• Collection [1]
The move from hot metal production to cold type print in 1984 was a major milestone in the history of John Fairfax Limited. The transition heralded the modernisation of newspaper printing but simultaneously marked the demise of a decades old set of printers’ skills. Printers’ unions strongly defended those workers, who possessed these once protected skills, to ensure they remained employed. Some 140 years earlier, unions or “chapels”, were formed for the very reason of safeguarding the welfare of printers. In a somewhat remarkable piece of coincidence, it was during this technological changeover in 1984 that evidence surfaced of the role that unions played in those early years of the company.

Eileen Dwyer, the former Fairfax company archivist noted that, in preparation for the transition to cold type printing, production area staff were ordered to empty their lockers. Any lockers that were found still to be locked would be forced opened. As workers forced open the door on one of these lockers they discovered a pile of exercise books, ledgers, booklets and loose papers. What they had found consisted of a portion of long forgotten Herald Chapel records, some dating back to 1847.

The word “chapel” has its origins in Westminster Abbey where Caxton, in 1471, set up a press in one of the chapels. Henceforth printers’ workrooms became known as chapels and over time it came to include associations of printing tradesmen. The Herald Chapel was formed in 1846 as a union for the production area staff of the Sydney Herald, purchased by John Fairfax and Charles Kemp five years previously. The Chapel comprised the printers, type-setters, composers and other staff who worked in the production side of the organisation. When John Fairfax introduced a new evening paper the “Echo” in 1857 the men on this paper formed a separate Chapel, the Echo Companionship. It was the Herald Chapel in 1854 that moved for the formation of the first “typographical union” in Sydney.

The records found consist of Chapel rule books, financial ledgers and membership lists, minute books dating back to 1875, ephemera, agreements, expenses, and Chapel record books from 1935-1954. Interestingly the Australian Register for the UNESCO Memory of the World includes a collection of pre-federation minute books of trade unions. The register describes these minute books as a record of,

“...collective decision-making by Australian workers in the nineteenth-century. They are a record of democracy for workers both men and women.”

The minute books and other records in this collection from the Fairfax Archive will contribute to a greater understanding of the formative years and growth of what was to become the printers’ union movement.
The front pages of a Chapel Record book kept by the Father of the Chapel, H. E. Wheeler. In it he keeps records of the work of the Sydney Morning Herald and Sydney Mail Chapels.

The Chapel, as a printers' union, is strongly associated with John Fairfax and Sons, but these records are not official business records of the company, they are records of the Chapel which have fortunately survived and have become part of the Fairfax Archives collection. Earlier minute books of the Chapel can be found at the Noel Butlin Archives.

Together these records represent the strength of the workers to unite and collectively negotiate with their employer. They also show that the role of the Chapel was something far greater than workers' rights. The Chapel also planned social activities for employees, and provided additional financial support through the "Herald" Benefit Society and Provident Fund, pension funds and patriotic funds, "Herald" Hospital Fund and Mutual Help Society.

These Chapel records, together with the industrial relations records of the business archive will contribute to a greater understanding of the current industrial relations and social welfare system, and the history of working lives and communities.

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References