# Co-operative Ideas and Experiments in Sheffield 1790 – 1850
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# Co-operative Schemes in the Era of mid-Victorian Prosperity 1850 – 1875

**By John Baxter**

Working people had been involved in co-operative schemes for over sixty years before the formation of the societies of the 1860s and early 1870s which came together to produce the modern Sheffield and Ecclesall and Brightside and Carbrook Societies. The following article aims to present the important episodes in local co-operative “pre-history” to help people working for the modern movement find among their “roots” inspiration and extra pride, for their part in building a progressive system of production and distribution. Perhaps it may also serve to make the wider co-operative membership and consumers appreciate the principles of common ownership and distribution of profit.

Setting the story of the 1790s, co-operatives in coal, corn, milk, and boot manufacture and distribution, the 1830s and 1840s produce co-ops involving Owenites, Trade Unionists, and Chartists, and the Rochdale inspired groups of the 1850s and 1860s, against a background of Sheffield’s industrial and social development may also add to the understanding of the making of our city in the industrial revolution.

## Sheffield in the 1790s: The Jacobin City

During the 1790s, Sheffield's population grew from 40,000 to 45,000 (more than twenty times this number live in the modern city). Most of these people were crammed into the warren of workshops and tenements of the central township. Most people owed their living to the fortunes of the cutlery trades and worked in small workshops under control of the merchants or factors to whose warehouses finished work was taken for payment. A few larger workshops and some small factories had begun to appear with the arrival of the silver and silver-plate trade. A few people worked in local iron foundries and in the small number of local pits.

For the first time ever working people began to organise to demand their political rights during the 1790s. The Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information was formed in 1791 and soon had 2,000 members formed by an alliance of the small shopkeeper, small master, and wage-earning journeymen classes. Four years of campaigning through mass meetings and petitions failed to win one-man, one-vote, and still only a twentieth of the population had the right to vote. All the same, working people began to organise more successfully to protect their living standards.

The early 1790s saw the start of war with France which hit local industry. These were times of poor harvests and shortages of food and rapid inflation in the market place. In the worst instances crowds gathered in the market and seized food and re-sold it at a fair price. The magistrates called such events "riots" and punished ringleaders with transportation. Some workers used their friendly, benefit, or sick clubs to help them

through such times. In some instances the clubs were secret trade unions and able, despite the harsh legal bans on trade unions, to organise strikes. There were over fifty such clubs in Sheffield in the 1700s. Many were just self-help insurance societies for the small master and shopkeeper and even more “respectable” classes. Perhaps a dozen or more were trade union bodies. It was these that gave a lead in forming the first Sheffield co-operatives.

## The First Co-operatives

There is one mention of several sick or friendly clubs forming a common fund to run a coal mine in 1793. The aim was to break the monopoly of the Duke of Norfolk whose pits, including the Ponds Pit under the modern bus station, produced expensive coal. Nothing can be discovered about the pit and its backers but it is worth noticing in passing that the clubs organising in this way probably had been involved in united action for the first time in the 1780s when they helped the journeymen’s campaign against the merchants and larger masters trying to abolish the protective powers of the Cutler’s Company. In 1795 there is a mention of the Dore House pit at Handsworth being run as a sick club backed co-operative pit providing the town with cheap coal. This was the year of the most extensive co-operative venture – the Club Corn Mill.

The year 1795 was one of great turmoil in Sheffield. The price of bread flour soared to between 5s6d (27p) and 6s (30p) a stone, at a time when the average cutler, if lucky enough to be in work, was taking home 14s – 15s (70-75p) a week. The threat of “riots” with women wandering the streets carrying empty meal

sacks tied with black ribbons (threatening death) forced the authorities to open a subscription to buy flour and sell it at lower prices. The organised section of the working class through its sick clubs decided to act to provide cheaper bread other than on the basis of charity.

In August, led by the Mason's Society, several clubs met to discuss proposals for raising a common fund to build and operate a co-operative corn mill to provide members with bread flour at cost price. A scheme was planned and a fund set up and on 5 November the first brick was laid at Hill Foot. A huge procession formed up on Lady's Bridge with bands and banners from forty-two clubs. Eyewitnesses claimed 20,000 people turned out to watch the procession march through the town to the site of the mill. Among the speakers was Edward Oakes, a worker from the silver plate trade, who had been active in the political struggles of the Constitutional Society. Several of the clubs and leading lights represented the towns' trade unions and we can see the early "labour movement" represented at the ceremony.

There is little information surviving about the success of the scheme. It appears that the clubs involved set up retail stores to sell the cheep produce to the members but that in several instances bad management took place. In 1811 the mill and land was sold off to a private firm. Some time between 1795 and 1811 problems had set in. All the same, the scale of the operation was remarkable and also spread to products like boots, milk, and coal. Of these, the coal pits were more successful and for a while worried the Duke of Norfolk, whose monopoly was temporarily broken.

