

Collecting Co-operative Archives: The South East Experience

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The establishment of the National Co-operative Archive created for a while a flurry of interest in the preservation of co-operative records, and in recent weeks this interest has re-appeared in the pages of the Co-operative News. This report gives an overview of the major archive created by Ron Roffey, a former Secretary of the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society, together with some reflections on its future. It supplements this survey with additional information concerning other archival activity in the area.

Following his retirement 12 years ago, Ron has over the years built up a collection of over 10,000 artefacts and an estimated 10,000 further photos and slides. This collection includes complete or near-complete sets of minute books including Management and Education Committees, Financial Records in considerable detail and a unique body of letters and documents relating to business affairs. It also contains a library of books, including many Co-operative publications, and a large number of the journals, pamphlets and leaflets that made a major contribution to the political and social discussions of their day. There are also banners especially of the Co-operative Women's Guild, and over 200 cups and trophies that bear witness to the enormous scale of co-operative sporting activity in south east England. There are countless ephemera and memorabilia relating to Congresses and other events including large public exhibitions. Most importantly, there is the detail everywhere concerning the practical organisation of shop work and experience of shopping in co-operative societies throughout the twentieth century. The scales and other items of equipment are not to be neglected.

A select 3,500 items from this collection were transferred to the National Co-operative Archive in 2001. But a residual portion, including local objects of interest to Greenwich

Council, has been retained in Greenwich and is currently housed by the Council and expected to go into the local heritage centre. The remainder of the collection, of which the main part relates to the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society's activities outside the Greenwich-Woolwich boundaries, is thus left without a future. It would be a mistake to further divide the collection, on the basis probably of source, nor should more of it be transported off to the North, thus leaving London without a public record of co-operative history. It is irresponsible for co-operators to leave the entire matter to local interests such as the local Council, whose commitments lie outside the co-operative sphere. There is a problem here that demands attention. It is a co-operative responsibility through and through.

The uses to which this material may be put are many. It is a major part of the commercial history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is also a large source of working class history, a focus of interest that is neither widely documented nor well researched. In the south east region two recent studies, both of which used this collection as source material, are pathfinders. Ron published a history of the Royal Arsenal and South Suburban Co-operative Societies in 2001, *The Co-operative Way*. This followed shortly after Rita Rhodes' book on the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society Political Committee, *An Arsenal for Labour*. At least three other recent publications have made use of this archive's resources and over 12 years more than 600 enquiries have been addressed to the archive.

In 1997 when I started to assist Ron, the collection was housed in the Co-operative Wholesale Society South East Region head office at Woolwich. When that office was closed and transferred to Dartford, the archive remained in the building for a little over 12 months. It was then re-housed by Greenwich Council. After a further 12 months it was moved again, also by the Council.

It should be recorded that, since the Woolwich office closed, the Archive has more often than not been held in damp and unsuitable accommodation, a circumstance that may have resulted in damage to the condition of the objects.

Transporting precious objects also tends to cause damage.

In this context the importance of conservation should be emphasised. Many items require attention already; but the skills and expertise necessary for this function are costly, with the result that at present we are in no position to initiate or develop a conservation programme.

After the move out of Woolwich, the Archive ceased to receive funding from the co-op. Nonetheless in conditions of considerable adversity we have managed to keep an eye on the collection and make small advances in database work.

By the end of 2002 we expect funds to run out and we shall conclude our activities by printing out a substantial body of documentation concerning the archive and the societies of south east England that gave rise to it. If new funding could be raised, we should also put this body of information on to a CD-ROM.

There are 3 parts to this product: a database of records and artefacts; an encyclopaedia in draft form; and a schematic survey of some other co-operative archives in the south east.

The database: its classification scheme

This account of the database reflects the fact that my personal background is in the social sciences and as a result my attention was caught at an early stage by issues of how artefacts and records from a number of complex organisations may be classified. These are issues that are not widely recognised as problematic and they would repay much closer analysis than they are usually given.

A database like Microsoft Access offers enormous flexibility and functionality with regard to the design of comprehensive data structures for large quantities of data. But the definition and ordering of fields demands clear analysis if a product that is useful to readers or researchers is to be created.

I began the work by creating simple listings with records in each section being constructed according to the attributes of the objects recorded.

