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How to cite this article:

Statham, M. (2019). Charles Sheridan Jones - The Co-operative Granite Quarries Limited and the Aberdaron Co-operative Housing Society Limited. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 53(3), 30-35.
<https://doi.org/10.61869/QMMF7221>

Charles Sheridan Jones — The Co-operative Granite Quarries Limited and The Aberdaron Co-operative Housing Society Limited

Michael Statham

On a trip to Bardsey Island in Gwynedd, North Wales (UK) in summer 2019, I spotted a derelict harbour in a cove called Porth y Pistyll on the North Wales coast near to Porth Meudwy at the tip of the Llŷn Peninsular. The skipper of the Bardsey ferry informed me it was built to service granite quarries. As a result of new research, the full historical significance of the site has now come to light. In 1907, journalist Charles Sheridan Jones took over a pre-existing quarry and jetty and formed The Co-operative Granite Quarries Limited. Others involved included journalist Cecil Chesterton, banker W. Walter Crotch, trade unionist Sidney Stranks, and civil and mechanical engineer William Stainton. The company replaced an existing timber jetty with a stone quay and by 1909 export of setts and macadam had commenced. Stainton also formed a subsidiary company The Coal Consumers Pioneer Society based at Plas yn Mhowys in Flintshire, Wales. Another subsidiary company The Aberdaron Co-operative Housing Society was formed to build a nearby model village designed by architect Harold Clapham Lander. Construction of several cottages was started, the remains of two of which are still extant, but the enterprise was of course highly speculative and doomed to failure.

Introduction

Anyone who has made the short ferry trip to Bardsey Island in North Wales from the small fishing cove of Porth Meudwy, near Aberdaron on the extreme western end of the Llŷn Peninsular, will probably have noticed the tiny harbour along the peninsula coastline at Porth y Pistyll. On the mainland, the cliff path leading south from Porth Meudwy passes above the harbour and those who have approached the path across fields from the hamlet of Bodermid Uchaf may also have noticed what appear to be ruined cottages in a roadside field. Just above the cliff path, there is a small quarry in the rocky outcrops called Craig Cwlwm. These are some of the remains of the activities of the Co-operative Granite Quarries Limited and its subsidiary company the Aberdaron Co-operative Housing Society Limited.



Porth y Pistyll harbour seen from the Bardsey Ferry

Charles Sheridan Jones (1874-1925)

Charles Sheridan Jones was a journalist who, between 1901 and 1903, had covered the strike at the Penrhyn slate quarry in Bethesda for the *Daily News*. The reasons for, and the social effects of, this bitter dispute, which is still one of the longest in British history, were set out in

Jones' poignant work *What I saw in Bethesda* (Jones, 1903). It was in this pamphlet that he suggested the formation of workers' co-operatives to quarry slate on state-owned land in North Wales.

Initially he worked as Secretary for the North Wales Quarries Limited, set up in 1903 by W. J. Parry the leader of the Quarrymen's Union and the Labour MP Richard Bell. However, although this made a small profit in the early days, a recession in the building trade did not help and it was soon running at a loss and had to lay off many of its workers. By this time Jones had anyway become disenchanted with Parry's management style and in 1906 helped set up the National Co-operative Quarries Limited under the chairmanship of Labour MP John Hodge. The company's prospectus tried to promote the use of slate by including an article by architect Harold Clapham Lander which was illustrated with photographs showing 'the artistic effect' of slate (National Co-operative Quarries, 1906, p. 8). However, this enterprise also struggled to make a profit.



Partial view of quarry from cliff path



Craig Cwlwm Quarry



Partly constructed quarrymen's cottages on the site of model village

The Co-operative Granite Quarries Limited

Aware of the problems which beset the slate industry, Jones had already turned his attention to the exploitation of granite, a material for which demand was perceived to be more buoyant due to the pressing need for road improvements. Around the turn of the century, a small enterprise making granite setts had been set up by Hugh Evans on land at Bodermid Isaf farm near Aberdaron. As the nearest railhead was at Pwllheli some 17 miles distant, Evans had built a rudimentary stone and timber landing stage in the nearby cove of Porth y Pistyll in order to be able to ship his products by sea. The embryonic operation was brought to Jones' attention and he formed the Co-operative Granite Quarrying Pioneer Society Limited. This led to his setting up the Co-operative Granite Quarries Limited, which was registered under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act, 1893 in 1907 with a capital of £10,000 and £5,000 in loan stock. An early company prospectus, which includes an article entitled, *The Problem of the Roads*.

Aberdaron Granite: An efficient and economic solution, describes the enterprise as “an effort in constructive social reform” (Co-operative Granite Quarries, 1907).

