

Rothschild Reunited: The records of de Rothschild Frères at the Centre des archives du monde du travail

Amable Sablon du Corail, Johann Comble and Melanie Aspey
chart the progress of work on a major French archive.

The archives of N.M. Rothschild & Sons, the London branch of the business which form the core of the collection of The Rothschild Archive, have received no threat to their safekeeping and accumulation throughout the 200-year history of the bank. Aside from a period of a couple of decades when they were housed at a private Rothschild property in Hampshire they have always been on the bank's London premises. The records of the other family businesses have experienced rather different fates. The majority of the records of the Frankfurt bank were destroyed after the business was liquidated in 1901, together with those of the Naples bank, which had been transferred to Frankfurt after its closure in 1863 and the early business records of the Viennese bank. Some records were transferred to Paris in 1912, but they only survived a few years more. An archive of material collected by Salomon von Rothschild and augmented by his descendants survived this purge, only to be captured by the Nazis in Vienna in 1938. The eventual return of the records to the family was documented in a previous issue of this *Review*.¹

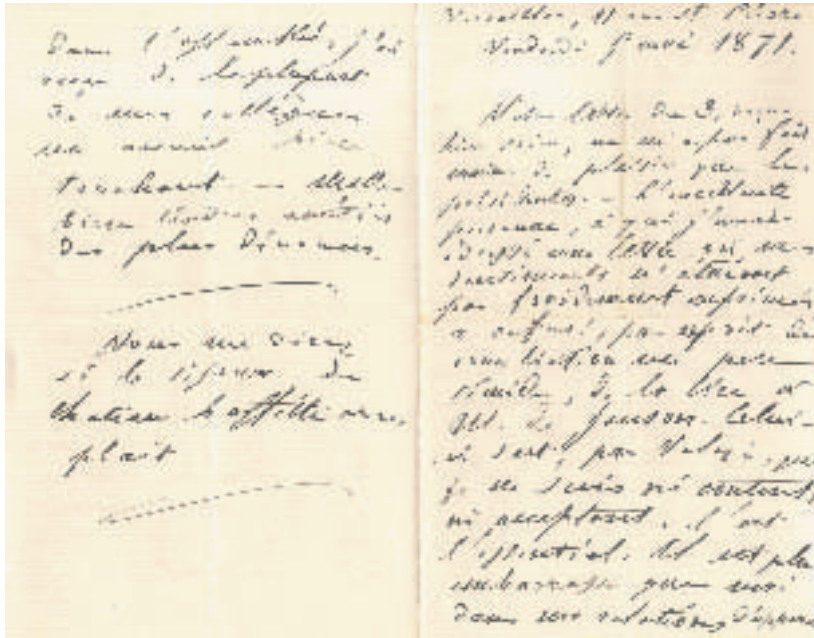
Records relating to the French Rothschild business have been available to researchers since the 1970s through the French national archives system and private family records have been available in London from the middle of the 1990s.² In 2004 the ownership of the business records was assigned to The Rothschild Archive by the Rothschild family, uniting intellectually not just the records of the French Rothschild bank with those of the family, but also the records of all the banking branches.

Bertrand Gille, the distinguished economic historian, who worked on the records of the French bank from the early 1950s also used them as the source for his authoritative history of the Rothschild business, which appeared in two volumes in the 1960s.³ He gave this assessment of the archives of de Rothschild Frères.

Aucun fonds d'archives économiques en France (pas même les archives de la Banque de France) ne possède l'intérêt que présentent les archives Rothschild.⁴

In subsequent reports about the archives, Gille expanded on his claim, identifying a number of major themes that could not be fully understood without reference to the Rothschild collection: the financial history of France; the financial history of Belgium; the history of railways in France and the rest of Europe; the history of the cotton trade in Europe in the nineteenth century; the competition between financial syndicates; French oil companies.

Gille's work took place against the backdrop of a veritable collecting frenzy of company archives which was first pursued in a systematic and consistent manner in France during the 1930s. After the Second World War this activity really began in earnest, notably thanks to the establishment in 1949 of a section for private and company archives within the Archives nationales; in less than eight years, it was to gather together over 65 collections and close on 40,000 articles. The emerging interest in the study of economic and social history (as typified in the popularity of the Annales school of thought in French universities) generated a pressing new public demand for access to company archives. The purpose of Gille's work was to



Letter from Changarnier to Betty, Baroness James de Rothschild, 5 May 1871, describing the situation at Versailles during the Paris Commune.

