

Reflections on the Co-operative College, Co-operative Education and Stanford Hall 1977-1994

Len Burch

Why “Reflections”? Because I share Henry Ford’s “bunkum” view of history. Even “independent “ writers rely on more than undestroyed papers. Official documents rarely explain; frequently mislead or, like minutes for many meetings, communicate the minimum possible. On the other hand, histories, by those directly involved, are likely to suffer a worse self-interested emphasis. The College period 1977-1994 became publicly controversial towards the end, but that was only the culmination of a period when many people saw things differently; so any detailed account would displease someone. My only “virtue” is that I survived, while displeasing everyone, and served through the first, and nearly all of the second of the three “Bob” reigns at Stanford Hall.

Not unnaturally, those outside the establishment are recognised here, as the main sources of problems, within the first few years at any rate. If fault was not one way, I cannot, barrister-like, speak both ways - especially to a poor case! Others will have to do that. Equally constraints of time, space and confidentiality mean that much has been cut out. A fuller version may be possible one day.

A near unhappy ending to this story should not blind anyone to the enormous contribution made by the College and Department and by its principal officer and staff during this whole period. The uproar arising from the threat of it all coming to an end, is a better testimony to Bob Houlton and to all concerned than anything anyone could write. Where this account may not repeatedly attribute initiatives to Bob Houlton, be assured that he was always the recognised source and inspiration, and must be credited for widening everybody’s horizons and keeping both College and Department as effective and up-to-date as resources would allow.

The immediate changes in 1977-79

All who were involved with the College and Education Department in 1977, when one long-serving, respected chief officer retired, and another

started, will agree, that it was a momentous occasion, for practically everything else also suddenly changed as well. A whole team of similarly long-serving people went with Bob Marshall. The accommodation and offices changed drastically, as did working methods and conditions. More significantly the management style changed, as did the view of what the College and Department were about, and its relationship to the Movement and to the wider community. Horizons, ambitions and expectations extended considerably, and for the few who remained from the previous regime, it seemed an exciting and invigorating time. Those outside the institution became similarly infected, and enhanced expectations developed all round.

The substantial staff changes were entirely co-incidental. The announcement that the new Principal would start on 25 July 1977 also noted the departure of three academic staff, the Tutors in Management Studies, Economics and Overseas Studies. Within less than a year the Senior and Resident Tutor, Bill Shearer, serving since 1954, and Miss Hilda Watling, the Housekeeper since 1949, both retired. Leslie Fox, Education Secretary, in charge of the administrative arrangements for 30 years soon followed. Kath Carson (in administration since 1955) retired in 1978 and Mrs Pick the part-time librarian for 30 years also left. They were followed by Les Boyfield (Engineers Department for 18 years) and later Ken Onions the Engineer since 1959. Even Jack Dring the world's most obliging porter, since 1947, had only retired a year before. A new College Administrative officer had just been appointed and Mrs Bunn became the new Education Executive Chairman within months. Thus did the institution unexpectedly wear a completely new outfit. Age, lack of it, left the lonely Officer for Member Education among the few significant non-changers.

All those departures and new arrivals, with the creation of additional posts, would have meant changes anyway; but given the new situation, determined breaks with the past were made that much easier. Traditions were put under the microscope, little was considered sacrosanct, and all was assessed according to contributions to new objectives. A succession of new staff were appointed starting with Ossie O'Brien in the newly created post of Vice Principal, and Bob Wildgust, the replacement Assistant Chief Education Officer.

Those changes in personnel were accompanied by extensive changes in accommodation and buildings. Before Bob Marshall's retirement, student accommodation was all within the College building itself. It was, for those days, fairly satisfactory within the new Abbott's Wing, but less so in the adapted rooms within the older parts of the College itself (students were then still using the famous marble bathroom, which still worked).

Before retirement, Bob Marshall, through an appeal, had finalised the arrangements for an additional wing to the College of 40 *en-suite* study bedrooms, to be completed in 1977 at an estimated cost of £450,000. Also at that time, the Education Department's Offices were housed in separate buildings, in the "Stables" (now Cedar Mews). The Member Education Section too was accommodated there, but separately in what was known as "Flat 2". (How would an historian interpret Mr Fox's references to 'those so-and-so's in Flat 2.')

Pretty well on his first day of occupancy, Bob Houlton decided to change the proposed building arrangements. It was claimed that capital expenditure, greatly in excess of the Department of Education and Science guidelines on accommodation, could be justified only in relation to a higher level of course provision. Plans for something quite different were afoot. Architects were even asked to undertake a feasibility study for the use of the Theatre as student accommodation, and alternative plans were produced for forty study bedrooms there, at a cost of £230,000. But even that was considered too expensive, and problems with planning might cause building delays. So it was decided that the administrative buildings would be converted into student accommodation and the offices of the Education Department and Member Education would move onto the first floor of the College. Such an investment in the Stable Block was reckoned to be twice as productive as an investment in a new college wing would have been. The former office buildings were renovated, in cases rebuilt, and turned into student accommodation, (but not *en suite*) and then renamed Cedar Mews.

Whereas previously the College, Education Department (staff training), and Member Education had been separately housed departments run independently by three national officers, all three, from 1978, became more integrated into a larger unit - and the Chief Officer largely disappeared (in the physical sense) upstairs to the second floor. Although the respective responsibilities stayed much the same, each sector became more dependent on the other; co-operation should have brought benefits all round, but in practice it often meant much antagonism. It became more difficult for each unit to disassociate itself from the other, and that had advantages and disadvantages.