**Co-operatives in the 1830s and 1840s**

From 1811, when the town's population was around 50,000, to 1830, when it had nearly doubled to 90,000, there were no signs of co-operative experimentation. These were years of great hardship, particularly after the French Wars ended in 1815. They were years when the political and industrial struggles of working people continued, the one to fight for political rights and the other to defend living standards. The Union and Hampden Clubs of 18-16 and the Paine Club and sellers of the forbidden "unstamped" radical papers of the 1820s carried on the political struggle.

The trade unions, many coming out into the open when the harsh Combination Laws were partly repeated in the middle 1830s, carried on industrial struggle. The late 1820s, with great hardship experienced, saw a revival of ideas on co-operative production. In Barnsley a weavers' co-op had appeared in 1822, employing the out-of-work on the basis of a fund raised among the Weavers Union members. In 1829, another co-operative was formed. Sheffield followed suit with the forming of a "Sheffield First" Society in January 1830, and a "Sheffield Second" in April.

## Two Societies

Details concerning the two Sheffield Societies is provided by returns to the two Co-operative Congresses held in 1832. The third Congress, held in London in April 1832, shows that the "First Society" had 63 members, £110 in funds and had members manufacturing razors, scissors, and files. It also had a small library but did not have a school as yet. The "Second Society" had 183 members, some also manufacturing cutlery wares. It had £300 in funds. It had neither a library nor a school and like the "First Society" had not yet discussed the

scheme of “labour exchanges” advocated by Owen to link up various producer co-ops who would then exchange services and “labour notes” and build up a cash-free alternative economy.

The co-operative press – the paper *The Crisis* and *Lancashire and Yorkshire Co-operator* provide a few details on the activities of the Sheffield groups, including a meeting in the Music Hall in June 1832 when a co-operative band played before visiting speakers spoke. However short-lived these societies were and however small, they were genuine attempts at building alternative communities and changing the wider society by example.

At the Forth Congress held in Liverpool in October 1832, the two societies were again represented. Their memberships had fallen to 60 and 90 members and their funds stood at £120 and £150 respectively. By this stage they had both discussed the “labour exchange” principle and sent wares for exchange at the “labour bazaar”. The societies were also linked to the wholesale organisation, the North West of England United Co-operative Company.

## The Hall of Science

There is no mention of Sheffield at the later Congresses held up to 1835 when the national movement collapsed. Some of the Sheffielders may have been involved in various groups Robert Owen led through the 1830s. In the early 1830s Owen had been involved in building general trade unions embracing a range of trades and pointing out the merit of co-operative production as an alternative to capitalism. Some Sheffield trades were linked to this but when the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union collapsed interest

waned. Owen led more exclusive and intellectual elements in the later 1830s and 1840s. A branch of his Universal Community Society built the Hall of Science which gave people a place for free debate in the late 1830s. This group also preached co-operation, which they described as “socialism”, through the late 1830s and into the 1840s. It was, however, only when industrially organised workers in trade unions adopted the ideas that there was any consequence.

## Co-operative Ventures in Chartist Times

In 1837 the town’s first Chartist group appeared – the Sheffield Working Men’s Association. This led a mass campaign for political rights, for the demands of the 1790s had still not been met. For a while many of the 30-odd trade unions gave open support. The Sheffield working class was on the move under the Chartist banner. When, in 1839, the Chartist national petition to Parliament was turned down, the Chartists turned to using what economic weapons they had. One of these as to direct members and supporters to “deal exclusively” with tradespeople friendly to the cause. During the autumn of 1839, when the “exclusive dealing” was at its height, the Chartists met in their Fig Tree Lane headquarters to discuss co-operative production and retailing. Other groups of Chartists particularly in Newcastle had successfully sold foodstuffs bought out of common stock and put many traders out of business. At the same time the repression the Chartists faced forced them to arm to defend themselves and it was this tactic that was put into use in the winter of 1839-40.
The economic hardships of the early 1840s drained away the funds of trade unions paying out vast sums to the hundreds of men “on the box” i.e. unemployed. In 1843 the joiners’ tool and brace and bit trade acquired

some land to set its own unemployed to work. This was the only example of “spade husbandry” schemes much talked about in Chartist, Owenite, and trade union circles in the early and middle 1840s. Such schemes were intended to take men off the labour market and stop them being used as a pool of cheap labour by the parish workhouse masters in collaboration with local employers. In 1844, after the colliers’ strike, one section of the large workforce of the Sheffield Coal Company were not taken on by the firm and they set up a co-operative at Greenhill. Soon after, many of the trade unions in the City became involved with a national trade union federation – the National Association of United Trades for the Protection of Labour. Sheffield sent representatives to a “Labour Parliament” which sat for a short while and discussed among other things co-operative workshops. No practical results followed except that in the severe economic crisis of 1847-8 at least five trade unions bought or leased land to set their unemployed to work. The Edge Tool Grinders had a 70 acre farm at Wincobank, the Britannia Metalsmiths a 12 acre farm on Gleadless Common, the Pen Blade Grinders had 8 acres, the File Hardeners 4 acres, and the Scissors Forgers a similar small farm. In addition the Scissors Forgers used their funds to buy up the manufactured wares of their members and stockpiled them at their own warehouses to the tune of £7,000 worth of rough scissors.