AN CAMT AQ 132.

prepare the documents for eventual deposit with the Archives nationales.

Gille began work just as the bank regained possession of its archives, which had been seized during the war by the occupying German authorities. An inventory drawn up on 1 December 1952 by the archivist then in post at the bank, although focusing more on famous autographs and attractive bindings than on the detailed structure of the collection, nevertheless provides information about the major groups. It would have been surprising if the sequestered documents had been returned without difficulties or losses, given the chaos inherently bound up with events of this kind; it is believed that this was the time when the correspondence received by the bank when it first began its operations, from 1813 to 1837, went missing.⁵ However, in the absence of any more formal proof regarding the cause of this highly regrettable gap in the archive, this still remains a matter of speculation rather than fact.

Nevertheless, the more significant losses to the archive are due to the destruction carried out by the bank itself in the course of its normal activities and operations. Despite the volume of transactions it carried out, de Rothschild Frères always remained a modest establishment employing a small staff (150 people around the year 1880). In this respect, it differs from other major merchant banks and deposit banks. An 1872 inventory reveals that the archives were then filling the bank's premises to the point where they were being stored in cupboards in the dining room.⁶ This state of affairs prompted a series of purges of documents, and these of course began with the oldest documents first. The correspondence sent prior to 1850, conserved in the form of registers of manuscript copies, and later in registers of letter-press copies, was therefore destroyed before the war, and it is not possible to specify either the precise date or the person responsible for those losses. In 1935, on the instruction of the bank's management, all the books of accounts from before 1931 were to suffer a similar fate. The first four ledgers, covering the years 1813–4, 1815–6, 1816 and 1817, had been saved from this cull and in 1952 were being kept in the strong-room of the bank's own archive department, but they cannot now be traced.

Gille began by developing a classification system which, in its key aspects, has been retained to the present day. Three main groups of documents lie at the heart of his system: business files, outgoing correspondence and correspondence received. To this can be added the smaller collections which make up the archives for the bank's legal department and documentation

department and, lastly, the collection from the Commissie en Handelsbank (the Rothschild agency in Amsterdam), whose archives for the period up until the war were transferred to France in 1951. Gille then began to draw up a detailed inventory of the business files, outgoing correspondence and correspondence received from agencies and other branches of the business. Appointed to various other posts, Gille never had the time to complete his work, which was only resumed after an interval of nearly 20 years.

The contract for depositing the archives of de Rothschild Frères with the Archives nationales was officially signed on 28 June 1972. The collection, which in the meantime had found a temporary home in storage in the cellars of the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris, could then be transferred to the Archives nationales, moving first to the Centre des archives contemporaines in Fontainebleau, before the part of the collection already classified was transferred to the Centre historique des archives nationales in Paris. The move of this part of the archive was made in response to pressure from readers at the Archives nationales who were keen to make use of such rich documentary sources; this demand was also behind the resumption of work to classify the archive, in the early 1980s.

Isabelle Guérin-Brot, the curator responsible for company archives, directed the major part of these efforts at the correspondence received, at the point where Gille had left off. She secured funding from the Rothschild bank for a temporary archivist, Madame Fontfrède, who accomplished a remarkable feat in working her way through several thousands of boxes in less than two years, from 1981 to 1983; but even she did not reach the end of this mass of material which took up more than 350 continuous metres of shelf space. In 1996, the company archives department was disbanded. The Centre des archives du monde du travail, (or CAMT), the latest offshoot of the Archives nationales, had been based in an historic former cotton mill in Roubaix in Northern France from 1993 and it inherited the Rothschild materials. It is to be hoped that this, the sixth move, heralds a period of stability.

In 1999–2000, the archives of the documentation department and the legal department were catalogued, under the direction of Armelle Le Goff. After this, there remained the matter of preparing inventories for the archives of the Commissie en Handelsbank, the current accounts and accounting documents for de Rothschild Frères from 1811, miscellaneous supplementary materials for the elements already catalogued and, last but not least, a very large number of letters received from a wide variety of correspondents. The work carried out by Johann Comble, an archivist funded for a period of fifteen months by the Institut Alain de Rothschild has at last seen a project which has stretched over fifty years and more brought to a close in 2004–5.

At the end of this description, perhaps slightly meticulous in its attention to detail but necessary for a good understanding of the general structure of the collection, it seems fitting to review the main groups of documents mentioned earlier, both to point out their interesting features and to explain how they have been catalogued.