The directors were W. Walter Crotch, Charles Sheridan Jones, Cecil Chesterton, Edwin J. Fletcher, and Sidney Stranks. The company’s Consulting Engineer was William Stainton (Co-operative Granite Quarries, 1907, p. 6). William Walter Crotch (1874-1947) the chair, was first and foremost a journalist and social critic. In 1901 he had written *The Cottage Homes of England*, a scathing report on the state of rural housing in England. In August 1908, he wrote a promotional article for the Company entitled *The Treasure House of Wales*. At the time of his appointment to the Board of the new quarry company, Crotch was Deputy Managing Director of Farrow’s Bank. Known as the ‘People’s Bank’, it had been founded by James Farrow for the benefit of small investors to whom it offered more favourable rates of interest than other banks. Both Farrow and Crotch were jailed for ‘conspiracy to defraud’ when the bank failed in 1920 (Hollow, 2014, p. 174).

Cecil Edward Chesterton (1879-1918) was the youngest brother of G. K. Chesterton. He had worked in publishing for a while before training as a surveyor with the intention of joining his father’s firm of estate agents. However, in 1900 he met and fell in love with the older socialist journalist Ada Elizabeth Jones (1869-1962), Charles Sheridan Jones’ sister, who encouraged him to become a journalist. Chesterton wrote a promotional pamphlet for the Pioneer Company setting out the application of co-operative principles to be applied to the granite industry (2017). Later, financed by his father, he became editor of the *New Witness* with Ada as his assistant. In 1916 he joined the army as a private soldier and Ada finally agreed to marry him. He was three times wounded during WW1 and died of nephritis in a French hospital on 6 December 1918, with Ada at his bedside.

Sidney Stranks (c1868-1953) was a trade unionist and life-member of the Operative Society of Masons, Quarrymen, and Allied Trades, which in 1921 merged with the Manchester Unity of Operative Bricklayers’ Society and the London Order of Operative Bricklayers’ Society to form the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers. Stranks had stood as labour candidate for Croydon in 1906, where he was beaten into third place. He was later elected to Lambeth Borough Council and between 1923 and 1934 served on the London County Council. Together with Chesterton he helped promote the enterprise, speaking at conferences and meetings.

William Stainton (1851-1929) was a consultant civil and mechanical engineer who had reported on several mines in Cardiganshire. His report (1907) recommended that the company first needed to replace Evans’ existing timber jetty with a stone and cement wall and create enough space for up to 50 men to work and with funds coming in, work was started on this project. In the UK Government’s annual list of quarries, the company appeared in 1908 and in 1909 and was stated to employ twenty-six (HM Inspector of Mines, 1910).

The Aberdaron Co-operative Housing Society

What the Directors and the Consultant Engineer seemed to have failed to take into consideration was that, due to the remote location of the quarry and serious lack of suitable accommodation in the area, they would find it difficult to attract skilled workers to the site and this became a serious problem. In December 1907, Bodermid Isaf farm, which adjoins Porth y Pistyll, came up for sale (Stephenson & Alexander Records, 1907) Spurred on by the idea of building their own accommodation, the 72-acre holding was purchased for £1,160, the deposit having been paid by Jones. The subsidiary Aberdaron Co-operative Housing Society Limited was registered in January 1908 and a circular letter appealing for more funds was sent out (Aberdaron Co-operative Housing Society, 1908). Initially it was set up with an issue of Capital of £5,000, which was later increased to £10,000, together with £3,000 of Loan Stock. Initially the directors were Jones and Crotch, with Harold Clapham Lander as the consultant architect. Later George H. Roberts MP also became a Director.

Harold Clapham Lander (1868-1955) was heavily involved in the Garden City movement. The idea of a Garden Village at Aberdaron was first aired in an article in *The Citizen* on 8 February 1908 (Aberdaron Co-operative Housing Society, 1908). Lander drew a layout of the proposed development, which comprised 91 cottages on a tree-lined street in terraces of 3, 4, 5, and 6 units, most with front and back gardens. The plan included provision for a block of shops, a reading room and club facing a village green. Sites were set aside for a school and a church or chapel, together with an area for private bungalows overlooking the sea. Lander also drafted a bird's eye view sketch of part of the estate showing two story properties of varying design, which were not dissimilar to designs later used at Letchworth (Aberdaron Co-operative Housing Society, 1908).

Ada Elizabeth Jones, under her pseudonym of John Keith Prothero, wrote an article entitled *Aberdaron: A Co-operative City*, which accompanied Crotch's *Treasure House of Wales*. These two articles, dated August 1908, are illustrated with photographs showing progress to date at the harbour, quarries, and model village. A perusal of two photographs of building work at the model village compared with those left standing today tends to suggest that there were probably more partly erected cottages built than those still extant. The two articles were followed by updated prospectuses of the granite and housing companies (John Johnson Collection, 2011). The whole exercise was obviously undertaken in a desperate attempt to raise further capital.

