



Encyclopaedia of co-operatives in South-east England [CD]. By Ron Roffey and Peter Collier

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Encyclopaedia of Co-operatives in South East England

By Ron Roffey and Peter Collier
CD-ROM Resource 2nd edition 2016.
Available from comms@petercollier.me.uk

Telling stories is powerful. It can provide the basis for personal and collective identities by creating broader narratives in which people can locate and have validated their own experiences and, in some cases, prejudices.

During 2017, co-operators will be celebrating the bicentenary of the birth of one of our movement's greatest story-tellers, George Jacob Holyoake. However, recent debates around Britain's proposed exit from the European Union, the US Presidential election campaign and the rise of so-called "Post-Truth Politics" have illustrated the dangers of promoting and holding beliefs that are not based upon what might traditionally be regarded as facts. It is in this context that the importance of Ron Roffey's work in compiling this encyclopaedia can be seen.

The origin of this piece of work is in a project that Ron began in 1990 following his retirement from a life-long co-operative career to collect and catalogue documents and artefacts relating to the co-operative societies of South East England. For the purposes of the project, the South East is defined as the areas of Greater London, Kent, Sussex, Surrey and Berkshire, plus the parts of Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Essex where the former London Co-operative Society and Enfield Highway Co-operative Society traded. Having served as Secretary of the former Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society (a position which in that society was subject to election by the members) and then, following the merger with the CWS (now the Co-operative Group), as Regional Secretary for the South East, Roffey was uniquely placed to undertake this task.

Starting in his former office at Woolwich, the archive grew to occupy several floors of the former Co-operative Department Store there and included thousands of objects, documents, sound recordings, transcripts and computer equipment on which a comprehensive catalogue was assembled. At the time, this comprised one of the largest co-operative collections in the country. When the building was sold for redevelopment, the collection needed to be rehoused. In the absence of any single organisation being willing or able to take it on, the material was dispersed and one function of the Encyclopaedia is to record exactly where the items ended up and what they were. The CD-ROM also includes historical notes on every known co-operative society that has traded in the area it covers, transcripts of interviews of people who were involved, a complete reproduction of the text of previously unpublished and informal histories of some of the earlier societies and associated photographs, maps and statistical tables.

As with an earlier book, *The Co-operative Way* (Roffey 1999), the encyclopaedia does not purport to provide an interpretation of the history of the co-operative movement in South East England, why things happened the way they did and whether they might have worked out differently. Rather, it assembles the sources available and the information known on each organisation as a resource for current and future historians to use. It is to be hoped that the act of compiling this important resource will itself stimulate some of that work to begin.

The material contained in the encyclopaedia deserves a wider audience. It has been formatted in a way that should be relatively easily to upload onto a web site and this is something that the UKSCS History Network or the Co-operative Heritage Trust might consider doing. It also raises

some important issues that the co-operative movement needs to consider in terms of managing our common heritage.

Thanks to the work of the Co-operative Heritage Trust and the National Co-operative Archive, the paper records of the movement are now relatively well-catalogued and looked after and initiatives such as the Worker Co-operative Archive Project are encouraging more recent items to be identified and saved. Whether they are held centrally in Manchester or in local record offices, what documents survive and where they can be found can be searched through the Archives Hub web site (<http://archiveshub.ac.uk/>) or the National Archives' Discovery web site (<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>). However, the same cannot be said of objects and ephemera.

The author of this review was involved in dispersing a collection of co-operative artefacts in Birmingham during 2013 and can attest to the difficulty of finding museums and other collections willing to take these materials, yet we know that in terms of story-telling, a tangible item can communicate much more memorably than words or pictures alone. Perhaps Ron Roffey's work in producing this encyclopaedia could mark the start of a much more systematic attempt to record and share details of where the movement's rich heritage of objects can be found?

The Reviewer

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