The building of **Oak Court** and the **Co-operative Bank Training Facility** were announced in 1979 - completed in 1980. Interesting nowadays, are the constant references to the need for haste - in view of the state of inflation at the time. The cost implications of such extensive capital expenditure soon revealed itself in the College's budgets. **Stanford Hills Farm** was acquired in 1979 and remained a ruin until its sale in 1995. The searing hot summers of 1975 and 1976, Dutch Elm disease, fierce storms, the College extension building programme, and just age,

had taken its toll of the timbered splendour of the Estate. John Lister, Evelyn Gardener and Peter Gormley launched **The 1980 Tree Appeal**. The response was immediate and continuous; each tree was labelled with the contributor's name and College year. By 1993 a sum of £1953 was raised and 252 trees planted. A large plan, in the College, shows the location of the trees, identified by their purchasers.

The College's extended role was also recognised by the allocation of much new equipment. The previous common room became a first rate **television studio**, with high class recording and editing facilities - more than was available in similar institutions. A new boiler-house was installed at a cost of £120,000 and new kitchen equipment. The present Marshall Room was turned into teaching space and the **Library** it contained was not just moved upstairs (into the unused "supermarket") but was significantly modernised, becoming second to none for a college of its size. By January 1983 Stanford Hall was one among few colleges, and the first residential college, with a **computer room**. Such facilities are common-place now, so it is not easy to realise how much they were unwanted, even opposed by some tutors at the time. Bob Houlton, throughout the period, never expected people to make bricks without straw; anyone not doing a proper job could not blame the tools.

In addition to those changes in staff, accommodation and equipment, another major difference was in the style of doing things. It would be like Richard Branson taking over today. Bob Houlton's enthusiasm and persuasive talents rubbed off onto everyone; the hierarchical structure pretty well disappeared, in outward appearances anyway; Christian names were in, and a more relaxed, apparently more open, and more informal atmosphere prevailed. But expectations and workloads rose, as a succession of new ideas and plans were put into operation. The Education Executive found themselves hardly able to keep pace with new projects and the constant appointment of new and additional staff. All was designed to get the College, Department and the whole Movement looking outwards more, towards the wider community, and less inward and parochial. There was a feeling that the College and Department stood at the threshold of great advances, and the Co-operative Union made much extra resources available, to the understandable envy of other departments.

New Initiatives in Member Education

Member Education was among the new Chief Officer's priorities and most suited to his sociological insight; but well before he left he must have been somewhat disappointed and disillusioned - I claim no responsibility for that. Early events in member education simply did not fulfil expectations. And so it was our expectations, rather than member education, that changed.

Two major initiatives had wide-ranging, but Co-operatively disappointing, responses. The first was a “**Co-ops in the Community Campaign**” in 1978, which consisted of televised interviews with the then Minister for Education and with Lord Taylor and a pack produced for Societies containing background information, standard letters, slides and recorded tapes:

1. To provide opportunities for members of retail co-operatives to make their views known on the consultative document ‘The Taylor Report’ on the governance of schools; and for Societies, by organising meetings and getting publicity, to become associated with other educational groups, thereby bringing each Society to public notice as a concerned and helpful agency;
2. A small scheme for Co-operators to take College overseas students as their guests at Christmas and Easter, and with Societies using those students as a means for organising meetings and interesting members and public in the students and their homelands.
3. The development of an Opinion Leaders Register - which would be used for contacting, and supplying Co-operative news and information to, *opinion leaders* in other local organisations; for them to use and to become ambassadors for Co-operation and for the local Society, in areas outside of the Society’s influence.

The notion and value of concentrating on opinion leaders within other interlinking organisations was, even by 1977, well-understood in sociology - and might have been considered “old hat”. Yet Co-operative education officers thought it the most bizarre thing ever. A complete kit was supplied to cut work to the minimum, consisting of a punched card index; only the database itself needed to be built up - no great problem at all.

The opposition that that, and the “Co-ops in the Community” campaign elicited, had to be seen to be believed. Previously dead conferences suddenly became negatively alive. Bob Houlton, then less-familiar with the Co-operative mind, must have been surprised, but so were others. The campaign against the Campaign was stronger than the Campaign itself - mixed with a level of mischief, some malevolence and great misunderstanding. One leading Society education officer, to great applause, publicly asked how the Education Executive and Department thought he could keep in contact with his Society area’s population of over 400,000. But of course it was just because he could not do that, that the opinion leaders register was so vital and valid.

The idea aroused interest outside the Movement where colleges used the materials for their students to develop pilot schemes. A few Societies with officers prepared to take on extra work, did secure notable successes, particularly with items (1) and (2). Few tackled the opinion leaders register, although most today will have such databases on their computer - hopefully to inform and contact a wider group than just their actual small active membership. The idea of building up a network of contacts was taken on in the late 1980's particularly by officers in CRS. The apparent lack of success at the time, (1978) may be less so when looked at over a longer time scale. It was only one example, where initiatives from "Stanford Hall" were ahead of their time. Certainly looking back from a distance, there was probably too much optimism about how easily well-entrenched people could be moved; but equally it is now difficult to see why there was such a fuss at all.

Positive outcomes included the introduction that year of the **Co-operatives in the Community Awards** schemes and a **National Community Conference** at Stanford Hall which brought together a vast range of representatives from Societies and national organisations, including the Universities, The National Youth Bureau, and the BBC. Two new Community Officers, appointed at Stanford Hall, developed a close association with community groups nationally, via joint conferences and events. The problem simply was, that however worthwhile the linkages at that level, they got nowhere when not replicated locally; either the ability or will of local co-operative organisations was absent. An unexpected problem at national level, was that representatives of community groups, invited to Stanford Hall, wrongly visualised it as a wealthy institution, as a means for getting money rather than for mutual support.

