

East India Company Factory Records

from the British Library, London

Parts 1 & 2: China and Japan



“The Company stands forth as a robust association of adventurers... It was thanks to the incorrigible pioneering of the Company's servants that the British Empire acquired its peculiarly diverse character.”

John Keay

'The Honourable Company:
A History of the English East India Company' (1991)

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Adam Matthew Publications

Between 1600 and 1833 the East India Company sent more than 4600 ships to East Asia. At first an unwelcome troop of foreigners, the EIC merchants were persistent and slowly set up their factory settlements (trading posts where the merchants lived) throughout Japan and China. By 1800 the EIC had become Britain's biggest commercial enterprise.

The EIC records in Parts 1 and 2 of this collection reflect the scale of the company's activity and the merchants' successes and failures in China and Japan. They're an essential source for studying the interaction between Western traders and Asian society.

As well as documenting business activities, these files provide an insight into the character of English and foreign merchants, their operations and relationships.

Japan, 1613-1623

Trade with Japan started with the visit of 'The Clove' to the port of Hirado in 1613. After this mission successfully established a factory in Hirado, merchants were sent to neighbouring islands and ports including Nagasaki, Edo, Osaka, Shirogane, Miaco and Tushima.

But after ten years, the EIC was forced to accept the fact that trade was not flourishing. Failure to establish good trading relationships with the Shogun and his coast, coupled with problems with the Dutch traders, finally led to the factory's closure in 1623.

Despite the short life of the EIC's trade in Japan, the records here offer a detailed insight into the EIC's activity and contemporary life in Japan. They help to explain why the Dutch managed to keep trade open with Japan for such a substantial period, while the English lasted only ten years.

The records include Richard Wickham's books of letters written in Japan and Bantam in Java

(the site of the first English factory in 1602) between 1614 and 1617. These provide much detail on business and negotiations, plus very helpful indices and a précis of contents. Also included are invoices and accounts books, miscellaneous letters, ships' journals, annals of the factory and other papers for the period 1613-1623. There is also an interesting narrative by the well-known figure William Adams on his arrival in Japan in 1600.

China, 1596-1840

East India Company trade with China started in earnest in 1699 with the commencement of trade at Canton. The 'Macclesfield' was the first company ship to moor at Whampora harbour and Robert Douglas, its factor, stayed for nearly a year. His achievements were to pave the way for the EIC's most profitable business venture.

Trade was initially hindered by the Chinese, who banned European traders from the city until the 19th century. Undeterred, the EIC built its factories on a stretch of land between the city wall and the river. The three main commodities were tea, silk textiles and porcelain.

These records for China offer an intimate view of the EIC's activities, from both business and personal viewpoints. There are files on merchants' dealings with local cartels, attempts at price-fixing and also accounts of the beginning of the Opium trade – by 1804, the value of British and Indian exports to China exceeded their imports. There are also many diaries, consultations, ships' diaries, letters



East India Company coat of arms

received, copies of letters sent and miscellaneous papers.

Some more highlights of this fascinating archive include:

- Lists of commodities for sale to China
- Instructions from the Company to the merchants
- Descriptions of business meetings with the Chinese
- Instructions to ships and narratives of ships' voyages
- Details on proceedings with the Dutch
- Proceedings of the Court
- Notes on meetings with local contacts
- Lists of ships at Canton
- Catalogues of presents given by the Company to the Emperor
- Watercolour drawings of harbours in China
- Papers relating to Lord McCartney's Embassy to China
- Lists of goods imported into and exported from China

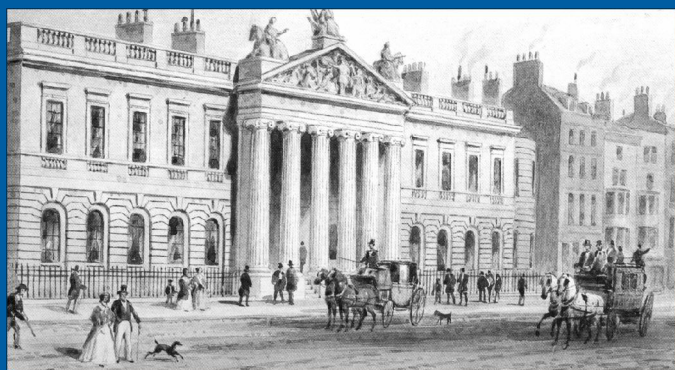
These files are a core source for anybody interested in the maritime trade, the origins of global commerce and the establishment of trading networks in Asia.

Part 1: China and Japan: 34 reels • Available

Part 2: China: c32 reels • Forthcoming

Part 3: Fort St. George: c30 reels • Forthcoming

Further parts will cover factory records for India.



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