

Sheffield Co-operative Societies history

Background

- Sheffield Improved Industrial & Provident Society. Est. 1865 its central stores were on Snig Hill and Trippet Lane.
- Ecclesall Society. Est. 1874.
These two societies amalgamated in 1907 to form the Sheffield & Ecclesall Co-operative Society. And in 1968, S&E absorbed Bakewell Society. S&E merged with Yorkshire Co-operatives, United Co-operatives and the Co-operative Group.
- 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.

Just after the First World War, Brightside & Carbrook Co-operative Society bought part of the site of Sheffield Castle on Exchange Street / Waingate. Before building work took place Leslie Armstrong as part of a team surveyed the site. 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 which described and illustrated the stores, gave some history of the site, and introduced readers to the B&C Co-op Society.

Here is a page from the City Stores souvenir which explains why anyone might want to be a member of the co-op.

A WORD TO THE WISE

WHY should I join the Co-operative Stores? you may ask.
The answer is simple.
You would save money.

You would be sure of obtaining pure, unadulterated goods and honest value.

You (and if a married woman your husband, too) would be insured free without payment of premiums or any medical examinations.

You would be able to take advantage of unique Savings Clubs, Clothing Clubs, and Easy Payments Systems.

You would have the satisfaction of knowing that you were helping to provide employment under ideal conditions, helping to keep down the cost of living, and helping to improve the general standard of life.

And you could take part in the various Educational and Social activities of the Society.

Yes, you may say, that sounds very fine.
But how is it all accomplished?

In the first place you must understand that on joining the Co-operative Stores you become part owner of the business. You become a partner. The shops are owned entirely by the members—by the men and women who buy the goods. Thus you are buying from yourself. The assistants in the shops are *your* employees. Naturally you will not sell to yourself inferior quality goods. You will have the best. And you will not wish to make a profit out of yourself. So what would otherwise be the profit on your purchases, if made at any ordinary shop, become SAVINGS which are returned to you in the form of Dividend. That is what the Dividend is—a *division of the profits* amongst all the member-owners in proportion to the amount they have spent in their own shops.



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.

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 sully 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.

John Baxter

My Memories

I remember castle House since its opening in 1964, and until it closed in 2008 have shopped there. Gradually into the 1980s the neighbourhood co-op shops in every shopping centre began to close down. Until then, there was always a co-op within easy reach of wherever anyone lived. The 1970s saw great change in the co-op culture when blue stamps replaced the membership dividend. My memories are mostly associated with Brightside & Carbrook Co-operative Society (later renamed Sheffield Co-operative Society).

Of course, the other co-op society was Sheffield & Ecclesall, whose great department store was 'The Arcade' (later renamed Sunwin House) at the junction of London Road, Cemetery Road, Ecclesall Road, and the Moor. Like B&C it had co-op shops in shopping areas. The city was divided into the B&C half and the S&E half. (NOTE: an attempt was made to bring them together into one co-op in the 1990s, but it failed).

When S&E merged with Yorkshire Co-op, Sunwin House was closed down and replaced by the building which had been

vacated by Redgates in Furnival Gate. This was a splendid building with a spiral staircase and wonderful chandeliers.

As the 21st century approached B&C (Sheffield Co-op) opened a second department store on the Moor (which is now occupied by Sainsbury's), and It also opened a small shop with post office on the bottom of the Moor. S&E opened an electrical appliances shop on the corner of Fitzwilliam Gate and the Moor.

Far from co-operating with each other, the two societies appeared to be in competition, a possible factor in their demise.

Yorkshire Co-ops merged with United Society which in turn merged with the Co-operative Group. Sheffield Society merged with the Co-operative Group, creating one monolithic co-op society in this area.

A co-op supermarket was opened on Pinstone Street opposite the Peace Gardens.

Castle House, the Moor Department Store, the electrical shop, the post office on the Moor, the new Sunwin House on Furnival Gate and the Pinstone Street supermarket were all closed. This left no co-op business in Sheffield City Centre.

Steve Thompson

RESEARCH MATERIAL WHICH THROWS LIGHT ON THE CO-
OP STORY IN SHEFFIELD IS AVAILABLE IN THE PRINCIPLE 5
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