

Sheffield Community Heritage Forum Talk CWS 150 Years

2013 celebrates the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Co-operative Wholesale Society – which is now, of course, The Co-operative Group. I have provided some information about the National Co-operative Archive and the Rochdale Pioneers Museum on Toad Lane. Have a look at them, and if you are interested in co-operative studies, let me know if I can answer any questions for you.

Just to get an idea of how the Co-operative Movement began, we need to have a look at the lives of ordinary men and women workers during the early days of the industrial revolution. I have no wish to spell it out, suffice to say that it was a scene of appalling poverty, where working people had no rights, no power, no property. Working class people were effectively owned by the industrialists.

The textile workers of Lancashire and Yorkshire were very badly abused. Naturally, working people made valiant attempts to improve their situation. They tried forming trades unions. But their situation was too desperate, and the opposition too strong. Any attempt to improve their situation through strikes were easily smashed.

Chartism was a movement taken up by the masses of people. It was a movement to petition parliament for basic democratic rights for working men.

The peoples charter of 1830 advocated;

- an annual parliament
- payment of M.P.s
- equal electoral divisions
- universal male suffrage
- vote by secret ballot
- abolition of the property qualification for M.P.s

Despite the petition with thousands of signatures going to parliament, the M.P.s, all wealthy land owners and industrialists, threw it out, leaving no hope for the ordinary man and woman.

People had no representation and no political rights.

All that was left was collective self help.

It was by people coming together to pool what little they had and organising the necessities of life free from the exploitation of profiteers, that the Co-operative movement began.

Here again there were many failures. But 1844 marks a turning point. That is the year when, on 21st December the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society opened their first shop at 31 Toad Lane Rochdale with £28 collected from the members at a few pence per week towards their one pound share (a share in the Co-op is still £1 deducted from the new members first share of the profits). I will not dwell on the Rochdale Pioneers because their story is well documented. You might like to see the film 'The Rochdale Pioneers' made by the Co-operative Youth Film Academy, released last year for the United Nations International Year of Co-operatives 2012, and commissioned by the Co-operative Group. Or see some of the material which I have provided. The important thing to note is that the Pioneers put education at the heart of the co-operative and wrote education into the co-operative aims and principles. Their store had a reading room and a library upstairs. Newspapers and books were too expensive for working people to buy, so this was an opportunity for members to become informed. There were also regular lectures and classes held above the store. At that time virtually all co-op stores had reading rooms. The values such as education still play an important part in the life of the Co-operative Movement.

The members benefited by the quarterly 'divi' (a share of the surplus made by the co-operative in proportion to how much the member spent with the Society). Instead of getting into debt, members were beginning to manage their money much better. And despite it being illegal at the time, women had their own accounts, and co-op societies ensured that their share was returned to them.

The Pioneers also enthusiastically supported and advised others who wanted to set up co-operatives. They had a model that worked and sound values and principles which they could share. In turn other co-operatives supported new co-operatives and so the movement grew rapidly with small co-op societies providing the necessities of life traded fairly for the benefit of the members.

Thus, in 1847, only three years after the opening of the Pioneers store in Toad Lane, there were co-op societies in nearby Bacup, Todmorden, Leigh, Salford, Palidom and Middleton. By 1900 there were 1,439 co-op societies in Britain.

By 1860 it was becoming clear that a federal society was required which could serve the growing co-operative movement. A co-operative wholesale society was proposed in which co-operative societies would be members. And here we get to the date; 1863 – the founding of the Co-operative Wholesale Society. (It was originally the 'North of England Co-operative Wholesale Industrial and Provident Society Limited'. The Scottish CWS was formed in 1868 and in due course merged with the CWS).

The CWS became wholesaler, manufacturer, importer, farmer, banker and

insurance provider to the Co-operative Movement. It was a major player in the development of the Manchester Ship Canal and owned ocean going vessels for the importation of goods.

In 1934, the CWS launched a Retail Society with the purpose of opening stores where co-operatives were under represented and taking over failed societies to bring them back into viability. This was known as Co-operative Retail Services (CRS).

In the year 2000 the CWS and CRS merged to form The Co-operative Group.

The Co-operative movement has been well served with newspapers over the years.