This gave rise to considerable variety in the fields used in

the records and, as a result, to inconsistency in the overall database structure. Indeed it was not a simple database at all; rather it was 156 different database files each pertaining to a different area of the collection. This type of structure creates difficulties; for example 156 files are not in any simple way searchable.

The initial 9 parts comprised: Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society documents; other society documents; auxiliaries; books; pamphlets and journals; leaflets; pictorial matter and artefacts. The first part, society documents and records, used only three fields for data: Item, Description and Dates. Books of course were recorded as you would expect under Author, Title, etc. But Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society Press Releases used something rather different: Year, Month, Store, Item, and Accession Number. This was one of the rare places where we were able to develop an accession number system. Classifying the artefacts further extended the number of categories (or sections) and range of fields used. Seals, banners, wall plaques and ephemera are categorised separately and each tends to have different features to be recorded.

Following the creation of the initial database, there have been two subsequent extensions to the work. The first was to keep records up to date as new material came in. The second was to tackle the problem of rationalising the classification.

In the outcome a revised database was drawn up consisting of only four parts with one file for each:

- Society Records;
- Library;
- Pictorial; and
- Artefacts.

Throughout these files I have attempted to standardise the fields to:

- Part;
- Section;
- Society/Class;
- Item;

- Description;
- Date From;
- Date To;
- Accession Number; and
- Location.

An alternative approach would have been to create a multiplicity of fields to accommodate every conceivable attribute that might be recorded. But at this point the number of fields may be a less significant problem than that of organising names of objects so that a common language is used: anyone familiar with the variety of labels used for financial records will recognise the difficulty.

In the end however, lack of funds prevented the completion of this work and the revised database is not yet well structured. However under 'Location' we have been able to record where each item of Ron's original collection is now held.

Encyclopaedia

This is the second piece of research and it followed at Ron's instigation in the aftermath of his book. Early on it was clear that much more information was at hand than could realistically be used in the book. We began to collect it together to the point when we had a considerable body of factual knowledge which might prove invaluable to a new generation of researchers without prior knowledge of retail co-operative societies as they were in their heyday. This is an ongoing exercise with regular updating as new information and material becomes available.

The encyclopaedia now comprises 5 sections:

- **Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society** This section consists of 172 entries and adds a body of information concerning the structure and activities of the Society.
- **South Suburban Co-operative Society** This section comprises 53 entries and adds comparable information concerning the Society. Here we were

fortunate to be able to draw in detail from a draft history written by William Stewart, the Society's Education Secretary for many years.

- **General Information** This section comprises 179 entries containing either information on other local societies or relevant background information concerning the co-operative movement as a whole.
- **Biographies** This section includes 1,325 biographies and lists all known Management Committee members together with a proportion of Education and Halls Committee members plus a number of officials and other co-operators who achieved distinction in their activity and lived in the area. Often we were only able to give names and perhaps dates. But in a number of instances we were able to use electoral statements and similar sources to give a more interesting biographical summary.
- **Properties** The Properties section comprises 946 entries. It lists all properties known to have been owned by societies in the south east. Our information again varies according to source, but whereas often name and address of property are all that is known, in some cases we can add something to this, such as type of goods sold, and footage.

Survey of Archive Locations

This third area of research interest reflects the fact that, in the recent past, as societies merged, their records have been deposited in local public and other archives. Sometimes, when these deposits were made, no detailed list was kept of what was handed over.

The present list is schematic only, for the reason that substantial work would have been required to complete it in detail. Moreover we do not have automatic access to co-operative records held in public bodies. The present lists may be examined on computer by Location or by Society.

We have found significant holdings of societies at: Bishopsgate Institute (mostly societies north of the Thames including the London Society and Co-operative Retail Services). Medway Archive (Invicta Co-operative Society); Croydon Archive (South Suburban Co-operative Society); Stratford Archive (Stratford Co-operative Society); South East Co-op, Dartford (records held by Co-operative Retail Services at the time of its merger with the Co-operative Wholesale Society).

This report briefly summarises five and a half years of intermittent work on my part, supplementing the many years of interest and activity on Ron's side. If support and funding does not come in by the end of 2002, the collection through dissipation will be lost for ever and continuing research will cease. The time left is now very short.