The relatively poor response to that first campaign, did not inhibit a further initiative, "**SHARE**" a campaign to Start Helping Adults to Real Education - designed to enable the Co-op to take the lead in a movement for adult education. Had a majority of retail Societies even partly responded, the potential was there for putting Co-operative Education on the map. Despite a low level of response from Societies, the campaign got through to educational organisations throughout the country and secured substantial kudos nationally. It came to a climax with a **Remonstrance** on Friday 21st November 1980 with:

1. over 450 people lobbying M.P.s in Westminster
2. the placing of an early-day motion on the House of Commons order paper to secure a debate on the Russell Report on Adult Education
3. simultaneous lobbies, interviews with officials, and presentation of petitions that day to:

Downing Street
Home Office
Department of Environment
Department of Health and Social Security
Manpower Services Commission
Confederation of British Industry
Trade Union Congress
Department of Employment
Association of Metropolitan Authorities
Department of Education and Science
County Councils Association
Scottish Office

4. an evening rally in the Central Hall Westminster with prominent speakers

Bob Houlton secured far less credit than he deserved from the member side of the Movement for such gigantic endeavours. SHARE was therefore the last of the big time spenders; had member relations professionals had more co-operative insight, the writing of this history might have been different. Their reply, to that, is that both campaigns came at a time when many major Societies had other prime concerns, and were on the verge of going to CRS; prior marketing before announcing such huge plans was non-existent, and there was no infra-structure of support.

Following that, in the early 80's, an influx of a new generation of Member Relations officers were under the misapprehension that fundamental aspects of the Co-operative Movement, or even the world, might be changed by their leadership of a few votes at Education Convention. A majority of votes was seen as sufficient for making pigs fly; and the frustration that that aroused, was something that the Education Executive and Department had to deal with for a few years. Convention 1982 had resolutions expressing concern at the minimal response from the Education Executive to motions carried, and a demand for a **Convention Standing Orders Committee** - which was established. After that and with the expansion of CRS member professionals, more "non-political" officers were appointed; and the decision to hold 1982 Education Convention at Stanford Hall, changed its nature and helped College funds.

The Structure of Co-operative Education

During the late 70's, nearly every aspect of traditional operations was made the subject of examination: Education Convention, The Auxiliaries and the National Co-operative Education Association (NCEA). A Report

on **The Role of Education Convention** noted that attendance had declined over the previous 25 years from 800 delegates and visitors in the 1950s to 347 in 1977. The following extracts had the aim, at least, of provoking a response:

"Has this ritualistic, time consuming exercise, which has the form of democracy but little of the substance, now outlived its usefulness."

"If the Co-operative Movement is to become a driving force in education, and to exert influence nationally and locally, no longer can we afford one set of educational policies at national level whilst, locally, education committees follow a pattern of provision of activity, often a mixture of activities which were relevant a generation or more ago, combined with quasi-promotional events and unconnected with recommendations approved at annual conference."

Such references aroused and challenged the professionals, and others, and may in small part explain reactions to the 'Co-ops in the Community' packs. Thereafter and throughout the late 70s and early 80s there was a rapid development of communication with other national bodies. A successful high-flying **Conference on Informal Adult Education** was followed by CLEAR unit's launch of "Co-operation and Co-operatives in the Curriculum - A Pilot Project in Schools Liaison". The College started sponsoring displays at the National Institute of Adult Education Conference and at the WEA Conference. Coincidentally, in the first year that the College Policy Studies students attended the NIAE conference, LEA professionals there attacked its composition, asking why students were never represented. When Lady Plowden from the platform asked whether anyone was attending as a student, all were surprised to discover that the Co-op alone was well-represented.

August 1982 saw the Co-op Union's decision to reduce the number of Sections from eight to four, and to discontinue its servicing of the Sectional Education Councils. That had repercussion throughout the democratic side of the Movement and added to the administrative work and expense of the Education Department, which took on the servicing of impossibly huge and nonsensical sectional areas. The fact that this further reduction in responsibility and service by the Co-op Union would save money was suggested as a secondary consideration:

"It is stressed that the foregoing proposals are motivated primarily by the continuing requirement for the Co-operative Union to ensure that its structure reflects the changed and changing requirements of the Movement generally. The proposals would also give rise to an overall cost saving, although this cannot be quantified with any degree of accuracy at this stage."

No one outside officialdom could see how the reduced and transferred services better “reflected changing requirements” - unless that meant saving money.

Within the College Establishment, and by 1983, a policy of separation began, and grew to tremendous proportions. What had been an initial fusing together of responsibilities and provisions, was beginning to separate - and the split got worse. A report, that year, suggested that the traditional structure of the **Education Convention Annual Report** was both confused and confusing. From thenceforth two reports would be issued, one for the NCEA (just member education) and another as the Report of the Education Department and College. The Easter Education Conference agenda was thus amended, so as to exclude consideration of the work of the College, CLEAR Unit and even the Education Department itself - but a separate, printed report on those matters would in future be issued for information only. The Education Executive thus became no longer answerable to Education Convention for the major part of its responsibilities.

College and the Department

With the improvements in accommodation, equipment and hopefully in staff, the College and Department set about extending services and cutting dead wood (postal courses had to go). Many new initiatives were developed and continue (in changed form) to this day, eg the College Open Day first held in May 1980.