- 1828 – 1830 The Co-operator. A monthly periodical produced by Dr. William King which sold at a penny each and reached a circulation of 12,000 copies. It was an influential instructional manual of practical co-operative philosophy.
- Another newspaper also called The Co-operator was published by the Manchester & Salford Co-operative Society under the editorship of Henry Pitman (brother of Isaac, inventor of shorthand). This was a national newspaper and began in 1860 and lasted for about ten years.
- In 1871, the Co-operative Congress supported the establishment of a national newspaper to serve the Co-operative Movement. And on 2nd September 1871 The Co-operative News was born. Today it is the oldest democratically owned newspaper in the world and comes out fortnightly.

Co-operative News is published by Co-operative Press a readers co-op. Any reader of the News can become a member.

- Co-operative Press has published a number of other titles over the years e.g. Reynolds News (a Sunday newspaper), Scottish Co-operator, Our Circle (Monthly), Woman's Outlook (Fortnightly), The Millgate (the Movements general interest magazine). All this to inform and support co-operative members.

The Co-operative Movement has been served well by the Co-operative Union since its establishment in 1870 (known initially as the Co-operative Central Board and now as Co-operatives UK). Out of this national umbrella body comes

- the Co-operative Party (the political wing). (est. 1917).
- The Co-operative College (est. 1919) which manages; The Co-operative Heritage Trust, that is to say The National Co-operative Archive and The Rochdale Pioneers Museum. (The Pioneers left the premises in 1867 and moved into a large department store

further up the road).

It was not until the 1920's that 31 Toad Lane came back into the Co-operative Movement. The Co-operative Union and the CWS drew up plans to restore the building to its original appearance and the shop was officially opened as a museum for the Co-operative Movement in 1931). It receives funding from the Co-operative Group.

The Co-operative Movement in Sheffield

Sheffield Improved Industrial & Provident Society. Est. 1865

Central stores – Snig Hill and Trippett Lane

Ecclesall Society. Est. 1874.

These two societies amalgamated in 1907 to form the Sheffield & Ecclesall Co-operative Society, which later merged with Yorkshire Co-operatives and United Co-operatives.

Brightside & Carbrook Co-operative Society. Est. 1868

Changed name to Sheffield Co-operative Society in 1985

Transferred engagements to United Co-operatives in 2006

United Co-operatives transferred engagements to the Co-operative Group in 2007.

In the 1960's B&C absorbed the following Co-operative Societies;
Woodhouse, Oughtibridge, Stocksbridge, Killamarsh, and in 1976, Tideswell.
And in 1968, S&E absorbed Bakewell Society.

From The Sheffield Yearbook of 1925.

Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society Limited

Registered office; Kirkbridge Road, Attercliffe

37 Branches. Membership 35,676. Share capital £418,823. Annual turnover £990,245.

OBJECTS OF THE SOCIETY

To produce and distribute goods that are made under proper and duly recognised Trade Union conditions of labour.

To promote organisation for the Social Advancement and better Economic Conditions of its Members by the medium of Conferences, Classes, Lantern Lectures and other propaganda means of social intercourse.

To oppose and renounce the evils of Competitive Trading, by securing for the workers immunity against the tyranny of sweated labour, and thus imparting

thereto healthier and happier surroundings.

To divide Half-Yearly the surplus left, after due observance of the foregoing conditions amongst the members in proportion to their purchases and to encourage a policy of thrift and Self-help by the usual employment of members accumulated Dividends and Home-saving Deposits in the Societies operations.

EVERY MEMBER ASSURED FREE

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION. NO PREMIUMS.

Remember that your HUSBAND or your WIFE is assured under this Scheme.

Sheffield Productive Societies

Co-operative Filesmiths Society. Registered 19th Feb 1866 established by the Filesmiths Union to find employment for members unable to obtain work elsewhere. By 1821 there were 25 members with £1,250 share capital.

Sheffield Engineering Society. Formed 1873. In 1874 the first year of trade there were 11 members and £778 of share capital.

Sheffield Cutlery Co-operative Manufacturing Society. Also formed in 1873. By 1874 it had 34 members, £67 share capital. Trade was done with Co-operative Societies. Taken over by the CWS in 1916. Produced cutlery and garden tools under the Unity brand name. A new factory was opened in 1937.

A Sheffield society of miners amalgamated with South Yorkshire Mining Co-operative Society (formed at Masborough in 1873).

They issued shares at £1 each and began discussions with mine owners about various coalfields. At the end of 1874 with a membership of 334 including 20 co-operative societies they negotiated a lease on 300 acres of High Hazel seam. Coal markets entered a depression and the society went into liquidation before commencing trade – all shareholders received 19s 6d in the £.

Norton Cutlery Society. Reg. 3rd November 1916.

