

Records in Britain

by Brian Dyson

Lest there be any doubt, let me begin by confessing that my principal motive in writing this article is to draw to the attention of the wider Co-operative movement the important relevant collections within my care in the archives of the Brynmor Jones Library (BJL) of the University of Hull. But it is also my intention to emphasize the importance of such collections, wherever they are held, and the considerable storehouse of information they contain which is, or should be, of value to researchers of all types.

The BJL, I am happy to report, holds several outstanding collections relating to the Co-operative and Co-partnership movements. At the regional and local level, there are records of the Hull and East Riding Co-operative Society Limited, and of Hull Printers Limited (an outstanding example of a long lasting, if ultimately unsuccessful, Co-partnership venture). Moving further afield to the national and international level, there are records of the Co-operative Productive Federation Limited, the Co-operative Women's Guild and the International Co-operative Women's Guild.

The Local Co-operative Society

The Hull and East Riding Co-operative Society Limited was the principal Co-operative society in the region from its establishment in the late 1850s until the end of its independent existence in the early 1980s. The archival collection now in the BJL includes Management Committee minute books for various periods between 1890 and 1966, and thereafter the minutes of the Board of Directors to 1979, members' meeting minute books, rules, registers of officers, sub-committee minute books, quarterly, half-yearly and annual reports and statements of accounts, purchase account books, numerous photographs (of, for example, premises, employees, products, vehicles and war damage), and employee welfare records.

There are also some records of the Beverley and District Co-operative Society Limited and the Market Weighton and District Co-operative Society.

Hull Printers

The firm of Hull Printers Limited was established on Co-operative and Co-partnership principles in 1897 by a group determined to give workers good conditions and fair rewards, and was registered under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act of 1893.

Workers were involved in both the ownership and management of Hull Printers. The firm initially occupied small premises with just two rooms, one

containing the first electrically driven printing press in Hull. New premises occupied in October 1924 were much more spacious, well lit and ventilated, with central heating and two staff rooms (male and female) with cooking facilities. Working hours were generally shorter than the norm in the industry. All the employees were shareholders, and eligible to stand for election to the Committee of Management. There were also good pension and sick schemes. The firm produced high quality printing work of all kinds, including leaflets, pamphlets, books, and forms.

As a result of enemy bombing during the Second World War, the Hull Printers had to move yet again to new premises in Willerby near Hull. Its most successful period was in the 1950s, when over 80 people were employed. Beset by problems of lack of capital, rapid technological change and, ironically, serious labour difficulties, the firm went into liquidation in 1975.

The surviving records - some were destroyed during World War Two - cover the 1897-1975 period. Sadly, too, a proportion of what has survived has been badly damaged by fire, also during the War. Nevertheless, the collection includes minute books of the Board of Management, accounts, contract files, share registers and miscellaneous items, including some examples of the firm's work.

The Co-operative Productive Federation

Away from the parochial level, but remaining in the area of Co-partnership, the Co-operative Productive Federation Limited was formed in 1882, very much under the influence of Robert Owen, and on the basis of Christian Socialist principles. It joined together some fifteen local Co-operative Productive Societies with the aim of helping them to find capital and markets for their goods. These members were involved mainly in the clothing, footwear and printing trades, operating on a Co-partnership and profit-sharing basis.

The archival collection in the B JL covers the period between 1896 and 1968. It includes general minute books, committee minute books, press cuttings and cash books, together with a minute book of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Centre of the Labour Association for the Promotion of Co-operative Production based on Labour Co-partnership.

Co-operation and Women

Probably the most important single collection in the B JL is the archive of the Co-operative Women's Guild (CWG). The CWG holds an important place in the history of the Co-operative movement, both in its own right and as the first

major organisation in Britain to promote the rights and interests of women.

Despite the great success of the movement in its early decades, there was a widespread belief, reflecting existing social attitudes, that the Co-operative woman's place was in the home, except when she went shopping. In January 1883 Mrs Alice Acland succeeded in launching a woman's page ('Woman's Corner') in *Co-operative News*. This received an encouraging response and led in April 1883 to the formation of the Women's League for the Spread of Co-operation. This small group of just seven women, with Mrs Acland as Secretary, eventually enjoyed remarkable success. By the time of the Golden Jubilee of the Women's Co-operative Guild, as it was quickly renamed, there were in 1933, over 72,000 members in 1513 branches - a body large enough to send 1600 delegates to the Jubilee Congress.