The trade union solution to surplus labour – to acquire land and set the unemployed to work – was closer to co-operative principles than the Chartist Land Plan which aimed to set people up on small peasant plots of land. The Land Plan was very popular and had, when wound up in the early 1850s, over 600 Sheffield subscribers. Set against the problems of

unemployment, both seasonal and long-term, such schemes made little inroads in what was a city with well over 130,000 inhabitants by 1850.

## Mid-Victorian Prosperity

The twenty-five years which saw the birth of the modern steel dominated city were years of tremendous expansion with the population almost doubling from 130,000 to 250,000. The prosperity was unevenly divided and there were some bad years for workers in cutlery, tools, and older established light trades and also the new “heavy” trades developing at the east end of the city. Working people temporarily gave up the fight for political rights although the 1867 Reform Act gave many skilled and better off industrial workers the vote. Through the trade unions, a trades council, and friendly and sick clubs, the organised working class fought to improve its lot in good times and to hold its gains in bad times. Co-operative schemes continued to play a part in this struggle.

Producer Co-operatives

The improvement in trade in the early 1850s meant that even the lowest and least organisable trades could be unionised. The spring knife workers established a co-operative store to provide cheap food for their members as part of their union activity in 1851. A co-operative store was opened in the Woodhouse area run for the locals in the mid-1850s, and a mid-1950s trade directory lists a Saw Handle Makers warehouse, suggesting another trade union employing its own members.

The story of co-operative ventures in the 1860s and early 1870s becomes more complicated with the growth of organisations and their collapse and later re-organisation. There were several trade union producer co-operatives. Pollard's book "History of Labour in Sheffield" notes the fact that at various times the saw grinders, razor grinders, scale pressers, and saw handle makers unions acquired tools and set their unemployed to work in short-term co-operative ventures. Among the powerful filesmiths, the spring knife, and scissor trades, longer-lasting and self supporting co-ops were founded. A "Co-operative Filesmiths" Society was begun in 1861 to help strikers and survived into the 1870s. Three branches of the spring knife trade combined in 1866 in a Cutlery Co-operative Production Society and employed up to 100 men through periods of trade depression. A similar scissor trade co-operative was begun in 1873.

Retail Co-operatives

The ups and downs of the retail societies set up in the 1860s and early 1870s are difficult to follow, but an examination of local trade directories, co-operative directories, reports in the national co-operative monthly *The Co-operator* and later histories of local societies help to sort out details. The societies formed followed the successful Rochdale model, raising their capital on a £1 share basis raised by members' twopenny (1p) weekly dues. A small amount of interest was paid to members on their share capital and they also received full dividend payouts on purchases. Non-members could trade at the shops but only got half the dividend.

An 1860 Sheffield trades directory listed a "Co-operative Stores (Equitable Pioneers)" at 66 Queen Street. A directory of 1861 noted the same store and

another at 32 Scotland Street. At the same time stores were starting at Stocksbridge (Band of Hope Industrial Co-operative Society), Kilnhurst, and High Green. The Sheffield Equitable Co-operative and Industrial Society moved to 127 Devonshire Street during 1861, probably as part of a re-organisation. It celebrated its early success with a soirée in July. The Society had expanded its membership from 62 in February to 270 subscribers and by September it had 400 and a branch store in the Wicker.

Two other Co-operative stores were also in existence in the town in Green Lane and a Catholic Co-op (St Vincents) in Westbar Green. The Sheffield Society continued to expand. A report in *The Co-operator* in June 1862 noted it had four branched (Devonshire Street, South Street, the Moor, and Nursery Street), 369 members, a capital of £1381 and sales of £6240 in the last three months. Sales dropped to £3256 during the next three months as the loss of Sheffield's markets in America due to the Civil War, began to make its mark. The High Green Society with 83 members and a modest capital of £58 and sales in the same quarter of £284 managed a 1s 2d (6p) in the pound dividend. It noted in its November report:

> "Owing to the depression in trade and other causes, we have had a good many withdrawals, but as the main body of the members have allowed their profits to accumulate, the capital of the society remains stationary."