Diploma in Policy Studies. One of the first major College changes was to its long standing two-year residential Diploma in Political Economic and Social Studies (Dip PESS), which was run in association with the local Universities. Many Co-operative supporters and employees remember that course; and its abandonment met with resistance from tutors and students. They leafletted Congress delegates, sent joint letters to Co-op News and Morning Star, and a deputation of students met the Education Executive. Yet in its place a new more innovative provision, with no formal entry requirements, was developed - a Diploma in Policy Studies course to start in 1982. It was a second-chance education for those involved in community and voluntary organisations, who had missed out at school and whose work would benefit from a year's tuition at the College. The idea was that education should not take such people away from their roots by leading on to University attendance, but that after the course they would return, better qualified to give service to their local organisations. As it turned out many did see the course as an avenue to university entrance, but it was, and still is, a rare course of its kind, an asset to community education that the Department of Education and Science

continue financially to support, though regrettably now only for a 6 months course.

Another change was the introduction of a **Certificate in Management Studies** awarded by the Business Education Council in 1981, which replaced the Certificate in Distributive Management Principles (CDMP) which had also been a replacement for the old Diploma in Co-operative Management.

In January 1982, the likely consequences of the dissolution of the Distributive Industrial Training Board (DITB), set up in the mid 60's, became apparent. Societies had previously made payments and received grants for training; and had developed fairly extensive training departments and facilities at local level. With the Government abandoning the DITB could the Co-operative Movement create its own training framework? Education Executive proposals included the creation of national and sectional training committees. A series of consultations were held in various parts of the country and a mandate was established for a Voluntary Training System. Bob Houlton attempted to re-establish a central role for the College in staff training. He put in a huge amount of work, with all sectors of the Co-operative Movement, with the Manpower Services Commission who had to assess the voluntary training proposals (indeed the Education Departments proposals later became the standard by which the rest of the retail sector was judged), with the Retail Consortium and so on. But even so, the ideas for voluntary training in the Co-operative Sector found little favour, at that time, with Chief Officers.

By 1983 the College's **Management Training Scheme (MTS)** was facing difficulties. Started in 1964, it was the first co-ordinated attempt by Societies to recruit and train graduates for senior management posts. Some 117 trainees had taken part and half a dozen or so had reached Chief Executive Officer status, with many more in senior management posts. From quite small beginnings, with only four or five trainees in the initial years, the numbers had doubled in the 70's despite reduced advertising. The number of applications rose from 94 in 1977-8 to 521 in 1981-2. But numbers starting and completing the course did not similarly increase: 10 in 1977-8 and only 6 in 1981-2. When the scheme started, it had been a two year course, later reduced to one year, and by 1982 to only 6 months. Even so, the number of Societies willing or able to sponsor and later recruit, the plentiful supply of graduate applications was reducing.

Another large scale College initiative was the development of the residential requirements of the **Youth Training Scheme (YTS)** for retail Societies and other commercial organisations as well as the development of learning materials for on-site training. The most recognisable thing about the different groups then being catered for at the College was their differences; and that gave added value to the residential stay. The improved accommodation and facilities must also have been reasons for the continued

custom from overseas co-operatives, who sent contingents of overseas students via the British Council, and who were, for many years, a mainstay of College funding and gave the College a rich mix of culture and informal education that was unique.

Relations between College/Department and Co-operative Union

A projected deficit in 1981 of £460,834, brought the request for College Officers to reduce the figure to £395,000, thereby containing the deficit within the agreed 20% of the subscription income of the Co-operative Union Ltd. From then on, the concentration on new initiatives and looking outward was combined with years of introspective concern with finances, power struggles, structures and responsibilities.

By about 1984, the fusion of Member Education, the Education Department and the College, heightened in 1978, became the cause of disagreement; and plagued what might otherwise have been brighter relationships. The integrated approach went into reverse. The already-started separation between roles, responsibilities and organisations took on endemic proportions, becoming little short of a war, between the Education Executive or College and the parent body - even aspects of parentage became questioned. The three administrations - College, Member Education and Staff Training became increasingly differentiated; and a sleeping partner "The Trust" started cuckoo-like to command centre stage and push all else off. A new distinction, never envisaged before, differentiated what was termed *trade* from *charity*. Trade was what was done for the Co-op Union, (then designated by the College as a "trade association") and charity was what was done for anyone else.

The non-profit making Member Education service was no longer to be considered part of that "charitable" and social provision made available to members, pupils, students, and the community, but as a trade function. On the face of it, the proposed division seemed most extraordinary, when educational and cultural work of a non-profit-making nature was classified as trade, while those functions whose purpose was to make a profit were considered to be part of the charity. For instance the non-profit provision of member education and democratic services (another newly created distinction) were considered trade while the supposed profitable functions of the CLEAR unit, providing consultancy on a business basis, was part of the charity. The new division made sense only on the basis that anything to do with the Co-op Union was to be considered trade, and anything not to do with the Co-op Union was considered charity. The important thing here is that a "not-to-do-with-the-Co-op-Union" classification came into existence, and just grew and grew.

Study of the original College Trust Deeds 1943 was used as a means to claim independence from the Co-operative Union. The Charitable Trust started to become one thing and the Union something else - even though the Union was the Trustee, and the establishment owned by the trust was named in its deed as the "Co-operative College". People had not until then seen the need to differentiate the Trust as a separate and quite different entity from the Co-op Union, which was the trustee. Irrelevancies, even illogicalities, were used to support unsustainable arguments.

By June 1984 the Education Executive resolved that in view of the Union's change from a 'mutuality' to a 'mutuality and commercial organisation', the College had to protect itself: the Education Executive called for the development of the Stanford Hills Farm as a Youth and Staff Training Centre; for College officers to investigate alternative funding arrangements; for the full retention of the annual 20% of the Co-operative Union subscription: and for the retention of monies earned by the Department and College from educational activities.

