

A National Co-operative Archive

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The National Co-operative Archive, which has been set up by the Co-operative College, has created a research resource that will allow those interested in a wide range of subjects to access the documentary history of the co-operative movement.

The Archive's close links with the Rochdale Pioneers Museum offers the opportunity for research to be extended to include artefacts, which, with the documents, films and oral histories in the Archive give an unrivalled picture of the development of the movement from the eighteenth century to the present day.

The aim of the Archive is to ensure the safekeeping of the collections for future generations of researchers and to make original documents accessible, in many cases for the first time. The College is looking at the potential for improving access and with this in mind, an Archive Advisory Committee has been formed, made up of academics, practitioners and curatorial experts to advise on the policy of the Archive. The Committee's remit also covers the Rochdale Pioneers Museum, helping to bind the two together.

The major collections of the Archive include:

- National Co-operative Film Archive, including loan copies of some films for researchers and broadcasters.
- National Co-operative Oral History Archive.
- Correspondence collections including those of Robert Owen, George Jacob Holyoake and Edward Owen Greening.
- Material relating to the Christian Socialist movement.
- Original records of consumer co-operative societies including Royal Arsenal, South Suburban, Birmingham, Derby, Leicester, Enfield and St Albans.
- Journals from the early 19th century to the present day including *New Moral World*, *The Reasoner*, *The Co-operator*, *Co-operative News* and *The Producer*.

- Co-operative Party material.
- Co-operative Women's Guild pamphlets and journals.
- Records and photographic collection of the Co-operative Press.
- Co-operative Congress Proceedings and Co-operative Statistics.
- Congress reports and journals of the International Co-operative Alliance.

The Archive welcomes material which will be valuable to future researchers - the most recent such deposit is the collection of the records of the Co-operative Commission. Current research projects, such as the *Co-operative Lives* research discussed at the 2002 Co-operative Congress will ensure that the Archive will have collections relating to the activities of the later twentieth century as well as to that of earlier decades and centuries.

Background

The National Co-operative Archive has its origins in the early part of the twentieth century.

On the death of George Jacob Holyoake in 1906, consumer co-operative societies decided to build a memorial befitting a man who had done so much to spread the idea of co-operation throughout the UK and indeed the rest of the world.

The plans for Holyoake House - the first permanent premises for the Co-operative Union - included provision for a library. During Holyoake's lifetime he had ensured that the Robert Owen correspondence was transferred to the Co-operative Union and after his death, Holyoake's daughter Emilie Holyoake Marsh deposited her father's papers to join them. Over the years, the library grew and other archive collections were added.

In 1945 when the Co-operative College relocated from Manchester, the library was split. The next half century saw many deposits of archival material - some in Manchester, some at the College.

The beginning of a new century saw the decision to bring the collections together, to provide - for the first time - a truly national archive. The Co-operative Union's archive was

transferred to the Co-operative College and work began on combining the collections and converting the catalogues so that they can be accessed by researchers through the Archive's web site.¹

As part of this process, duplicate books and periodicals were identified, this will enable the Co-operative College to set up collections in different parts of the UK. The first of these, the Co-operative College Collection in Scotland, is based at the Heriot Watt University.

The Co-operative College holds the minute books and primary records relating to societies now forming part of the Midlands Co-operative Society. These documents show the development of co-operation through the family tree of societies that came together into the Midlands Society in a wide area covering Birmingham, Leicester, Kettering, Derby and Chesterfield. Other collections, such as the records of the Co-operative Group South Eastern, South Midlands and Northern England regions have been added to allow researchers access to the widest possible range of material. Electronic versions of the catalogues to these collections are being prepared and will appear on the web site in due course.

The relocation of the Co-operative College to the North West has led to some of the collections being temporarily placed in storage while suitable premises are identified. The most frequently consulted material remains freely accessible to staff and researchers. It was only necessary to close the Archive for ten days in August 2001 and it is anticipated that any closure when the Archive is moved to its permanent premises would be of similar length.

Researchers

The Archive is open to researchers by appointment. In living up to the co-operative principle of 'Open Membership' the widest possible definition of 'researcher' is used. This includes:

- **Academic researchers.** The Archive is used by students undertaking school projects as well as those working towards a doctorate.
- **Local history researchers.** Co-operative societies form an integral part of their communities, looking at the development of a society through published histories,

journals, co-operative directories and statistics often points towards changes in the life of the community.