There are no reports in *The Co-operator* of 1863 covering Sheffield. The Society's shops are listed in the 1863 trades directory and it is likely that it struggled through the year with its numbers dwindling. A store at Attercliffe is also mentioned. A co-operative directory of

1863 mentions a figure of 713 Sheffield members. Smaller local societies including High Green, Stocksbridge, and Malin Bridge gave more favourable reports.

For example, Stocksbridge's half-yearly report, made in October 1863, noted a capital of £1177, sales of £3856, profit of £171 and dividends of 1s 1d (35p) and 6d (2.5p) to non-members. Three years' work now saw Stocksbridge co-operators with a grocery and provision store, a drapers and a butchers shop. A shoemakers and cloggers workshop was being completed. In celebration the Stocksbridge and Malin Bridge Societies held a cricket match in September 1863 – a reminder that the societies were ventures in recreational and wider social enjoyment, including self-education. They were also places where temperance or stricter abstinence from drinking was discussed and responded to.

There were no reports on activity in central Sheffield in 1864, although it is likely that the main town society struggled on into that year. The smaller societies flourished, although a natural disaster – the Great Sheffield Flood – dealt the Malin Bridge Society a severe blow. *The Co-operator* reported in September:

"Although the door of the stores was plated with iron, the force of the torrent burst it open and washed out the shelves on which were stored sugar, soap, rice, etc. The counters, flour bins, scales, vinegar barrels, sacks of flour etc, were swimming in the water – we also lost nine members, two of whom besides their wives had families of six to nine children."

Nearly a year later, leading lights in Sheffield co-operation, including Alderman G.L. Saunders and

Samuel B. Auty (Secretary of the Sheffield Society) came to take part in a re-opening ceremony. The Sheffield Society had now in 1865 been revived, although on a much reduced scale. It had a new name – the Sheffield Improved Industrial and Provident Society – and it was located at 127 Devonshire Street. A trade directory for 1865 also lists stores at Wadsley Bridge and Dronfield – probably connected to the Malin Bridge and Woodhouse societies.

Progress of local societies in 1866 was affected by the prolonged file strike. The Malin Bridge Society was the worst affected by this. It also suffered a disaster the following year when its Langsett Road Store was destroyed by fire. The Sheffield Society was slowly rebuilding. Its fourth half-yearly report of 1876 noted the recent addition of 25 members bringing the total to 134 – a shadow of its size in the early 1860s. Despite bad trade during that year and its losses from withdrawals by members facing half times, its dividend for the second half of 1867 was 1s 1d 5.5p) in the pound and membership held steady. The Sheffield Society battled on through 1868. A report in *The Co-operator* in June noted they had 200 members, one store dealing in groceries, provisions and butchers meat. This store was moved from Devonshire Street to 82 Snig Hill during the Spring. A report in November noted five shops and four branches (or separate societies) in Sheffield and its suburbs. A note of discord was struck in comments made by a prominent Sheffield co-operator:

“I am sorry to report that in some cases they are tempting the public by various means to trade with them, and so far sullying the fair principle of co-operation.”

The same year the Carbrook Society was begun by a group of blacksmiths from Jessop's steelworks. This appears to have grown out of a self-help group "Brightside Improvement Class Saving Society" begun in 1865. The origins of this society are also linked to the Kilnhurst Society.

The following year saw further evidence of the revival in Sheffield with a public lecture given in the Temperance Hall. The early 1870s saw more growth with two new stores being listed in an 1872 directory – a Co-operative Society (Atlas Works) in Carlisle Street, and a Co-operative STORE (Brunswick) in Occupation Road. Stocksbridge also opened new branches. Two years later, some workers from Chesterman's Bow Works (engineering tools, cutlery) on Ecclesall Road got together with others (48 original shareholders) and founded the Ecclesall Industrial and Provident Society Limited. The linking of this society and the Sheffield one resulted in the modern Sheffield and Ecclesall Society and the Carbrook Society became the modern Brightside and Carbrook.

## Conclusion

It must be recognised that the trade union producer co-ops and the Rochdale-inspired societies formed in the period of mid-Victorian prosperity involved only a small minority of working people. The industrial co-ops kept only a few workers working "off the box" or "off the parish". The shops reached a wider working class public than just the members. They helped to force private traders to deal more honestly and at fairer profit margins. The moral message of the co-operators about abstinence from drink and tobacco helped some workers to manage their scarce earning and provide better for their families. No credit was given and in bad

times out-of-work co-operators may have been forced back to private dealers with higher prices but credit. They may have had to pawn, beg, steal, or improvise like the mass of depressed workers. The high mindedness of co-operative ideals helped many to avoid such a fall into the abyss of despair. Despite having the assistance of the employing class, the new 1870s co-op stores carried on the principle of common ownership, profit sharing, and democratic control. We should recognise the practical contribution of such bodies in the struggle for socialism.