By October 1984, the Education Executive approved the reallocation of member education services back to more specifically Co-operative Society work. There was to be "*a concentration on Society and member provision as against the public, community and school co-operative services*"; and "*a concentration on specific but limited objectives that depend essentially on the administrative contribution of the department itself, and not on local society organisation*".

By November 1984 the Education Executive again called on the Central Executive to endorse: the re-establishment of the 1944 commitment to a capital development and endowment fund; the re-designation of the sinking fund as the Capital Development and Endowment Fund; the retention in total by the Education Department and College of the full (20%) annual grant from the Union; the authorisation of the Chief Education Officer to bring forward plans for the more effective utilisation of the capital assets of Stanford Hall; and revised presentation of the annual estimates as between College and Department. In January 1985 historical documentation was exhumed which considered a suggestion that Societies directly fund the Trust and College, thereby short-circuiting the accounts of the Co-operative Union.

In conditions where the Co-op Union were supporting the College and Department to the tune of nearly £400,000 a year, the contrary argument was made that the Co-op Union were incorrectly or "improperly" profiting from the Trust. It was being suggested that, in fact all the physical and human resources at Stanford Hall were engaged in charitable work, but the financial benefits were not reflected in the Trust accounts but in the Union accounts. Consequently, any in-depth review of resources and engagements

located at Stanford Hall needed to examine carefully the costs, the sources of income and the contribution that the subscription income of the Co-operative Union made. The costs were broken into four elements:

Maintenance of fabric and gardens	£80,000
Costs of Sub-optimum Size	£80,000
Costs of Member Education and Democratic Services	£140,000
Costs of Management and Staff Training	£150,000

The argument was, that under such an allocation, the costs of the central education services amounted to £160,000 related to premises (ie, the Trust) and £290,000 related to services to Co-operative Societies. When compared with a total grant from the Co-operative Union of £390,000 they suggested that the other educational activities at Stanford Hall were providing support “to the tune of £60,000”. It was pointed out that the law forbids the Trustees of any charity to subvert its charitable aims to their own commercial purposes.

The events that followed seem to indicate that Co-op Union (mistakenly) accepted that view (not necessarily in terms of the arithmetic, but in terms of the threatening principle of self interest), rather than trusting Clause 17 of the Trust Deed where our predecessors (who actually wanted a Co-operative College to be of benefit to the Co-op Movement) sensibly foresaw the potential for conflict of interest and made provision for it, permitting the Trustee to contract with itself, and not be liable to account for “profits” so derived. Probably that was also why the Corporate body and not certain individuals, or even a committee, was made the trustee. “No person or group of people can be identified as being the Trustee” The reason for making the College a **Trust**, and not just the property of the Co-operative Union, or someone else, surely was so that no one could then sell it off and make money from it - not so that its affairs would primarily service anything other than the Co-operative Movement. Surely sense suggests that the founders made the Co-op Union the trustee of the College in order that the Union and the Movement would benefit from such a possession, that it would be (in Richard Kimberley’s words) “The Jewel in the Co-op Crown” and not a millstone round its neck for subsidising and developing perhaps worthwhile charitable, but non-Co-operative ventures. The whole idea that Stanford Hall “belongs” to the Co-operative Union and its member Societies (referred to as a “misconception”) was in 1989 being challenged.

The underlying logic of the Education Executive’s own arguments was that the posts of Chief Education Officer and Principal of the College should and could not be held by the same person. The connection with

the Union simply through the Trusteeship was being emphasised and concentrated on, to the exclusion of the more significant provisions of the Trust Deed itself. However, apart from that, the College did have an argument that under the funding arrangements, and in areas where it did make a profit by an improved performance over the budget, it could never retain what its efforts secured. Much of the argument was an attempt to secure the benefits of performance. So, by January 1985 the Education Executive was approaching the Central Executive:

to initiate discussions on the clarification of the legal status of the trusteeship of the Co-operative College:

and to ensure that all the relevant documentation including solicitors and counsels opinion be made available to the Education Executive.

In June the Union recognised that there had been confusion over recent years, as to the relationship of the Education Department to the College Trust, so that in some ways the two had come to be seen as almost synonymous. But the Trust **was** a general educational charity for the benefit of the public at large, even though the Co-operative Union Limited was the sole Trustee and even though the registered name of the Trust was 'The Co-operative College'. But equally there was no legal obligation on the Co-operative Union to underwrite or provide additional financial support for the Charitable Trust; and the Trust had no rights against the Union or the Co-operative Movement for additional support for the development of its premises, facilities or additional services.

A College discussion paper referred to the Executive's four year endeavours to clarify roles and responsibilities, and expressed concern because the current confusion might conceal a number of accounting and organisational practices which could be misleading to grant and scholarship-giving bodies, and might make the Union liable to legal action or accusations of misrepresentation. It claimed that in the Union's decision-making, the role of Trustee had been submerged over the past 40 years and the trade association role had been dominant. Charts divided responsibilities into those of The Trustee and those of the Trade Association. Income-raising provisions went one way (to the Charity) and costly mutuality service provisions went the other way, to the Union. College overseas and policy studies courses, the International Business School, College outside lettings and the CLEAR unit came under the former; and Member Education, Democratic Services and Staff Training were placed under the latter.

