2019, the archive was generously gifted to WSRO by Freddie Allen Laker and Lady Jaqueline Laker. It covers the life of Sir Freddie Laker and his numerous business interests, as well as the considerable activities of the Laker company. The material had previously been stored at Loughborough University where it was box listed by one of WSRO's archivists, giving us a clear idea of the types of records. The documents arrived at WSRO in bankers' boxes and lever arch files; these were earmarked for repackaging with archival quality materials.

The archive comprises records of Laker Airways, its subsidiaries, Sir Freddie's other business ventures, and personal papers from 1956 to 2015. Records



begin around the time Sir Freddie founded Aviation Traders and go right through to his final business ventures with Jafcom Systems and TeleTix. There are also a considerable number of documents on horse racing and concerning Woodcote Stud, a horse breeding centre owned by Sir Freddie.

Primarily, the collection is made up of financial records, legal papers, correspondence, appointment diaries, photographs, and ephemeral material relating to Laker Airways and its subsidiary companies like Skytrain Holidays. The records regarding legal disputes, the liquidation of Laker Airways, and the landmark antitrust suit brought against several major airlines are particularly extensive.

## THE PROCESS

We established that the records were in a similar condition as to when they were in use. They had been stored primarily in cardboard folders, having been housed in filing cabinets. They also contained an enormous number of rusted staples. This was flagged as a conservation issue and a plan put in place to tackle this at a later stage. Meanwhile, bundles of documents were repackaged in archival quality card folders, labelled, and stored in archival boxes. In addition, 135 lever arch files of press cuttings and quantities of loose slides and negatives were flagged and a plan put in place for repackaging at a later date by volunteers.

Developing the structure of the catalogue was somewhat tricky, in part due to the unknown context of some of the original arrangement of the records. A biography of Sir Freddie Laker by Ania Grzesik and Gregory Dix (2019) was essential for establishing the functions and activities of the Laker business. We also looked at existing internal business collections such as that of Shippam's held at WSRO, as well as consulting the catalogues of external business archives such as Sainsbury's. However, as there is no one way to rationalise a business archive, we came up with a number of different options. After further inspection of the collection, one version was identified as the most effective.

Finally, we paid particular attention to the access status of some of the legal and financial papers, and personal correspondence. After several discussions, it was decided, given the potential for sensitive content in these records, to mark these as restricted. Whilst every record entry will remain visible on our online catalogue,

those for restricted items will have a note to contact us for further advice. We will then assess the risk on a case-by-case basis.

## OUTCOMES AND PROMOTION

The goal of the project, which was carried out over five weeks, was to create a comprehensive catalogue of the archive so the public could access the material. The catalogue, which is made up of over 700 record entries across five sections and 47 series, is now available to the public via WSRO's online catalogue. Moreover, researchers can visit the Record Office to view items from the collection now that they are in a producible condition.

A collection level description of the archive will be added to the Archives Hub and the archive will be further highlighted as the Archives Hub's feature blog in August 2023.

We also contacted the Aviation and Aerospace Archives Initiative ([www.aviationarchives.uk](http://www.aviationarchives.uk)) letting them know about the Sir Freddie Laker archive. We have subsequently provided them with a short blog piece and a case study for use on their website. There is also a possibility of contributing to their 2023 conference.

The Sir Freddie Laker archive will feature in WSRO's autumn edition of West Sussex Unwrapped - a collaborative multimedia project with Screen Archive South East - a part of which will concentrate on exploring the history of Laker Airways along with an introduction to the material via a short talk (live via Zoom) and a blog. Leading up to this event, images of material from the archive will be posted to WSRO's social media channels (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) alongside short explanations.

Finally, general feedback thus far from archive professionals, aeronautical enthusiasts and the public has been very positive. We are confident that the collection has the potential for use in more outreach work in the future.