

# Dawson

*International subscription agents and booksellers — Dave Fanning*

William Dawson established a small business in London's Cannon Street in 1809, selling newspapers and books. Under his energetic and shrewd management, the business grew and prospered far beyond its modest beginnings. However, even the far-sighted founder would be astonished at the size and complexity of today's Dawson group, in which the original core business still plays a crucial role. Over the past 180 years, the company has progressively developed book and journal subscription and back issue services, general, academic and rare bookselling, and specialist publishing within the United Kingdom, and expanded those activities overseas in Commonwealth countries, continental Europe and North America.

In strengthening and extending these long-standing operations and in tackling new products and markets, the group has firmly embraced new information technology and developed fully integrated computer-based library management systems for a variety of book and periodical services and facilities. Dawson's growth has been enhanced by a selective policy of acquisition of cognate companies in Britain and elsewhere, most noticeably in 1988 when five major businesses were acquired. The directors, led by chairman Peter Brown and group chief executive Bryan Ingleby, continue to search carefully for additional firms to augment or extend activities.

## Strength

The directors' policies of controlled expansion and careful concentration in specific well-defined markets have worked well over the past five years. In an increasingly difficult and competitive sector, group turnover has doubled, rising from £36.3 million in 1984-85 to £78.6 million in 1989-90. Profits from wholly-managed activities have risen too, from £1.1 million to £1.5 million, although the group's share of the profits of Surridge Dawson, the

newspaper wholesaler in which Dawson has a 50 per cent holding, has reduced, falling from £2.5 million to £1.9 million.

The group is substantially financed, with loans playing a relatively small part in funding; total net assets in September 1990 were valued at £19.7 million, of which just £2.4 million was financed by loans.

Dawson is probably the second-largest UK subscription agent, with Blackwell's its main competitor. Each has different strengths, of course, and the market is becoming fiercely competitive. The Dutch-based Swets has recently acquired Bailey Bros & Swinfen, and several smaller subscription agents are facing a parlous future. In the US, the situation is even more aggressive, particularly in the library management systems area.

## Origins

Dawson today is a far cry from the business set up at 12 Cannon Street in the first years of the nineteenth century. William Dawson swiftly diversified from newspapers and magazines into stationery, bookselling, engraving, printing and binding, and advertising, and by 1828 the business had grown so much that larger premises were needed; in addition to moving to 74 Cannon Street, two branches were opened at other London sites.

Over the succeeding years of the century, the firm's growth forced further moves, ending up in Fetter Lane in 1892. In part, this growth was fuelled by the rapid expansion in newspaper and periodical publishing in Britain at the time, but it was also a direct result of William Dawson's confident inauguration of new branches in Britain and around the world. By the turn of the century, there were branches in Cardiff, Exeter, Leicester, Brighton and elsewhere, and Dawson companies were active in many corners of the world.

In 1908 the Imperial News Company of Canada

was acquired, leading to an upsurge in overseas business, and a few years later the company launched into periodical publishing, introducing such titles as *The Aeroplane* and *The Army and Navy Gazette*. Consonant with its wholehearted use of existing road, rail and sea services, Dawson made full use of the first commercial flights from Croydon to Paris. The nascent Dawson France was set up in 1921, against strenuous opposition from other French agents, and survived the 1939-45 war, largely through the dedicated work of native French employees who kept the business flowing.

Up to the end of the Second World War, Dawson continued to grow year by year, gaining contracts to supply air and shipping fleets and establishing a resilient presence in many ancillary businesses, including rare book dealing and journal back issue reprinting and supply. The UK wholesale trade was separated from the other activities with the formation in 1934 of *SurrIDGE Dawson*, forged from the retail interests of the *SurrIDGE* family and Dawson's wholesale business.

The post-war years brought several changes, not least the loss of some overseas markets and, as Commonwealth countries began to publish their own popular magazines and journals, a reduction in foreign reliance on British publications. Against that, however, other business grew, as libraries overseas placed subscriptions for learned and specialist journals. By the end of 1946 the company had moved to *Macklin Street* in London and all activities were gathered together under one roof. Once again, though, continued growth necessitated a move in 1968 to larger premises - this time it was to *Folkestone* in Kent, where the greater part of the present-day company is based.

### Development

Since then the group has changed significantly, particularly in the nature of its continuing activities and in the breadth of its commitment to automation and information technology. Steady growth in sales has been maintained through the acquisition policy, which remains one of the group's principal strategies for the 1990s and beyond.

With the underlying emphasis on expansion in overseas markets, *B F Stevens and Brown*, the bookseller and subscription agent with a strong presence in the North American markets, was

bought in 1975. In 1985 US subscriptions agent *McGregor Subscription Service* was acquired, and the small press publications distributor *Quality Books* joined the group in 1988. In Britain, that same year saw the purchase of *D and P Seabrook*, specialist book and audiovisual dealers, and of *Alan Armstrong*, a bookseller concentrating on the corporate and institutional markets with particular strengths in direct mail. A year later, *Franklin Subscriptions* (now renamed *Dawson Serials Management*) was taken over.