Various alternative possibilities for a **New Trust Body** were considered by the Education Executive and the possibility declared, that the next attempt by the Union to cut-back educational resources could precipitate a reaction which would project the problem into the public domain. In

response and by 1987 the first **Co-operative College Trust Board** was established with powers (as in the original deed) for "*the absolute management and entire control of 'The Co-operative College' and the trust fund . . .*" The Board was to consist of the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the Central and Education Executives and Chairman of the National Training Committee, with power of co-option. Notwithstanding that most of those people were not actually representatives of the committee that directly acts on behalf of that corporate body which is the sole trustee, the Trustee functions were nevertheless thus delegated; but any responsibility of the Central Executive remained; indeed it could be said that it increased, as the Central Executive then became also responsible for the actions of others. The Union rules and common sense might require an over-whelming majority of Central Executive members on any such body; but the alternative view was that those representatives would always be impotent in having to declare a personal interest. Carried to its conclusion the logic (based on a misinterpretation of the Trust Deed) was that control of the profitable, or growing areas, of College provision must be outside the hands of members of the Central Executive, or the "trade association".

Later, in 1991 a reduction of the board's wide powers was agreed - to act on behalf of the Trustee in all matters relating to the governance of the College as a charitable educational trust with responsibility for the execution and management of the Trust. It was also agreed that the Board would consist of 17 people including one college staff member and a former student. The Education Executive of the Union then lost more of its influence; acting in future only as Governors, with the College (Trust) Board determining broad policy and overall funding. London Region's Member Relations Committee welcomed the arrangements in a motion to Easter Convention 1987; and the College Report for 1988 was no longer the "Report of the Education Executive" but "A Report to the Education Executive".

It is ironic, that after the turmoil, the fears and warnings of the Charity Commissioners breathing down unspecified necks, it was later revealed, that on being contacted, the Charity Commissioners had apparently no records even of the existence of the Co-operative College Trust. Later investigations confirmed that the role of Trusteeship was not delegated to the Central Executive but was retained within the body corporate. The Union, as sole corporate Trustee of the Co-operative College Trust, remained primarily responsible for the discharge of the Trustee functions and for the management and control of the College and its Trust Funds. The mystery is, given that the Co-op Union was the body with the power, even in respect of the Trust, why did it not put its foot down, instead of

constantly capitulating, obfuscating and appeasing, by setting up different boards and making constitutional changes. Could not the dragged-out attempts to secure autonomy have been more strongly resisted and stifled?

The International Dimension

In the late 1980s and through the 1990s the College was increasingly involved with the international dimension - a long-time feature of the CLEAR unit. In just 1988 alone, one of the College staff was seconded to Nigeria, another contributed to two training programmes at the ILO Turin Centre, a third travelled to Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia, and a fourth visited Malaysia and Singapore to conduct a 'train the trainer' program. Projects were completed in Thailand and Bangladesh and secondments of staff with two colleges in Denmark had been carried forward. Study tours were organised for training managers from Egypt, Uganda and Bangladesh as well as hosting visitors from Japan, Nigeria, Uganda and Bangladesh. Other partnerships were underway with Botswana and Egypt. A major development during the year was the establishment of the International Committee for Training and Education of Co-operators (INCOTEC), serviced by CLEAR unit staff. Under CORTCO (Consortium of Retail Teaching Companies) an organisation started by the College, work was proceeding with home study packs, developed in association with Cornell University in America, and there were briefings on retailing for Japanese managers.

Against staff objections, the Hall soon got a large notice board designating itself as "The International Co-operative College" (ICC), notwithstanding that other Co-operative Colleges exist throughout the world, and even though that title differed from the name of the establishment as defined in the College Trust. Later annual reports bore the title "**International Co-operative College**" as did much else. Something must have happened in 1988, because the 1991 Report (for a College that had existed since 1946) was introduced as "the third annual report of the International Co-operative College"

Financial Problems

In January 1989 the Central Executive of the Co-operative Union issued a letter to all its member Societies, indicating the results of a Strategic Review. The proposals affected not only education, finance and organisation, but also the constitutional position of the Education Executive and the Sectional Councils. Devolved responsibilities would be further

withdrawn from the Education Executive and lines of accountability would be further changed. The Union's letter included: discontinuation of the taxation service; restricting Economic & Research Department to compilation of basic statistics; reducing the role of Sectional Boards and frequency of meetings. But of concern to the College and Education was a 20% reduction in the Union's basic subscription from societies, which would finance 'core' activities only, and which would in future exclude Co-operative Education, for which an additional subscription would have to be raised. There was not even the forlorn hope of an additional subscription for Democratic Services, but the abandonment of Sectional Education Councils as part of the Union structure (withdrawal of administrative support and finance).

Final adoption of the proposals would have meant not merely the end of Co-operative Education and Democratic Services, at central (and affectively at local) level, but, in the view of many, the end of any particular or specific useful purpose for the Co-operative Union itself. Several Central Executive Sub-Committees were (to be) abandoned and the Education Executive itself would be reduced yet once again, this time to an Education Advisory Committee.

The Education Executive's efforts, with Member Education, Staff Training and Democratic Services, to put the financial problem clearly onto the Co-op Union have been already noted. The Union was then proposing to do the same by off-loading "the problem" onto Societies who *"will be asked to fund the Union's activities in its support services for member education by way of a separate increased subscription to the National Co-operative Education Association fund."* The Union letter made quite clear that Member Education and Democratic Services were no longer to be considered core services - although the basic subscription would still cover grants to the Co-operative Party and Co-operative College Trust. Staff training equally (but more feasibly) would need to be self-financing. Again the reductions were justified by the rhetoric of better meeting "member societies changing needs". That could only make sense on the basis that Societies' needs are better met without the Union's services, ie by Societies retaining the money instead. In respect of the national and sectional structures, the impossible *"twin objectives of seeking to improve their effectiveness and also reduce costs"* was a euphemism for their near and complete abandonment.

