

A History Of the Stocksbridge Co-Operative Society.

Co-operation Before 1860.

At the end of the eighteenth century and in the early part of the nineteenth the life of the workers was very hard. Epidemic disease spread owing to overwork, scanty food, wretched clothing, long hours, bad ventilation and overcrowding in unhealthy housing.

Robert Owen is said to be the father of co-operation. In 1800 he started manufacturing cotton in New Lanark, Scotland. He set about improving working conditions, introduced better housing and village streets and he also opened stores, buying for cash and selling at cost to replace the ruinous system of credit operated by small shopkeepers.

As a result of Owen's activities many co-operative societies, originally called union shops, were formed. In 1832 there were 400 such enterprises and they divided profits not according to purchases but as interest on capital and this method of profit sharing led to their downfall.

In Lancashire a few days before Christmas 1843, several out of work weavers met to discuss their condition and how they could improve it. They would become merchants and manufacturers on their own account. A subscription list was formed, each promised to pay two pence per week and the "Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers" was registered in October 1844. They introduced the new system of dividends on purchases. The first store was the ground floor of a warehouse in Toad Lane and the opening stock included small quantities of flour, sugar, butter and oatmeal with a total value of £14.

Cooperation in Stocksbridge.

From 1840 to 1860 a great change was coming over the commercial prospects of our valley.

The economy revolved around self-contained farms and there was much privation among the labouring population, wages being low, whilst food was dear.

Then "Owd Sammy Fox struck oil" by the invention of the Paragon umbrella frame and he tapped this reservoir of cheap labour to his own and his employees enrichment. Fox had no company shop and the yearly increase in population now earning better wages gave rise to a new class of shopkeepers who saw the opportunity to exploit the neighbourhood for their own gain.

So it was that this attitude of the shopkeepers seeing the consumer as a fat goose ready to be plucked became the subject to be debated by a knot of workers gathered round the furnace in the old hardening shop down in Stocksbridge Works in the winter of 1859/60. To these men co-operation showed a way of escape from debt. If it had succeeded in Rochdale in 1844 why not give it a try in Stocksbridge. A meeting was held in a little wayside inn recently opened by Mr. George Batty, wheelwright, and twenty or so people were present. As a result of this meeting George Batty, John Eastwood, Joseph Hayward and Isaac Patterson were appointed to inaugurate the movement with authority to collect contributions and trade in the name of the "Stocksbridge Band of Hope Industrial Co-operative Society." Their objective was "to raise, by voluntary subscription of the members, a fund for better enabling them to purchase food, tiring, clothes and other necessities, by carrying on in common the trade or business of general dealers."

Among those present at the meeting, who were also the earliest workers in the movement, were Henry Booth, Isaac Crossland, William Dyche, John Dalton, Ben Grayson, Joseph Garlick, John Hey, Henry Hall, George Ashby Helliwell, John Haigh and Thomas Marshall. They used Batty's clubroom as a salesroom and office and Messrs Haywood and Co. were ordering Groceries and provisions with the various members of the committee acting as salesmen.

George Batty had recently built two houses at the top of Gibson Lane and gave the co-op a good start by letting the society have them rent free for three months.



A butchery department with slaughterhouse and shop was further down Gibson Lane and a drapery business was opened in a house at the top of Hawke Green.

In 1863 the Central Stores was opened and this provided accommodation for the butcher, draper and grocer with storerooms and a committee room on the second floor and a Co-operative Hall on the third floor. A house at each end was provided for the managers.



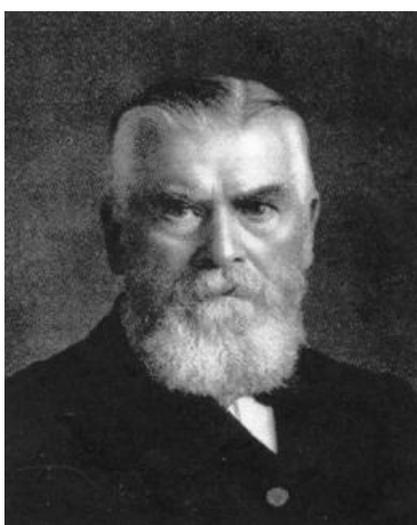
Mr. James Holt was the first grocery manager and Joseph Gill the first carter being paid eighteen shillings a week to drive a grey mare purchased from John (Shelfer) Helliwell farming at the Green, a hamlet near Bolsterstone. Joseph Walton was the first drapery manager and salesman but ill health forced him to emigrate to New Zealand and he was replaced by John Williams and he in turn by John Sprowson and then Joseph Moxon.

The first branch shop was at Well Hill, Greenmoor, but this only traded between 1861 and 1872 the receipts for the half year ended December 1871 having dwindled to £24. From 1872 to 1876 there were two branches in New Heywoods and in 1883 a branch opened in Thurgoland.

Branches also opened in Langsett and upper Midhope in 1898. In 1910 the "Jubilee Building" housing shops and offices was opened opposite the Central Stores, this being the building now occupied by the Further Education College.



Mr. Joseph Moxon served as secretary, manager and committeeman for thirty-nine years retiring in 1907 and during this time half-yearly sales increased from £3,235 to £31,088.



In the half year to June 1861 sales were £2942, profit £125 and divi` one shilling in the pound.

In the half year to June 1909 sales were £32,642, profit £3,642 and divi` two shillings and four pence in the pound.

Many of the old Co-op buildings have now gone or are under new use and ownership but these shops served the people of Stocksbridge and district well over a hundred years thanks to the vision and enterprise of a few hard-working pioneers. What would they think if they could see the vast array of goods on display in the new Co-op supermarket in Johnson Street?

Les Walker.