

Export bar aims to protect archive of Scottish Enlightenment mastermind

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A temporary export bar has been placed on the historically significant archive of James Stirling.

- The archive catalogues revolutionary practices at James Stirling's Scots Mining Company that ushered in a new era of better conditions for workers
- The export bar will allow time for a UK archive or institution to acquire the collection for the nation

An export bar has been placed on an archive relating to James Stirling's radical management of the Leadhills mines to allow time for a UK buyer to be found.

The archive charts the development of one of the most extraordinary operations of the Industrial Revolution. In 1736 James Stirling took over a struggling mining business in South Lanarkshire, where miners lived and worked in poverty. Stirling created a programme to radically improve the living conditions of workers as well as their productivity. His success became a blueprint for future socially-minded industrialists like George Cadbury.

The large collection includes 51 bundles of letters between the Scots Mining Company, James Stirling and later company managers, as well as a 1738 book of orders relating to the direction of the company. One of James Stirling's copy books from 1736-37 is included, featuring his own mathematical notations. Further documents include a catalogue of the Leadhills Miners' Library from 1800 and a folder of twentieth century research papers relating to Stirling's role at Leadhills mine.

James Stirling was born into the Scottish landed aristocracy in 1692, during the reign of King William III and Queen Mary II. He was a talented mathematician, but his family's support for the Jacobite rivals to the English monarchy blocked his academic ambitions. Instead he became a mathematics teacher in London, ultimately meeting and befriending some of the greatest enlightenment thinkers of the day. By 1726, Isaac Newton proposed him for membership of the Royal Society.

The radical changes James Stirling brought to the Leadhills mines site began with cuts to working hours from 72 to 40 per week and the introduction of team leaders, who would negotiate with managers over the pay for each task, thus giving workers more ownership and incentivisation for their labour. Families were supported to build their own cottages, with patches set aside for crops or livestock. A social insurance scheme for the sick and elderly was established, along with a school, church and library - which remains the oldest subscription library in the UK today.

Culture Minister, Baroness Twycross said:

In the eighteenth century it was radical to believe that better conditions would improve the productivity of workers. James Stirling's reforms were a step towards the progression of workers' rights and modern social security.

As key historical sources of Britain's industrial and social history, it's important that these documents remain available for research. It is excellent that James Stirling's model village survives at Leadhills and I hope this archive can remain accessible to the public too.

Committee member, Caroline Shenton said:

James Stirling was an extraordinary 18th century employer, creating for his mineworkers at Leadhills one of the first, if not the first, model industrial settlement in Great Britain. The archive of letters he left behind describing his methods and progressive approach at Leadhills in the best traditions of the Scottish Enlightenment is hugely significant and endlessly fascinating. It would be a great tragedy if they were to leave the country, and so I very much hope that a suitable home can be found for them in a UK public institution.

This is the sixth temporary export bar issued since the start of the year by the Government. It follows attempts to protect a bust of John Gordon of Invergordon; Claude Lorrain's Landscape with Rural Dance; Shock Dog by Anne Seymour Damer; a sculpture of two putti by Michael Rysbrack; and Howard Hodgkin's Mrs Acton in Delhi.

The Minister's decision follows the advice of the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (RCEWA).

The Committee made its recommendation on the basis that the archive met the first and third Waverley criteria for its outstanding connection with our history and national life and its outstanding significance to the study of local, regional, and pioneering social and industrial history of Scotland.

The decision on the export licence application for the archive will be deferred for a period ending on 19 June 2026 inclusive. At the end of the first deferral period owners will have a consideration period of 15 Business Days to consider any offer(s) to purchase the archive at the recommended price of £24,928 (inclusive of VAT of £988 which can be reclaimed by an eligible institution). The second deferral period will commence following the signing of an Option Agreement and will last for three months.

Notes to editors:

1. Organisations or individuals interested in purchasing the archive should contact the RCEWA on 02072680534 or rcewa@artscouncil.org.uk.
2. Details of the ITEM are as follows: A copy book (1736-1737) containing James Stirling's outgoing letters to the directors as manager of the mine, plus some of his mathematical notes; A 1738 book of orders and instructions from the directors of the company, plus a folder of related orders and other papers; 51 bundles of letters to James and later Archibald Stirling from the company, covering the period from 1736 to 1801; Further miscellaneous documents, including a catalogue of the Leadhills Miners' Library (1800) and a folder of twentieth century research papers relating to Stirling's role at Leadhills.
3. Provenance: By direct descent from James Stirling (1692-1770) to the current seller.
4. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest is an independent body, serviced by Arts Council England (ACE), which advises the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on whether a cultural object, intended for export, is of

national importance under specified criteria.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/export-bar-aims-to-protect-archive-of-scottish-enlightenment-mastermind>