

A HISTORY OF

CHAMBERS^{OF}
COMMERCE

IN THE UNITED KINGDOM
1768-2007

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PREFACE

Chambers of Commerce have promoted and protected the businesses of the United Kingdom since the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Yet despite their significant contribution to the economic life of the country little has been published of their activities and accomplishments. In 1961 to mark its centenary the Association of British Chambers of Commerce commissioned a history by A. R. Ilesic and P. F. B. Little of the London School of Economics, concentrating mainly on the national lobbying effort. There are in addition some excellent local histories. Nonetheless there has been little attempt to track, record and interpret the development of Chambers of Commerce, their impact on government policy, their pioneering of business support services and their practical contribution to regional economic development, or indeed to compare them with their Continental equivalents.

I had been thinking of writing a history of Chambers in Britain for some years, but it was not until my retirement as Director-General of the British Chambers of Commerce in 1998 and the suggestion from its then President, John Entwistle, that I might pick up where Professor Ilesic left off, that challenge and opportunity came together.

For almost forty of those two hundred years I was a part of the history of Chambers, having joined the Leeds Chamber of Commerce in November 1959. That has allowed me to supplement the archive with personal experience and recollection and to tap the memories of contemporaries, but it opens up the danger that the history becomes an autobiography or, worse, an apologia for my fourteen-year period

as Director-General. My hope is that the merits of the insider's view outweigh any tendency to self-justification, and that I have avoided the pitfalls and succeeded in presenting a balanced view of the events from 1960 onwards.

This is not an academic study based on research of past minute books and other records. Instead I have drawn copiously on the existing histories of individual Chambers, all listed in the Further Reading; it was beyond my skills and capacity to delve rigorously into the formation of more than one hundred Chambers. Also as Chambers are continuously evolving and changing, inevitably some of the information in this book will be out of date or incomplete.

What has emerged is journalism rather than history, and a book aimed at briefing the leaders of the present Chamber movement about its origins.

Finally let me acknowledge the immense contribution of many friends and colleagues throughout the Chamber world, at home and abroad, and not least the authors of various Chamber histories to whom I owe a great debt. Their encouragement and assistance have been essential. I do hope you enjoy this read and will come to appreciate that the challenges and issues faced by individual Chambers and the network today are remarkably similar to those our predecessors faced over the centuries.

RON TAYLOR