Given the Union's new classification as a College customer, cuts in the Department's Education Budget could then be expressed only in terms of cuts in those services. By negotiation the cuts in the Education Department budget had been reduced from 50% to only 30% "of the member education expenditure". But did that include saved expenditure on democratic

services? The difference between democratic services and member education was never clear to me, but taking an estimate of half of the overall costs of £140,000 per year for the two, then the Union, by abandoning such democratic services had saved £70,000 there alone at the stroke of a pen.

But could the Education Executive, in the same way, save the same amount? It was in a bigger mess (of its own making) than it realised - or acknowledged. It had turned the Co-op Union into a customer of its own Trust and presented it with a bill for the estimated cost of member education and democratic services (in those days prices) at £140,000 and for staff training another £150,000, (nearly £300,000 in all). But now the trade association was either questioning the value, or deciding not to purchase directly the charged-for services.

If the customer would not pay or no longer wanted the services, how could the Education Executive save such large sums? Certainly not by sacking two relatively lowly paid Member Education Officers and withdrawing from what was a very minimal service to the Sections and saving £140,000; nor by sacking one, even more lowly paid, training officer, and a percentage of each of three tutors, and saving a further £150,000. Neither was a practical possibility. The Education Executive's own arguments had allowed the Union to save large sums. But what would such cuts have meant to the College and Department? Even that first proposed cut of 50% of "member education expenditure" could not be achieved without drastic cuts elsewhere. The illogicality of previous separative advocacies was becoming visible.

Concern abounded at lay and official levels; but the Co-operative Union was reported as suggesting that any wide-ranging discussion of the constitutional position of the NCEA and alternative strategies for its development would be premature. The Education Executive should not allow the topic to be debated at length at Convention; but should leave it for a meeting of the NCEA **after** Congress decision (ie when it would be too late). The Education Executive wondered whether that approach was compatible with the democratic traditions of co-operative education, and formulated a motion to Education Convention, which then went to Congress - viewing with grave concern the Central Executive's proposals and calling on Congress to endorse the recommendation of the Education Executive that education services should continue to form part of the core funding from general subscriptions.

For many years, well before this period, Co-operative education had been ever reducing in quality and quantity. It had suffered cut after cut and was a skeleton of its former self. By 1989 Co-operative Education (and by implication Co-operative democracy) was at a low ebb - with little

status, and unable to stand up for itself. So, it was surprising that the Central Executive's Congress recommendation was found to be unacceptable, and that of the Education Executive was accepted, on a vote of nearly two to one. Those working hard for that result could claim some success.

So the College had a respite but "the problems" remained. By July 1989 the Education Executive unanimously advocated that the future funding of education services should be on the basis of an "earmarked" index-linked grant from core funding. That was not accepted by the Co-op Union, but neither was it the normal way to charge a "trade association". The 1989 Union grant was projected at £296,000. It was also learned that following Congress decision, and defeat, the Central Executive had commissioned the Union's auditors to examine the Department's accounts/budget allocations without consultation with the Education Executive. Those investigations later tended to show that although budget allocations generally represented a fair distribution, it was the Education Department of the Co-operative Union, rather than the Trust, that was, if anything, being exploited - paying more than a fair share of costs. Normal sense would lead one to expect that those with delegated responsibility for that overpaying Education Department would have been concerned, but, as should be clear from the foregoing, the Education Executive was not fighting a battle on behalf of the Education Department, Member Education, or even Staff Training, but against the Co-operative Union and in favour of something called the Trust, a supposed but unlikely means of liberation; it was working against the very interests and provisions that it was the Education Executive's primary duty to be promoting and protecting - Co-operative Education, and not other charitable concerns.

By June 1990 the establishment of the College Trust Board was still not considered to have solved the problem as far as the Education Executive were concerned. Failure to resolve the problems surrounding the charitable status of the College, was reputedly having an adverse effect on staff morale and presenting difficulty in staff recruitment to professional posts in the College! Undaunted by that, by current financial difficulties, or that they were not the Trust Board, the Education Executive considered a long-term five-year plan - implementation of which would require substantial additional staffing resources, increasing the establishment costs of the College Trust by about 4.5% and the Education Department by 6%.

What was the basis for such optimism? Plans for the further utilisation of the estate were in hand. Work was going on to establish a Bereavement Trust which would require a separate building. In January 1990 approval in principal was given for building a housing estate of 300 houses, within the College grounds. Many saw that proposed development as detrimental

to the College's future; but in any case, after much expenditure of time and money, planning permission was not given for the project. In early 1992 the College had the chance to upgrade the Abbots Wing and provide en-suite facilities with support from the Department of Education and Science. Income was substantially increased by sophisticated marketing of the College facilities for hire by other organisations.

Yet other factors worked against the earning potential of the College. Over the years hotels were also turning themselves into conference centres, with the advantage of being closer to customers and able to supply higher standards of comfort. People's expectations in terms of standards were increasing; so that even the improved College conditions needed further upgrading at a time when the money was not available. Co-operative Society directors expressed discomfort and reservations about accommodation and food that was far superior to anything that the same individuals had once commended highly, only a few years earlier. At the beginning of this recorded period, everyone, including the overseas guests, had the same table-served traditional English meals. At the end of the period all were requiring different meals, with self-service for vegetarians, vegans, Moslems, Hindus and other cultural groups.

Another important factor was the escalating number of mergers between Societies during the period, their reduction in numbers, and their need for financial stringency. After a merger fewer people would be sent to courses or conferences. The increase in the size of Societies and the development of CRS and later CWS own services, even in member education or relations, equally meant less need and less support for what had been strong central agencies.

In staff training there was a 35% reversal in recruitment for residential courses at the College in 1991, with a substantial financial deficit, and notwithstanding a very wide range of specialist retail staff courses on offer. Only a few Societies were supporting the College. Analysis of records between 1988 and 1991 shows that about 75% of the patronage came from ten societies, about 50% from only four Societies.