The group has also expanded into related fields of management consultancy and information provision. *Reward Regional Surveys*, a major company in the collation of data on remuneration and employee benefits, joined Dawson in 1988 and last year the group's commitment to training and training information supply was enhanced by its acquisition of *Maris-Net*, a database of training courses and materials, and of *Directory of Training*, a directory and magazine publisher specializing in information technology courses.

In the growing sector of library automation and information management systems, Dawson Technology has made a very strong start, making significant inroads into the British and continental European markets. The group has ended its previous arrangements with the US company *Data Trek* whereby that firm's products were agented in Britain, and has now developed its own library and information management software.

Other library services group activities - limited own-name publishing (including the successful *Book Auction Records* acquired in 1968) and book distribution for other publishers, advertising representation, and journal back issue supply - have been consolidated and strengthened, and all segments of the present business are now part of a clear-cut management structure, with closely defined targets.

### Commitment

There are three firm strands to the Dawson group's strategy: steady and planned expansion in Europe; growing activity and new product development in library and information systems management; and continuing improvement in customer services and relations.

It is encouraging to hear *Bryan Ingleby* talk

about the group's intentions in Europe. Whereas "Europe" in many British businesses means 'continental Europe', for Ingleby and his colleagues Europe begins at home. This commitment is reflected in the group's management structures, with core functions such as sales and marketing being led by Paris-based executives to whom British managers report regularly. Dawson in the UK is as much a part of "Dawson Europe" as are Dawson France in Villebon and the recently-established Dawson Iberica in Barcelona.

Bryan Ingleby joined Dawson eight years ago, having previously run his own computer consultancy and personal computer agency after some years in the insurance business. He first became chief executive of the library services group handling subscriptions, back issues, and library systems supply and in March 1990 was appointed group chief executive.

He views the future with guarded optimism. 'Our aim is to broaden our customer base and achieve even higher sales activity. We are anticipating 1992' he says, "and positioning ourselves for even greater growth in the European market". A considerable impetus to those aims will come, he emphasizes, from the continued growth of Dawson Technology and from an expansion of the company's "programme of sponsorship and collaboration with the library profession".

Dawson plans to concentrate significant resources in the design and marketing of library and information management systems, where UK and other European customers present an as yet virtually untapped market. With the widespread use and understanding of multi-user personal computer networks, he says, "there is considerable scope for the application of modern systems design technology to book supply".

This full-blooded embracing of computer-based information management and retrieval systems is reflected in the group's growing presence in the management and training information sector, where he sees a potentially large market. "We shall continue to diversify into the provision of information services, particularly in the areas of pay and benefits surveys and consultancy and those of training". He plans an early move into continental European markets and regards information systems as one of the more attractive areas.

This is not to neglect conventional book and journal supply and subscription worldwide, where the group's presence in Europe and North America facilitates the supply of materials in both directions.

"We really are set fair for the future", Bryan Ingleby says. "Our particular strength is that Dawson is the only library vendor offering a comprehensive service: journal subscriptions, book supply, and library automation".

### Customers

In these days of somewhat fickle customer loyalties, Dawson is determined to offer a service better than any other supplier's and this determination is reflected in its strong commitment to customer services.

Under UK Library Services Director Mike Lennie and customer services manager Sheila Mann, the introduction of networked computer facilities in the operational department of the subscription and books divisions has enhanced service quality. Mike Lennie, previously with Pergamen Press, sees his task in simple terms: his job is to help staff make the best use of their abilities and the considerable investment in their training, and continually to improve the level and scope of service to customers. In his view, two important features are the ability to "put ourselves in the customer's position" and the determination to "keep the customer informed at all times". Inhouse computer facilities ensure that these goals are being achieved daily.

One of the central developments is the amalgamation of all book distribution services at D and P Seabrook's warehouse at Stroud in Gloucestershire, offering both publishers and customers a streamlined and effective system. This is particularly valuable in the running of the book approval facilities and bibliographic information services offered by the group's Seabrook, Stevens and Brown, and Armstrong operations.

Sheila Mann has been with the group for twelve years. On its inception eight years ago, she managed the company's Consolidated Air Freight Service, whereby overseas customers' orders are gathered at Folkestone, securely packed, and airfreighted at regular intervals - removing the problems of pilferage and non-delivery to which overseas journal subscriptions supply is so prone.

She took up her present position in 1987 and has seen the work grow substantially, following the removal of all UK serials subscription services to Folkestone, and today oversees a considerable staff, including a journal research unit. "The importance of good customer relations cannot be overemphasized" she says, "and we are constantly introducing additional facilities which can only be of direct benefit to our customers". Good relationships with publishers are crucial too - a factor to which Sheila Mann gives full attention, even if she does find some publishers less easy to work with than others.

