

CO-OPERATIVE RECORDS: TOO THINLY SPREAD?

by

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At the back of our centenary history of the Co-operative Women's Guild, (Caring and Sharing) we have a short Appendix entitled "Sources of Information". It hides a major problem we faced when we came to write the history of the Guild: the extent to which the records of the Guild are shared between so many Co-operative and academic institutions.

One expects local records to be held locally. We looked at the Birmingham Minute Books in Birmingham Reference Library. We were delighted when Guildford branch sent us a summary of the minute books going back to 1896 which they hold. Yet, even here, there is a case for centralisation in order to ensure preservation and to facilitate research.

But what of national Guild records? First a mass of papers are held in the Guild office. Not surprising, in view of the desperate shortage of staff, they are not indexed properly and are distributed between a number of locations in Head Office. We have suggested to the Guild that they might try, perhaps through the Manpower Services Commission's Community Programme, to find someone able to index their papers.

The Minutes of the Guild's Central Committee, (later National Executive Committee) and a substantial collection of published material and photographs are kept at Hull University. Due to copyright problems, one of us was refused a photocopy of a typed manuscript history of the Guild written by Mrs. Ganley but never published. Luckily, the Guild had already lent us a manuscript copy.

The Fawcett Library has an invaluable set of cuttings from the Daily Herald and other newspapers, showing the extensive coverage the Guild received before and after the war, when there was a serious press willing to cover such events as Guild congress, marches and demonstrations. We found the London School of Economics Library useful, with its Lilian Harris papers and some Co-operative Women's Guild publications too. Then there is the invaluable collection of the Co-operative Union - invaluable but nevertheless frustratingly split between Manchester and Loughborough.

Many members of the Society for Co-operative Studies will be interested in the history of the Co-operative movement. Have any of you been deterred from writing because of the fragmented way in which the historical records are kept, or is this a problem unique to the records of the Guild? The history of the Co-operative movement and its major auxiliaries is a crucial part of Britain's social history. The movement, in our opinion, should be doing all it can to encourage further study. This may well mean much more concerted effort to bring the records together: perhaps in Loughborough or Manchester or London - all

centres which, unlike Hull, have Co-operative links.

We should like to read your response in future copies of the Bulletin.

Note of the Authors

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