Despite those factors, creditable results were reported in marketing the facilities and services of the College to new clients, in developing partnership projects with the agricultural co-operative sector, with the High Street multiples, local authority housing departments, the Manpower Services Commission, and retailers in the USA. The College also claimed to be an administrative centre for an international network dealing with agriculture, marketing, credit, fisheries and manufacturing. It played a prominent role in the development of the new National Council for Vocational Qualifications Certificates for retailing, and became a centre of excellence in undergraduate work-experience for the retail industry in

partnership with the CWS and the High Street multiples. Although the College's former role in staff training had long since been undertaken by Societies themselves, there was throughout the period a continuing development of training courses involving College staff, as well as separate bookings by milk and dairy, funeral and other managers, store detectives and so on.

But the organisational ethos of retrenchment was not compatible with Bob Houlton's more expansive and more enterprising outlook (as seen by me anyway) nor was it conducive to the maintenance of good relations between the Union and the College. The College had been moving farther away from the Co-operative Union and seeing its future prospects as better not being tied to its shrinking parent. Its charitable status became a means for declaring a degree of financial independence. The annual report for 1992 said that "*Co-operative societies need to be reminded that the College is a charity.*" and that they needed to fund it as such - given the problems Societies confronted, hardly the best form of appeal!

Whether the College (and Education Department) failed to get adequate Co-operative support (not just financial) because of its concentration on non-Co-operative provisions, or whether it had to concentrate on those other provisions and services because of inadequate Co-operative support, is not easy to decide. Such situations are often an interaction between the two, systemically operating with positive feedback and thus becoming a vicious circle.

The College was increasingly having to spend valuable time and money on marketing itself and its products, on public relations, rather than being able to devote its whole resources and attention to the job to be done. Lecturers and senior staff were privately expressing concern about the direction of events and about the intense secrecy and distant management style which had developed. Letters to the General Secretary calling for a proper analysis of potential and prospects (a business plan) received no response. Tutors and staff also became concerned as standard provisions were dropping, and with little new work replacing it. It was clear that it would not be long (given the high and unreducing rate of expenditure) before the institution was facing financial collapse. But they could see a future, provided strategies were changed, and markets and communication re-established with the Movement.

The threatened sale and rescue of Stanford Hall

In November 1994, members of the Central Executive acting for the trustee and fearing possible individual liability for losses, were persuaded to sell Stanford Hall, and announced immediately that it would be put on the market. That decision was based on a recommendation from the Principal

and Chief Education Officer himself - contradicting however the wishes of other senior staff, and decisions of both his Education Executive and Trust Board. The decision also ran counter to Congress's "acceptance", (or was the report only "noted?") just months before, of the Independent Review Committee's (IRC) recommendations for a business plan and a three year period within which the College and Department would attempt to market their services.

The IRC had examined the existing relationships between the Co-operative Union, the Co-operative College Trust and the National Co-operative Education Association, reviewed governance, management and performance and recommended a constitutional framework. Although it reported in April that the situation was desperate, nothing seems to have been done to implement any of its recommendations, before the decision to sell the building in November. The IRC had recommended that only on the basis of a clear plan formulated by a newly established Board, and only after it had become evident that attempts to generate greater income and to achieve self-sufficiency in pursuit of the activities central to the College Mission, and unachievable by any other realistic means, should any decision to dispose of the College site be reached by the Central Executive of the Co-operative Union, and **ultimately by Congress.**

In normal circumstances the decision to sell would have concluded the history of Stanford Hall and probably the College itself - although its continuance without the building was suggested, as was the strange possibility of its continuance in the same building, after the public sale (which was difficult to envisage unless someone else was proposing to take on what had become the Co-op Union's liability). What was actually going on behind the scenes is known only to a very few people - excluding me. It is hardly likely that the Principal and Chief Education Officer in advocating the sale of Stanford Hall, against opposition, was planning to make himself redundant - as in fact ironically turned out to be the case. The anticipated future for the Hall and College, and use of any funds arising from the sale, is a matter of speculation.

However such are the strong and inexplicable feelings of support for Stanford Hall, not only throughout the country but throughout the world, that there was instant uproar - from those who do feel it "belongs to them". Something unusual even in the history of Co-operative democracy occurred; the movement against sale was so strong and so diversified that it needed no organising direction. Everyone, including the most prominent and respected leaders in the Movement, took to the barricades without their call-up papers. They suggested that the sale of Stanford Hall was not the best, nor the only, solution to its problems and asked the Central Executive to think again. To the credit of the Central Executive, they did

not wait to face Congress, but changed their decision. They agreed to put into effect most of the recommendations of the IRC and quickly went ahead with the appointment of the new Board of Management with its first meeting in January 1995.

Faced with a new appointment, the Central Executive had second thoughts about the wisdom of separating the posts of College Principal and Chief Education Officer, as recommended by IRC, and a new post was instituted. Robert Wildgust was appointed Chief Executive, and, with a newly arranged management team, set to work on a business plan, in order to pull the College and Department round. And so, at the beginning of 1995, a second Bob era ended and a third one began. The changes now taking place at Stanford Hall are probably more drastic than those which were begun in 1977; and are being undertaken in much less fortuitous circumstances.

The rest of the story remains to be told, but it is anticipated with much interest and well-wishes from many people, who hope that, in their attempts to stop the Central Executive from trying to save the College by selling Stanford Hall, they have not saved Stanford Hall and lost the College.

Len Burch was Officer for Member Education for the Co-operative Union Ltd, based at Stanford Hall, from March 1970 until retirement in April 1992.