Business files

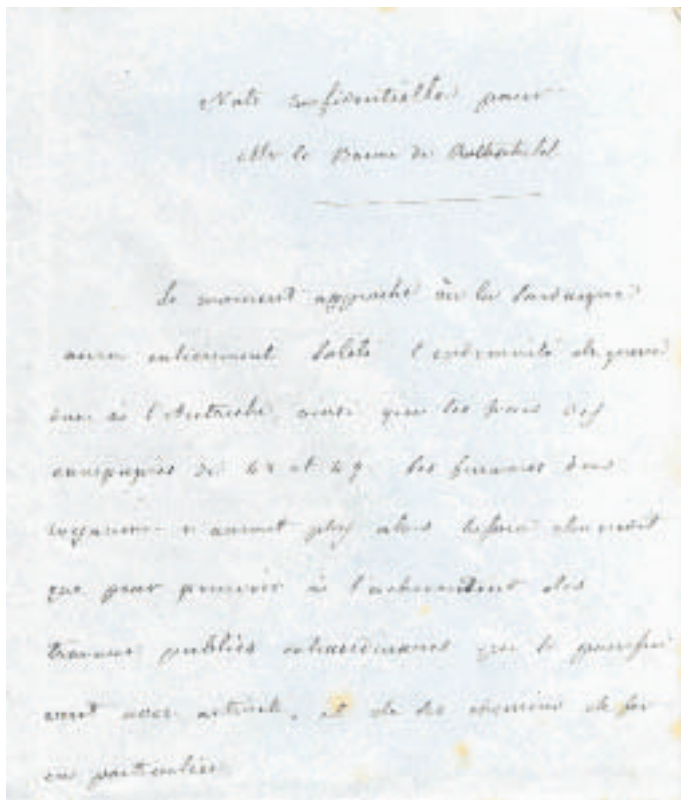
Catalogued by Bertrand Gille, by major area of activity for the Bank (public loans, petroleum, metals, etc.), their origin is not always easy to determine, but in most instances these are information notes, reports, original agreements and contracts, and other reference documents put together by senior staff and partners of the Bank. Although it is possible to find some very old items in this collection, particularly material relating to state loans, for the most part they date from after 1870. The variety of items contained in the files in relation to particular aspects of business, makes them the most consulted section in the collection. In addition to the dossiers catalogued by Gille, others have been retrieved in the latest cataloguing phase, together with a series of registers of loan issue notices and notices for the issue of bonds and shares (1870–1940).

Outgoing correspondence

This section comprises twenty-four series⁷ of registers of letter-press copies, classified in chronological order, the sheer quantity of which (over 4,700) frequently deters researchers from tackling them. However, there is an index of correspondents at the end of the volume which greatly simplifies the work of research, even though this may sometimes mean working one's way through considerable numbers of registers.

Correspondence received

The vast majority of this correspondence had been catalogued in chronological order relatively thoroughly by the bank's staff. Only the correspondence received and handled by the English office and the commodities office constitute two specific sub-classifications, which have naturally been preserved in their original grouping in the inventory. This sea of material made research difficult, so Gille devised a classification system that distinguished between the Rothschild houses and agencies, regular correspondents – principally banks, authorities and companies in close contact with de Rothschild Frères – occasional correspondents, and individuals holding an account with de Rothschild Frères. The regular correspondents were then broken down by country, with each country having a particular sub-classification.⁸ This method, which has made it possible to rapidly make available to the public a large part of the correspondence received, did however have its limitations, which became apparent at the time when the classification work was resumed in 2003. The scope of the task which remained to be tackled, made all the more complex in that the correspondents were vast in number and by the fact that it was not always easy to distinguish individuals from small banking establishments, stockbrokers and others, justified a change in the method of classification. The archivists decided to classify in alphabetical order all the remaining correspondents, no longer making arbitrary distinctions, up until 1869 (the year after the death of James de Rothschild), and then to adopt the broader chronological classification already in place.



Confidential note
from Cavour to James
de Rothschild, undated,
concerning a railway loan
that the kingdom of
Sardinia hopes to issue as
soon as the reparations due
to Austria following the
1848–9 war have been paid.
AN CAMT AQ 132.



Main entrance to the CAMT, Roubaix, the former Motte-Bossut cotton mill.

AN CAMT.

Right

The reading room at the Centre des archives du monde du travail.

AN CAMT.



Legal department

Individual files for loans, advances, transfers of stocks and shares, and particularly papers relating to inheritance, make up practically the entirety of this group. Ranging widely in importance and interest, the documents set out a procession of the bank's clientèle over nearly a century, with a fair representation of fashionable society of the time.

