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Durrants

Slow struggle to clear the smokescreen

Providing public access to British American Tobacco's internal workings has been no easy task, writes Lisa Urquhart

It could be one of a thousand anonymous industrial estates tacked carelessly on to the outskirts of town, but the unfortunately named Slyfield estate in Guildford is home to the secrets of British American Tobacco's internal workings and policies.

Alive with security cameras, the plain two-storey glass and concrete building holds an estimated 8m internal pages and memos stretching all the way from the 1950s to 1995.

The welcome for the few curious visitors is cordial but controlled. There is no dropping in just to look at the files. Appointments must be booked in advance.

On arriving, visitors are carefully escorted into a room that has a two-way mirror at one end, complete with a person sitting behind it. To add further discomfort, three security cameras are permanently trained on the users of the archive.

The archive itself is hard to search, as the 41,000 files are not organised in any systematic way and are often catalogued according to title rather than any meaningful

subject matter.

Once files are requested from a database they are brought up in boxes and have to be sifted by hand. Copying files is not permitted, and instead users have to make requests, which BAT says takes between four and six weeks.

Kelley Lee, senior lecturer at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said it was this difficulty in using the archive that provided the impetus for the Guildford Archiving Project. GAP is a joint project between the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the University of California, San Francisco and the Mayo Clinic, a medical research charity.

It was set up in 1999 to provide the public with access to the documents in BAT's Guildford depository.

"It was such an important resource that the public needed to see, and we were aware that it was only available for 10 years [the depository is scheduled to close in 2009]," Ms Lee said.

BAT was originally asked to provide public access to the archive in 1998 until

2009, following a ruling by the state of Minnesota as part of a court judgment to recover costs the state had spent on tobacco-related diseases.

But the archive was not opened until 1999 after BAT spent a year reviewing the documents for privilege.

The scanning technique GAP has employed now means that users are able to search topics by word from all of the available documents, rather than having to read entire files.

"Before, if you really wanted a comprehensive search on a topic you would have to search all 8m pages. Now you can't hide anything in there, and that is one really important advance," said Ms Lee.

So far, GAP has managed to scan 1m of the estimated 8m pages of the archive, and is adding 40,000 pages a week. Most of the scanning has been carried out in India to save costs.

One of the reasons the process has taken so long, GAP says, is the speed of access that BAT has allowed. GAP complains that it has taken up to a year to get docu-

ments.

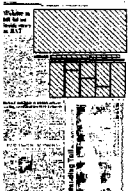
Another complaint has been that a number of documents have not been released because of BAT claiming legal privilege.

GAP now estimates that all the documents will have been received by October next year at the latest and the final online archive will be complete by October 2006.

At present, the archive goes up to only 1995, but the group is planning to add new documents from Minnesota from fresh litigation.

GAP first put in funding proposals for the archive in 1999. It was given a significant boost by a £1m donation from the Wellcome Trust. But, given that BAT charges 10p for copies of individual pages, this just about secured the archive. Another donor was the Flight Attendant Medical Research Institute, which gave \$1m.

After almost five years of labour, Ms Lee believes the real work has just begun. The group intends to spend the next few years looking at BAT's activities in 20 countries, including China, the former Soviet Union and Africa. "There is a lot coming out, and this is only the beginning," she says.



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Smouldering: Kirk Douglas enjoys a cigarette in the 1951 film 'Ace in the Hole'. Anti-tobacco groups say such on-screen images help perpetuate the idea that smoking is glamorous

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