CWS took over S&E premises in Trippett Lane for a shirt making factory. By 1937 they were producing;

- Douglas – Flannelette Pyjamas
- Hercules – Oxford Shirts
- Jarrow – Union Shirts, Weekend Sports Shirts
- Sheffield – Oxford Shirts

- Victory – Flannelette Shirts
- Waterford – Semi-Stiff Shirts
- Waterloo – Semi-Stiff Shirts

Brightside & Carbrook Co-operative Society

Collective self help was alive and well in the 1860's in Sheffield. Workers in the industrial East End were becoming more literate and were becoming actively involved in the Mechanics Institute and Library and the Working Men's Clubs. These clubs were a meeting place for enquiring minds to listen to and debate the subjects of the day.

Such were the men of the blacksmiths shop of Wm Jessop & Sons Ltd., who one night met in the School Room, Dean Street, Brightside and the subject of the working men's co-operative at Rochdale cropped up.

No one could explain until one member said that he noticed the word 'Co-operative' on a clock over a shop at Kilnhurst. A deputation went over and the secretary of Kilnhurst Co-operative, Mr Charles Holroyd, not only explained the principles behind this form of trading, but came over to Brightside and gave a talk to the club members on how to start a similar co-operative in Brightside and Attercliffe. The result was that a collection was taken and the proceeds started what became Brightside & Carbrook Co-operative Society.

This story illustrates three important features of the Co-operative Movement. First, collective self help and education, which led to seeking out knowledge of the co-operative principles.

Second, the willingness of one co-operative society to help others to start a co-operative. You will remember that the success of the Movement was dependent on mutual support and help between co-operatives. The Rochdale Pioneers gave that lead. Isolation will always be the downfall of working class movements, solidarity, the strength.

The support given by the Kilnhurst Society was exemplary.

And third, that by people pooling resources for a common objective, a great commonwealth can be built up for the benefit of all if it is based on co-operative principles. Present day examples of this in Sheffield are the community shares of Portland Works, where people contributed collectively to save a valued place of small industry and craft from being closed down by a developer. This is now a co-operative owned by the community.

Or Sheffield Renewables, a share offer has led to a project which will help the community to produce renewable energy, another innovative co-operative.

Sheffield Castle

Just after the First World War, Brightside & Carbrook Co-operative Society bought the site of Sheffield Castle on Exchange Street / Waingate.

Before building work took place they commissioned an archaeological survey of the site, led by a man called Armstrong. The design of the building was modified to accommodate the remains of the castle. In 1929 the magnificent City Stores was opened on the castle site. A souvenir booklet was produced to celebrate the opening of this department store. The City Stores only lasted for eleven years. It was destroyed by enemy action on the night of the 12th December 1940 in the Sheffield blitz.

B&C and the Sheffield City Council came to an agreement to swap the site of the castle and a site on Angel Street across the road. In due course a temporary single storey department store was built on Angel Street, followed by the building of Castle House which was opened in 1964.

The board of the B&C Co-operative Society commissioned a painting of Sheffield Castle as it might have looked and the painter was Kenneth Steel. This magnificent oil painting was hung in the boardroom in Castle House until the Co-operative Group sold Castle House in 2009. The painting was taken to Manchester to be looked after safely by the Co-operative.

The good news is that the Co-operative has loaned the picture to Green Estate and it will be put on display at the Sheffield Manor Lodge. Part of Sheffield heritage has been returned to the City.

What then is the Co-operative legacy in the City of Sheffield?

I have already mentioned a couple of examples of the new wave of Co-operatives in the City, Portland Works and Sheffield Renewables, but there are many more, see www.sheffield.coop

There is the Sheffield Credit Union, a financial co-operative owned by, and for the benefit of, the members, to help with money management, savings and loans at reasonable terms.

There is the direct legacy of the CWS, the Co-operative Group, which offers many services such as the Co-operative Bank and Insurance and Legal Services, Food stores, Pharmacies and Co-operative Funeralcare. And, of course, Co-operative Farms, which produce supplies to the stores.

All of this is under the collective ownership of the members who can play a part in the life of the Society and receive the benefits of the successes of the Society. It is the customer members, communities and the wider Society who are the beneficiaries not faceless speculators playing the stock market.

Just one more thing. It is a long time since anyone wrote a history of the CWS. So the Co-operative Group has commissioned historians from the two Universities in Liverpool to write a new history of the CWS. They have been given full access to the Co-operative Group historic papers and the National Co-operative Archive. This book will be published by Oxford University Press and will be available later this year, the 150th anniversary of the CWS.

Steve Thompson
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