Further Financial Over-extension — The Coal Consumers Pioneer Society

In addition to the Housing Society, another subsidiary company, the Coal Consumers Pioneer Society Limited, was launched to supply the quarry workers and others with cheap coal. This was to be achieved by distributing coal direct from the mine to the consumer, via depots in Liverpool and Aberdaron, thus cutting out the intermediaries. The coal was to be won by reopening Plas yn Mhowys Colliery near Mold in Flintshire. The only archival material so far seen for this Company is a Loan Stock Certificate (L. Pohl, personal communication, 2019, 29 October). The Government List of Mines for 1908 stated the company employed sixteen men below ground and two above ground (HM Inspector of Mines, 1909).

Charles Sheridan Jones v *Financial Times*

On 18 January 1908, the *Financial Times* published an article headed *Co-operative Granite Quarries — Old and New Methods of Company Promotion — Another Welsh Rarebit*. It highlighted the highly speculative nature of the schemes and to give a flavour of its content one sentence stated,

... It does not say much for the foresight of these clever people that they lead their credulous followers into a scheme, without apparent regard to the difficulties referred to, which they did not discover, or at any rate disclose, until they had obtained the subscriptions of the Quarry scheme ... (The Times 1909, 13 July).

This adverse publicity had the effect of warning off any further prospective investors. Jones considered the article an attack on his personal integrity and after taking legal advice he sued the *Financial Times* for libel. The case came up in the High Court in July 1909 and was reported in some detail (The Times, 1909, 13, 14, 15, 16 July). By this time, the granite company was actually trading, having supplied setts and macadam to Lancashire County Council and Rochdale Corporation.

On examination in court it transpired that there were certainly some difficulties in operating the quay, particularly in bad weather. One account mentioned that on one occasion, whilst attempting to unload a cargo of coal, the vessel *Enterprise* had to depart in such a hurry it left one of the crew on the quay. There were serious doubts about the viability of the coal company

and at one point in the proceedings the Court had descended into laughter after Council for the Defendant read a spoof advertisement which stated,

Praise the Lord of Hosts, for he is good and His mercy endureth for ever. Plas yn Mhowys Coal.
We are now supplying coal cobbles and nuts for those who cannot afford to pay higher prices for it.
Particulars may be had on application. – Yours Faithfully in the Lord, Jas. Mason and Son (Hull Daily Mail 1909, 14 July).

The Court also heard that there were suspicious accounting discrepancies in the company books, and that there had been great difficulty in attracting skilled workers to the quarry. It transpired that in all, the companies had received £17,743 as of December 1908 (equivalent to over £2m today) of which more than £10,000 had been spent on promotion and advertising and only £300 was left in the coffers. This, together with all the other evidence heard, led the court to conclude that the *Financial Times* article represented only “fair comment” and was not libellous in any way (Evening Express and Evening Mail, 1909, p. 2). Jones, who had sunk most of his own money in the scheme, lost the case and costs were awarded against him. His total legal expenses amounted to around £1,500, added to which he had outstanding guarantees of repayment of monies advanced on behalf of companies to meet, which he could not pay. He was declared bankrupt in May 1910 with total liabilities of £2,909:7s:6d against realisable assets of £308:10s (Times, 4 May 1910).

Exactly when the quarry closed is unknown, but as late as 15 December 1909, it was reported in *Truth* that the secretary of the Aberdaron Co-operative Housing Society Limited was to send out a prospectus with a circular “commending it to all” (p. 14). In February 1910, the Sheriff of Carnarvonshire seized certain of the quarry company’s goods and chattels and it was reported that their ownership was in dispute (Liverpool Echo, 1910, 19 February, p. 7). This dispute evidently continued well into 1911 but the outcome has not yet been determined. Bodermid Isaf farm was advertised for sale in early December 1910 (The Herald, 1910, 9 December, p. 4) and a further advertisement three weeks later stated that ‘several cottages are in the course of erection on the farm, for which there is a good demand’ (The North Wales Observer and Express, 1910, 30 December, p. 4). The Co-operative Granite Company was offered for sale in 1914 (Western Mail, 2014, 4 June, p. 2), but presumably there were no offers and all three companies were officially wound up in 1915 (Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer, 1915, 3 November, p. 5).

Conclusion

Anyone who was familiar with the remote location, and just how poor living conditions in Aberdaron were in the early 20th Century, should have realised from the outset that a great deal more capital than that which the Company said it needed would have been required for the development to have had any chance of success. However, this did not stop one Frank Jackson from attempting a revival in the 1930s, which also failed, but that is another story (Statham, 2020).

The Author

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