### **Technology**

The growth in the use of personal computers to handle text-based information and meet the operational needs of libraries and information centres represents perhaps the greatest opportunity for the group.

Dawson Technology works closely with librarians and computer specialists to provide suites or packages of integrated information management software. Beginning with a subscription management system (SMS), including full supplier and availability information, check-in and control safeguards, renewals, cost allocation and holding analyses, the available software was augmented by a dedicated inter-library loan system (AIM), jointly developed with Leicester Polytechnic and providing access to the British Library's Document Supply Centre at Boston Spa. In recent months, the software suite has been extended markedly, providing an open access strategic information system (OASIS), incorporating both SMS and AIM and introducing several new modules to handle acquisitions, cataloguing, and circulation. OASIS has the facility to work in several languages; records in the major European languages can be keyed in without the use of special keyboards and mixed in the same databases.

Under Shane Cleary, managing director of Dawson Technology, the division is also marketing an innovative full text retrieval system that allows users to index and recover a wide range of text-based information.

The OASIS Integrated Workstation is a combination of hardware (IBM compatible) and software designed specifically for library and

information centre tasks, and can operate as either a single personal computer or a station on a network. Shane Cleary says that the workstation is "designed to give all the hardware and software tools necessary to deal with the accessing, manipulation and outputting of text-based information", and the system offers access to a range of bibliographic resources, including the British National Bibliography, Whitaker's Bookbank, and other directories. Online access paths to a number of international information sources are also provided.

Shane Cleary joined Dawson in 1988 after running his own information and management systems company. In his view, the day is coming when "the library without automation will be the exception" and he sees every possibility that Dawson Technology will become the market leader in Europe in the provision of computer-based records and archive management systems. He recognizes that competition is heavy, and for that reason is proud of the most recent sale of the full OASIS system - to the United Nation's World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in Geneva - when Dawson won the business against strong competition.

### **Back Numbers and Rare Books**

Two of the most impressive sights at the Folkestone headquarters are the immense warehouse devoted to back issues of scholarly and specialist journals and the very much smaller, but still large, rare and antiquarian book stock. In both cases, the collections are extremely valuable, and mouth-watering for anyone with librarianship and bibliography in their veins.

Tom Hickey, director of back issues, presides over an amazingly eclectic collection of more than 5000 individual journal titles, in runs ranging from a single volume to complete sets. In addition to the purchase and sale of back issues on its own account, the department also handles back number sales for several journal publishers, including a variety of smaller and less active societies and learned bodies.

In one corner of the warehouse there is a room housing the rare books department's stock, mainly devoted to bibliography and the output of certain private presses and kindred publishers. With what he describes as "the most representative stock in

bibliography in Europe and perhaps the world" (with a resale value of around £350,000), book department manager Scott Brinded is also responsible for the production of Book Auction Records and his department distributes books for a number of publishers. At one time, Dawson developed a book publishing programme of its own, mainly in bibliography and local history, but that initiative gradually foundered after a few years.

### The Way Forward

John Cowley, marketing manager for the United Kingdom, is in no doubt about the group's way forward. "First, we have carried through a significant programme of rationalization and will continue to pursue that goal. But we have also brought about an attractive synergy through our recent acquisitions; now we can sell books and computer systems to our journals subscription customers, and vice versa".

Formerly chief librarian at Middlesex Polytechnic, he joined Dawson in 1985 as a library consultant and enjoys being part of a company with a strong European orientation. He views the future with optimism and cheerfulness and, like his group chief executive, sees Europe as the biggest opportunity for the group to grow. He points to France, where Dawson France has the lion's share of the subscriptions market, as well as to Barcelona where early signs are that Dawson Iberica will soon build up a significant presence. In other European countries, he recognizes, the establishment of new enterprises could pose major problems and the best way forward may be to purchase existing businesses.

The group continually encourages its customers to widen their experience and skills, and is keenly interested in promoting good relations with librarians. As part of its support for the European library profession, Dawson Europe mounts a biennial competition to encourage and support library and information initiatives in Europe, concentrating on work of originality and promise. The 1990 Innovation in Europe award of £1000, presented by Peter Brown during Britain's "Info 90" in September, was won by Sally Christopher, librarian at Norton College in Sheffield, for her project "Info English" designed to explore and

promote library and information links between the UK and the Basque region of Spain.

In nearly two centuries, Dawson has grown beyond recognition from the infant activities set up by William Dawson into a mature and profitable, yet still thrusting and energetic, business with its sights set firmly on wider horizons and new territories. Under its present management, and with its keen dedication to quality of service and continued improvement of product, the Dawson group face the future with confidence and determination.

*(This article first appeared in British Book News of November 1990 and is reproduced here by kind permission of the publishers, the British Council, with minor updating. Dave Fanning is a freelance writer and journalist.)*

02