

CAPTURING THE ENERGY: RECORDS OF THE UK OFFSHORE OIL AND GAS INDUSTRIES

Author: Dr Miles Oglethorpe

Institution: The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland

Address: RCAHMS, 16 Bernard Terrace, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH8 9NX, Scotland, UK

Telephone: 0131 (0) 662 1456

Fax: 0044 (0) 131 662 1477

Email: mileso@rcahms.gov.uk

Workshop 1

Abstract:

The North Sea offshore oil and gas industries are entering a new phase, during which the first fields are reaching exhaustion and being shut down, others are having their lives extended by new technologies, and new fields are being opened as exploration finds fresh reserves. It is therefore a period of rapid change, and one in which the industries' own records are under threat as businesses move on, and old information is perceived as no longer being of value.

In the past, major UK industries such as coal mining have rapidly changed and then disappeared, most of their associated records being lost or destroyed in the process. The oil and gas industries are potentially even more transient, being visible only to a small proportion of the population that works in the sector, much of the activity occurring offshore. However, the heroic scale and complexity of this activity is immense, and is of huge historical importance to the UK, and to other countries that have benefited from technologies developed in the North Sea.

A further important feature of the offshore oil and gas industries is that they are heavily regulated by Government, both for environmental reasons, and because of the large tax revenues paid to the state. The result is that no industry has previously been so well documented. This means that there is currently a wealth of information available. The problem is that it will require a huge amount of work to sift through it and select the most important archives. Equally, it will take a lot of effort to persuade the oil companies that it is worth retaining historical archive material.

Fortunately, this process has already begun in Norway, where Conoco Phillips have funded a documentation project for their Ekofisk field, and where TOTAL E&P Norge have begun supporting a similar project for their Frigg Gas field, also based at the Norwegian Petroleum Museum in Stavanger. Frigg spans both the UK and the Norwegian sectors, so, with encouragement from colleagues in Norway, attempts are currently being made in the UK to establish a British project.

The aim of this paper is therefore to describe how the project, 'Capturing the Energy' is attempting to establish a documentation programme in the UK. The ultimate aim is to establish a sustainable central repository into which oil and gas operators can routinely deposit archive material. Some of the greatest challenges will be to oversee the transition between conventional and digital archive media, and to tackle sensitive issues such as access, security and intellectual property.