Documentation department

Established at the start of the twentieth century, this department gathered together a wealth of economic and financial information on every subject of greater or lesser interest to the bank, notably on French and foreign companies listed on the Bourse or other stock exchanges.

Accounts

It is this area which has been the focus of the greatest – and the most innovative – part of the work recently carried out by Johann Comble. In fact, in the absence of the bank's main ledgers, what remains are fairly complete series of bundles of current accounts and franchisee accounts, dating back to the first years of business for the Rothschilds in France. Of particular interest are bank statements for de Rothschild Frères relating to their partner branches in Vienna, Frankfurt, Naples and London from 1827 on, and those for their agents and regular correspondents from 1818 onwards. These are generally monthly or quarterly statements. In the absence of general balance sheets, the reconstruction of which would be a hazardous business, it is therefore possible to evaluate the volume of transactions involving de Rothschild Frères in the European markets, and to know with whom and how the bank placed the bonds issued on behalf of the French or foreign governments.⁹

Charitable foundations and Jewish associations

This series of several boxes provides evidence of the bank's financial involvement with a large number of welfare organisations originally set up by the Rothschild family (e.g. Fondation Edmond de Rothschild pour le développement de la recherche scientifique, la Fondation Rothschild pour l'amélioration des conditions de l'existence matérielle des travailleurs, Hôpital Rothschild), or with bodies to which it simply made a contribution. Many associations supporting Jews returning to Palestine are featured here, although the details are scattered widely throughout the documentation.

Commissie en Handelsbank (Coha Bank)

This establishment took over from Auerbach as the company's representative in Amsterdam after 15 July 1926. All the accounts have been preserved: the main ledger, the account book, together with the correspondence sent and received between 1926 and 1940. The complexity – especially in view of the growing number of accounting transactions from the nineteenth century onwards – makes these documents accessible to researchers only with some difficulty, but they nevertheless constitute a valuable testimony to the working methods and types of transactions carried out at that time by the Bank.

With the completion of the cataloguing work a new phase in the development of the archives can begin. Researchers now have access to a fully catalogued collection, enabling them to exploit the sources more effectively. The catalogue that is available in hard copy at the CAMT¹⁰ will soon be accessible through the Rothschild Research Forum,¹¹ so that researchers can carry out preparatory research at their desks before travelling to Roubaix.

Such rich collections – the archives in London and Roubaix – deserve greater scholarly use and the archivists in both locations are keen to promote these sources. As a first step towards fulfilling this ambition, a series of joint ventures is planned, the first of which will be a colloquium on a theme that is comprehensively represented in both collections: Rothschild investment in eastern Europe. The colloquium will bring together researchers who have worked on the records of de Rothschild Frères and N.M. Rothschild & Sons furthering yet more the spirit of cross-Channel collaboration.

Amable Sablon du Corail, conservateur du patrimoine, has special responsibility for the direction of work on the Rothschild papers at CAMT; Johann Comble, undertook the final cataloguing of the collection at CAMT; Melanie Aspey is Director of The Rothschild Archive, London.

NOTES

- 1 Victor Gray, 'The Return of the Austrian Rothschild Archive' and Melanie Aspey, 'Salomon's Archive', in *The Rothschild Archive Review of the Year April 2001 – March 2002*.
- 2 Records previously stored at Château Lafite were returned in 1993, (The Rothschild Archive London [RAL] 000/929) and records looted from the family by the Nazis were returned in 1994 (RAL 000/796: 58-1).
- 3 Bertrand Gille, *Histoire de la Maison Rothschild, Tome 1: des origines à 1848* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1965) and *Tome 2: 1848–1870*, (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1967).

- 4 RAL 000/929: OC554.
- 5 From this period, only a few fragments for the years 1811, 1815 and 1816 remain (Archives nationales, Centre des archives du monde du travail [AN CAMT], 132 AQ 17–20).
- 6 AN CAMT 132 AQ, being catalogued currently.
- 7 By correspondent (Belmont, N. M. Rothschild, etc.), language area (French, German, Italian, etc.), or department (subject-matter, commodity, etc.).
- 8 1P, France, 2P, Germany, etc.

- 9 The finding made by Jean Bouvier in 1967 no longer holds true: 'It thus remains impossible to produce a translation in accounting terms of the activities of the Paris Rothschilds.' Quoted in translation from Jean Bouvier, *Les Rothschild* (Paris: A. Fayard, 1967), p.89.
- 10 www.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/camt
- 11 www.rothschildarchive.org