Duke’s and Orr’s Amalgamated Dry Docks Ltd

Georgina Ward

Living in modern times, in which advanced aviation technology has made international travel and transport of goods an efficient and relatively effortless process, it is easy to forget that less than a century ago these services were essentially performed by water transport. This mode of transport took a great toll on ships, which often travelled for months at a time in harsh weather conditions. The University of Melbourne Archives holds the collection of Duke’s and Orr’s Amalgamated Dry Docks Ltd, a fascinating record of the engineering, maintenance and repair side of the maritime industry in Melbourne.

Today the old Duke’s and Orr’s graving dock at Clarendon Street on the south bank of the Yarra River houses the Melbourne icon, the sailing ship Polly Woodside, an iron-hulled barque built in Belfast, Ireland, in 1885 and now open as a museum. The dock, built in 1868, is also part of the rich history of Melbourne’s maritime activity, being the place where thousands of ships, including those affected by the battles of wartime, were docked, cleaned, painted and repaired, until its closure in 1975. The dock is also of historic significance in the field of engineering, due to the fact that its wooden walls remained
during reconstruction at the turn of
the 20th century, making it the last
timber-walled dry dock in Australia,
and of its size, possibly one of the
last in the world. Its longevity is
said to be in part due to the choice
of Australian eucalyptus timber,
which is outstanding for strength
and durability. A selection of species
including red gum, blue gum, grey
box and ironbark were used for the
immense and costly reconstruction
completed in 1904, replacing the old
sheathing around the dock as well as
the floor and massive mitre gates.

The collection encompasses
records dating from between the
years 1878 and 1975, consisting
of a variety of material including
minutes, accounts, time books,
correspondence, share registers and
other company-related documents.
Time books recording employee wages
reflect changing economic conditions
and industry wage standards, while
correspondence with employees,
insurance companies and medical
practitioners regarding injury and
accident reports provide an interesting
historical understanding of work safety
practices (or lack of) and protection
against workplace injury. Needless
to say, there were a lot of slips and
spills! In addition, correspondence
with Melbourne Harbor Trust,
Department of Lands and Survey,
Collector of Customs (Melbourne)
and the Federal Taxation Office (now
the Australian Tax Office) provides
details of Melbourne’s port operations.
Docking registers, time books and
cleaning books all list names of ships
docked at Duke’s and Orr’s graving
dock, linking employees to these
jobs at certain dates. Together with
the library of the National Trust of
Australia (Victoria), UMA’s Duke’s
and Orr’s Amalgamated Dry Docks
Ltd Collection also includes a number
of published registers of Australian
and New Zealand shipping.

An assortment of photographs
provides a visual record of
Melbourne’s maritime activities,
depicting staff at work and posing
for group shots, the immense size
of the ships, impressive engineering
machinery and the mammoth task
at hand to repair the damaged ships.
Visual records of the Yarra Bank—
some featuring horses and carts
travelling along the neighbouring
roads—richly illustrate the early
proximity between Melbourne’s
central business district and its
bustling port facilities. The adoption
of new shipping and handling
methods and technologies, particularly
containerisation of freight, radically
changed this relationship through
the need for large new facilities and
streamlined road and rail access.

The Duke’s and Orr’s
Amalgamated Dry Docks Ltd
Collection is now listed online and
searchable via the University of
Melbourne Archives catalogue at
www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/
archives/. The digitising and
publishing online of some of the
more fragile and significant records
are proposed for the future. Further,
Duke’s and Orr’s did business
with many prominent firms in
Melbourne for which the University
of Melbourne Archives also holds
records, including Huddart Parker,
J.B. Were & Son, the Melbourne
Stock Exchange, Inglis Smith &
Co. and McPhersons Ltd. The
ability to consult, compare and make
links between related collections
such as these is of enormous value
to historians in understanding
Melbourne’s maritime and
commercial past.

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