

# London Metropolitan Archives

Information Leaflet Number 54

## The Russia Company



## **Introduction**

The early records of the Russia Company perished in the Great Fire of London in 1666. However the surviving material, including minutes of the Court of the Company from 1666/7, is now deposited at London Metropolitan Archives (Ms 11741-57, Ms11893-5, Ms 21377, Ms31781-2, Ms32801-5, Ms35997 and Ms36580-1).

## **History**

The history of the Russia Company begins in 1553, when a group of Londoners, said to number 240, financed an expedition to discover the north-east passage to Cathay. The expedition had mixed motives. It hoped to copy the success of the Spanish and Portuguese in discovering new markets, and especially that of the Portuguese in bringing gold and spices from the East Indies. It also hoped to discover new markets for the export of English cloth, a trade then in decline. The north-east passage was important because it would be free of Portuguese interference. Either way, the voyage failed in its original purpose, for the crews of two of the three ships froze to death during the northern winter. However the third ship, the *Edward Bonaventure*, under the command of Richard Chancellor, found safe anchorage in the mouth of the Dvina. Chancellor was then invited to Moscow, where Tsar Ivan IV agreed to allow English merchants to come and trade. The voyage thus led to the establishment of direct trade with all the Russias.

The Russia Company was formally incorporated by royal charter on 26th February 1555 as the ‘marchants adventurers of England, for the discovery of lands, territories, iles, dominions, and seignories unknowen, and not before that late adventure or enterprise by sea or navigation, commonly frequented’. The Company quickly became known as the Russia Company, or Muscovy Company, or Company of Merchants Trading with Russia. The charter gave the Company a legal and corporate basis for its activities, and a monopoly. Ivan IV also granted privileges to the Company before the end of 1555, although their precise nature is disputed. However in practice the Company’s monopoly of English trade with Russia included the rights to trade without paying customs duties or tolls, and to trade in the interior. The Company’s principal imports from Russia were furs, tallow, wax, timber, flax, tar and hemp. Its principal export to Russia was English cloth.

The Company in London appointed agents or ‘factors’ in Russia, hence the term ‘British Factory’ for the group of British agents. The headquarters of the Factory until 1717 was Moscow, when it removed to Archangel. In 1723 the Factory moved again, this time by Imperial decree, to St Petersburg. The Company also appointed a chaplain to the Factory in Russia, and he naturally moved with the Factory, although he continued to visit Moscow to minister to British residents. With the expansion of

trade in the 19th century, the number of trading posts maintained by the Company grew to include Archangel, Cronstadt, Moscow and St Petersburg. So too did the number of chaplains.

Since 1917 the Russia Company has operated principally as a charity and has given grants to English chaplaincies working within Russia. Several members of the current Court are direct descendants of families which traded in the British Factory in St Petersburg.

## **Records**

The Russia Company archive includes records of the Council for British Repatriated from Russia which was an association of charities interested in the welfare of British subjects repatriated from Russia following the Russian Revolution. It came into existence in November 1921 to help find employment for those repatriated, to provide financial relief, and to help with the education of young children. It was still in existence in 1932, but its eventual fate has not been discovered. The Russia Company does not appear to have been officially represented on the Council, although it made a number of charitable grants and its secretary, G F Feild, was also honorary treasurer to the Council. The Council's records include accounts and correspondence relating to individual cases for relief 1919-32 (Ms 11752-3). Some further correspondence relating to the Council's work 1920-30 can be found in the letter books of G F Feild (Ms 11747).

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