

2009 IS THE 90TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BRITISH CHAMBER OF COMMERCE IN GERMANY

The year 2009 marks the 90th anniversary of the first establishment of the BCCG.

In 1919, the first British chamber was founded in Cologne as the "British Chamber of Commerce, Cologne", on 27 June, as authorised by the military authorities in the then occupied territories.

In the October 1919 issue of the first postwar "Mitteilungen der Handelskammer zu Köln", the foreign chambers were listed: the American Chamber in Berlin, the British Chamber in Cologne and the Netherland Chamber in Frankfurt. The British Chamber had its offices for several years at Hohe Strasse 100. The chamber established the Anglo-German Commercial Review as its regular publication. The object of the Chamber was "to assist in the development of trade between the British Empire and Germany".

During the economic turmoil of 1927 on, the chamber faded away, and as a British company, official British documents could not be delivered to its former address from 1931. In December 1932, the Board of Trade dissolved the Chamber in Cologne.

A second British chamber with a somewhat different name – "British Board of Commerce" – was founded on 17 February 1925, in Hamburg and took its first office address at Jungfernstieg 24, later to move to Chilehaus, and in 1930 to the Cunard Haus, Neuer Jungfernstieg 5. The inauguration banquet took place in the presence of Ambassador Lord D'Abernon and Dr Petersen, the Bürgermeister of Hamburg. Between 1935 and 1938 the Board was dissolved; no exact date can be established other than a last letter of its secretary, dated 30 December 1935.

After World War II, it was not until 1960 that the successor organisation was established in Bonn. The reason for the delay was, first of all, the economic chaos after the war, and second, the absence of British investment activity and restrictions by the military government. British concerns with old-established investment interests in Germany set up a lobby: the Committee of British Industrial Interests in Western Germany. From the mid 1950s, foreign firms were encouraged to re-invest in their German subsidiaries. After preparations by the representative of the Federation of British Industry in Cologne and the British Embassy, the Embassy announced in November 1959 the formation of a consultative body of British businessmen in Germany.

On 14 October 1960, at its inaugural AGM, the Commercial Secretary of the British Embassy, R. J. Jacques, and Joe Parr, assistant to the FBI Representative, with the support of the National Union of Manufacturers, established the British Trade Council in Germany, later to be named British Chamber of Commerce in Germany. The first honorary president – ex officio – was HM Ambassador Sir Christopher Steel, GCMG MVO.

The BTC offered membership to British and German individuals and firms representing British business interests, which could further these in the Federal Republic of Germany and West Berlin.

In contrast to many British chambers overseas, Germany had no dominant business centre. But by 1968, regional groups were established in Frankfurt, Hamburg, Stuttgart and Düsseldorf, as well as in Berlin and Munich in 1973, and in the UK in 1981. The Embassy played a major role in financing secretarial and other work, and membership firms, as well as acting vice-presidents and committee members, took over other tasks. Annual membership subscriptions started initially in 1965, and by 1970 membership had risen to over 270.

In 1970, the UK began to negotiate its entry in the EEC, and a German Chamber of Commerce was formed in London. In 1971, the BTC's statutes were changed to also admit German firms. In 1975, the name was changed to the British-German Trade Council, to reflect the change to a genuine British-German trade organisation, promoting trade in both directions.

In 1976, the BGTC appointed Joe F. Parr as first Director General. This full-time employment reflected the need to implement the strategy for BGTC "The Way Ahead", to become a more dynamic and streamlined professional organisation. Simultaneously, the financing of the organisation had become self-reliant, obtaining income from membership subscriptions and advertising.

During the 1980s, after the name was changed to the British Chamber of Commerce in Germany e.V., the chamber grew to over 800 members. Growth later subsided, due to economic crises such as the 1987 stock market crash, and subsequent turmoils in the early 1990s. Membership was lost to a significant degree after 2001 to a lower level of around 500 by mid 2003.

By 2002, the board had elected a new president, Norbert Strohschen, following Helmut Buddenberg's long presidency. It had become clear that a major restructuring of the chamber was needed in order to meet today's and future challenges. After the appointment of the new director, Andreas Meyer-Schwickerath, in August 2003, the chamber took on the task of developing a new strategy.

With the support of one of our new sustaining members, Ernst & Young AG, the chamber was able to establish a strategy within a few months. The BCCG Board & Council cooperated with the management team on various measures in order to jointly achieve the goals set therein. Called "Road to the Future", the strategy resulted in a significant increase in membership and economic sustainability. For the next five years until today, the strategy was successfully implemented and the goals achieved, such as doubling membership and building up a sound financial basis.

Today, we can say the BCCG is stronger than ever, and our goals continue to be developed in order to enhance the services and networking opportunities for members and friends of the chamber. As a true bilateral organisation, the BCCG Board & Council and the Regional Committees are looking forward to interesting years before reaching its 100th birthday 2019.

Berlin/Cologne, March 2009

Norbert Strohschen, President
Andreas Meyer-Schwickerath, Director