- **Subject researchers.** 'From the cradle to the grave' is an accurate description of the subject areas that can be studied. The co-operative movement has a wealth of archive material covering a breadth that is not found in other archives. The most common subjects requested by researchers would probably be (in alphabetical order) dairies, education, employment, funerals, politics, retailing, women's studies, youth groups. Queries can, however, be on anything that co-operative societies have been involved with, such as cinemas², fish and chip shops (such as that of Rushden Co-operative Society³), housing, manufacturing, the peace movement, public houses, turkish baths, wartime rationing - the list is endless.
- **Biographers.** Those studying the lives of people involved with or who were connected to people who were involved with the co-operative movement.
- **Individual interest researchers.** Family history researchers can learn about a relative if they were well known within the movement, or can learn more about the organisations that played an important part in their relative's life. Occupiers of former co-operative premises sometimes wish to research the origins of the building and become interested in the activity that went on there.

Queries

The Archive receives queries from all over the world by post, telephone and email. It is not possible to undertake work on behalf of researchers - where queries cannot be answered swiftly, information is given so that enquirers can assess the amount of research required.

Other resources

The Archive maintains links with other archives which have major collections of co-operative or labour movement records such as the National Museum of Labour History, the Working

Class Movement Library and the Bishopsgate Institute and is represented on the Society for the Study of Labour History Archives & Resources Committee.

The links with the Society for the Study of Labour History have continued for many years, including through the co-publication with the Co-operative Union of a leaflet (most recently revised in the 1990s) called *Keeping Your Records*⁴ advising co-operative societies on the preservation of records.

During the 1970s the Co-operative Union completed the first national survey of society records. Questionnaires were sent to consumer societies asking for details of records kept by the society and of those which had been deposited with local archives. A second survey was taken in 1994 and it is anticipated that a third will be arranged, this time by the Co-operative College, during the next year. The results of the surveys are useful in locating materials held by societies.

The National Register of Archives (NRA), part of the Historic Manuscripts Commission lists the records held by public archives - including the National Co-operative Archive. The NRA's web site⁵ includes its database which can be searched by names of individuals, names of organisations or place names. This gives a quick and easy way of locating records and saves researchers the laborious process of locating and contacting archives in an area to find out if they have a particular organisation's records.

Gillian Lonergan is Learning Resources Manager and Archivist of the Co-operative College, with responsibility for the National Co-operative Archive and the Rochdale Pioneers Museum. She is also a past Chair of the Society for Co-operative Studies.

National Co-operative Archive Summary of Holdings

Books & Journals

Historical and current books on various aspects of the Co-operative Movement.

British Co-operative Societies – Facts & Figures

An extensive collection of published histories and journals of individual consumer and productive societies. Statistical information

dating from the 1870s. Registrar's Reports, Co-operative Union Directories, Co-operative Congress Proceedings, and Co-operative Statistics.

Records of Co-operative Societies and Organisations

Minute books, reports and original documents of societies which now form part of the Midlands Co-operative Society and the Northern, South Midlands and South East Region of the Co-operative Group dating from the mid 19th century.

Minute books and other documents relating to the Co-operative Press, the National Co-operative Fuel Managers Association and the Southern Co-operative Convalescent Association.

Minute books, publications and reports relating to co-operative auxiliaries such as the Co-operative Women's Guild, Co-operative Men's Guilds, National Guild of Co-operators, co-operative youth movements

The Co-operative Party collection including reports, journals and pamphlets.

International Co-operative Movement

Books, pamphlets and journals relating to the International Co-operative Alliance, including a complete set of ICA Congress Reports.

Historical Journals

The Collection includes runs of journals from the early 19th century, including King's *Co-operator*, *New Moral World*, Pitman's *Co-operator*, *Co-operative News* and *Scottish Co-operator*.

Film, Oral History & Photographic Collection

Collections include the National Co-operative Film Archive, the National Oral History Archive, Co-operative Press Photographic Collection and other photographs.

Correspondence Collections

Robert Owen social reformer, philanthropist and co-operator. Books and pamphlets by and about Owen and his work. More than 3,000 original letters and documents.

George Jacob Holyoake co-operative leader, secularist and social reformer. Books and pamphlets by and about Holyoake and his work. More than 3,500 original letters and documents.

Edward Owen Greening pioneer of co-operative co-partnership societies and a founder of the International Co-operative Alliance. Books and pamphlets by and about Greening and his work. Approximately 11,000 original letters and documents.

T W Mercer co-operative journalist. Collection of papers.

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Telephone 0161 246 2925 Email:
archive@co-op.ac.uk

Notes

- 1 <http://archive.co-op.ac.uk>
- 2 Society for the Study of Labour History Archives & Resources Committee *Keeping Your Records*. Co-operative Union, 1995
- 3 "Fishy Business" in Midland Societies: Chip Shop is Popular Centre. Co-operative News 28 May 1938.
- 4 Society for the Study of Labour History Archives & Resources Committee *Keeping Your Records* Co-operative Union, 1995.
- 5 <http://www.hmc.gov.uk/nra>