

Co-operation in the Community

by Denise Brace

My research into the Scottish Co-operative Women's Guild (SCWG) was undertaken in connection with the development of a new city museum, 'The People's Story'. The museum was opened on 14 July, 1989. It is one of the institutions which make up the Museums and Galleries Division of the City of Edinburgh District Council. The aims of the new museum were to tell the story of the lives, work and leisure of the ordinary people of Edinburgh from the late 18th century to the present day, to collect for research and for future exhibitions, and to develop a relationship between the museum and the communities it serves. Given the key role played by the Co-op in the lives of working class people in Edinburgh, it was essential to include it in our story.

The Co-op in Edinburgh

During the 19th century, three successful independent Co-operative retail societies emerged within the geographic area which now lies within the administrative boundaries of Edinburgh District. These were St. Cuthbert's Co-operative Association, Leith Provident Society and Portobello Co-operative Society. By 1975 the two latter organisations had merged with St. Cuthbert's. In 1981, St. Cuthbert's itself became Scotmid, the Scottish Midland Co-operative Society. Research carried out in connection with the SCWG represented an important part of investigations into the Co-operative movement in Edinburgh as a whole.

Oral History Recording

Oral history recording was an integral process in the creation of the museum and in the kind of relationship we wanted to foster with our communities. As a result of contacts made with Scotmid's Education Committee, a number of interviews were arranged with women who had strong associations with the Guild. The women's memories of their involvement with the organisation have now become part of our displays, using direct quotations from transcripts of the tapes. The archive is a permanent resource for present and future generations of researchers. It helps to fill gaps, where the written record is deficient and gives a highly personal, first-hand account of individual experience.

Photographic Records

Such contacts helped to generate photographic and other types of material for the museum's collections. Photographs with Guild associations were

kindly loaned or donated. These were then copied and the originals returned to their owners where appropriate. The copies now form part of our photographic archive and have thus become public and permanent records, rather than private and very probably, impermanent ones. I was particularly delighted to receive eight photographs of Co-operative Guild women and children against the backdrop of floats, some of which are festooned with Co-operative advertising. They are dressed up for the annual celebration of Co-operative Day. Other photographs consist of formal and informal gatherings of members, including the 85th anniversary of Edinburgh's eastern branch in 1990.

Women's Guild Banners

The project has elicited interesting material in the form of, for example, printed literature, Guild brooches and banners. In all, six SCWG banners have been donated to the Museum. The three earlier banners represent Portobello branch, founded in 1913, Raeburn branch, founded in 1927 and the Section IV banner. Section IV was formed in Leith in 1906. It was to become one of the eight sections into which the SCWG was divided, and covered Edinburgh and all branches to the Borders.

Each of these banners makes reference to Co-operation and peace, depicting the wheat sheaf to symbolise the former and the dove the latter. National associations are represented through the Scottish bluebell, and also the Scottish thistle. The Raeburn banner has been conserved at a cost of £1,440 with the assistance of a 50% grant from the Scottish Museums Council. The three later banners - Restalrig, Northfield and the Forth Bridge - show images which represent the geographic location of the branches, with Restalrig also having the clasped handshake symbol and Northfield the rainbow colours of the International Co-operative Alliance. The banners are particularly significant acquisitions as they represent the ethos, group solidarity and identity of the membership. For reasons of conservation and space they are displayed singly, in rotation.

Further Research Needed

Further research remains to be done on the SCWG, and indeed into all other areas of Co-operative activity in Edinburgh. In particular, there is an urgent need to record the memories of older people, though younger members should by no means be neglected. In the words of one member of the SCWG "If I had never joined the Women's Guild I would have had a much poorer life". It would be an enormous loss not to capture the experiences and feelings of older and younger women alike who have been closely associated with the Guild, whether this be in the time of its 'heyday' or in more recent years where numbers have diminished.

One way forward has been progressed through a collaborative venture between Suzanne Stevenson of the Scottish Co-operative Education Centre and Edinburgh City Museums. Our tapes and transcripts are currently being copied, the copies to be deposited with the Co-operative College at Stanford Hall. This will facilitate easier access for some researchers south of the border.

Records of Individuals

In the January 1993 issue of this journal, Jean Everitt stressed the need to preserve historical documents relating to the Co-operative movement. My own, necessarily modest venture into recording the Co-op locally has revealed in part the potential wealth of printed, photographic and other types of historical and contemporary material held by individuals. In almost every case, people were very glad to have the opportunity to deposit their material with an institution where it would be both preserved and used.

I am sure that the good relationship which has developed between the Co-operative community in Edinburgh and Edinburgh City Museums will continue into the future, and that this will go some way towards ensuring that valuable evidence is uncovered and preserved, to our mutual satisfaction and benefit.

The Author

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In Passing

Another factor in their quarrelling was Lydia's interest in the Eastwood branch of the Women's Co-operative Guild, which discussed social questions and tried to make women realise the unfairness of their conditions.

Elaine Feinstein – Lawrence's Women