A Campaigning Organisation

Much of the success was due to the Guild's third and longest serving secretary, Margaret Llewellyn Davies (1861-1944), between 1889 and 1921. She was instrumental in helping to create an organisation which aimed to spread knowledge of the advantages of Co-operation and to improve the conditions of women in general. As a result, the Guild became involved in numerous campaigns, including: the extension of the suffrage to women, health care, maternity rights, encouraging women to join trade unions, maternity benefits and conditions, the peace movement, and, most controversially at times, divorce law reform. The activities and strength of the Co-operative Women's Guild, as it is now called, continue to this day, as may be seen in its centenary publication, *Of whole heart cometh hope . . .* published in 1983.

The records of the Guild between 1883 and 1970 are held by the B.J.L. They include minutes (Central Committee, Congress, and of the Southern and South Eastern Section), annual reports, papers for annual meetings and congresses, rules, notes for speakers, and numerous photographs (of congresses, meetings, individuals, and so on), and much printed material; there is also some material relating to the Scottish and Irish Guilds. In addition, the B.J.L. holds some records of the International Co-operative Women's Guild.

Wider Still and Wider . . .

The success of the British Guilds inevitably led to comparable organisations being established in other countries, and at the International Co-operative Congress at Basle in 1921 it was decided to form an International Co-operative Women's Guild or Committee, with one representative from each of the existing Guilds, and Emmy Freundlich of Austria as first President. The ICWG survived until 1963, when it became a department of the International

Co-operative Alliance. The relevant papers in the B JL cover the period between 1921 and 1962 and include: minutes (central and executive committees), conference and other reports and papers, bulletins, and papers relating to Emmy Freundlich.

The Importance of Records

A complete bibliography of the Women's Co-operative Guild showing the location of all records (including those of the ICWG) has been compiled by Professor Tamae Mizuta of the Ngoya Economics University in Japan and published in two parts by the Journal of Social Sciences in 1988 and 1989. The fact that a researcher from Japan should be thus interested in the British Co-operative movement is very gratifying. But there are potentially many more individuals interested in the history of the movement who may be totally unaware of the existence of such documentary material, or the fact that a great deal of it is to be found in public and other repositories, as well as with local societies.

And it is not only historians of the Co-operative movement who can benefit from the investigation of such records. The Hull collections form part of the wider labour and feminist collections held by the B JL. Business historians have used the accounts and minutes of the Co-operative Productive Federation and Hull Printers. Students of the peace movement have found the records of the CWG and ICWG of considerable interest. Local historians inevitably find local Co-operative society records to be full of much valuable information: the photographs of damage and destruction to Hull and East Riding Co-operative Society premises during the Blitz in World War Two form a fascinating part of the Society's archive. Other similar records give much insight into such things as marketing techniques (showing products, shop displays, exhibitions).

The archives held by the University of Hull represent just one institution where important material is generally made freely available to scholars. Many other record offices and similar institutions do likewise. There is a useful summary guide to the records of the Co-operative movement in volume one of Chris Cook's *Sources in British Political History* (London, Macmillan, 1975, pages 74-81). However, the most complete catalogue of the records of the Co-operative movement is the Register held in the Co-operative Union Library in Manchester. The completeness of this register is obviously very much dependent on local societies and other bodies informing the staff there of what records exist, their availability, and the terms of access. It is to be hoped that all custodians of Co-operative records will do their utmost to make the existence of the material in their care known and, where they no longer require records for the purposes of management or administration, endeavour

to ensure that they are placed in a suitable repository for the benefit of future researchers and as part of Britain's national heritage.

The Author

BRIAN DYSON is the Hull University Archivist. Unusually, he is both a qualified archivist and librarian. As a result he is additionally custodian of the Brynmor Jones Library's sizeable labour history book and pamphlet collections, which include a large amount of Co-operative material.