

The Co-operative Societies of South Wales Collection at Swansea University

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The Co-operative Societies of South Wales Collection (collection reference SWCC/MND/137) held at Swansea University Archives has recently been catalogued. It comprises a diverse range of material relating to the history of co-operative societies in South Wales: minute books, title deeds, reports and balance sheets, correspondence, staff and society papers, publications, photographs, research notes and ephemera. It is now being brought to public attention and it is hoped to encourage further investigations into the history of the co-operative movement and individual societies in South Wales as this appears to have been under-researched in the past.

The collection of material relating to the co-operative societies held in the South Wales Coalfield Collection at Swansea University was significantly augmented in 2007 when more material covering the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was deposited. The South Wales Coalfield Collection was established in 1969, when it became apparent that the documentary heritage of the area was at risk of permanent loss. Material, including a significant number of oral history recordings, was collected as a result of two research projects supported by the University in the 1970s and 1980s, and was continued in subsequent projects. Whilst the majority of the collection relates to miners' institutes, trade unions and those individuals involved in them, documents relating to co-operative societies within the coalfield were also saved.¹

In contrast to this the recent deposit solely relates to the co-operative movement, with the focus being on societies in South Wales, particularly the coalfield area. The collection has been now been catalogued, courtesy of a grant from CyMAL: Museums Archives Libraries Wales, a division of the Welsh Assembly Government, and its widely varied contents are available for consultation by researchers in the searchroom of Swansea University Archives.² The collection is a wonderfully rich mix of documents ranging from contemporary formal business records, such as rules, minutes, and report and balance sheets, both originals and copies, to late twentieth century historical notes about individual societies and original and reprints of photographs, and provide an illustration of the ubiquitous nature and continuous presence of the co-operative movement in South Wales from the late nineteenth century onwards.

The collection has been arranged into three series: minute books, research files; publications. The series of minute books and research files have then been organised alphabetically. Whilst the minute books have been arranged chronologically, the research files, which have a series of miscellaneous files at the end, have been subdivided into text and image within each file, and then arranged chronologically. The eclectic mix of documents found within the research files being the reason for this. In contrast to the more complex arrangement of the research files the publications follow a simple chronological plan.

Although small in number, the minute books, which give a wonderful insight into the management of a society, complement the selection already held. In some instances they add to existing runs. For example for the Aberdare Co-operative Society for which Swansea University Archives previously held 1871 to 1986, there are now also the minutes for 1986 to 1988, thereby holding the minutes for the society from shortly after its establishment until the transfer of its engagements to Co-operative Retail Services Limited. For other co-operative societies minutes are now held where none were before: Blaengarw and Llangennech Co-operative Societies. The minutes of productive societies are also new additions, with those for the Rhondda Co-operative Productive Butchery Society covering 1925 to 1934.

Within the research files other official business papers can be found, such as rules and their subsequent amendments. The rules of the Rhondda Co-operative Butchery Productive Society for 1921 are extant, together with those from 1928 by when its name had been altered to the Rhondda

Co-operative Productive and Service Society. There are also the rules of the Mid-Glamorgan Co-operative Boot Repairing Society Limited from 1952, but the majority of volumes of rules relate to consumer co-operative societies, including those for Garndiffaith and Varteg, Blaenavon and Ynysybwll amongst others. There is also one instance of rules for staff organisations, namely the staff association of the Mid-Rhondda Co-operative Society, dated 1968.

The report and balance sheets that form part of the collection give valuable information not only about the finances of a society but also the context and the circumstances faced by their members and the locality. For example in the report and balance sheet for the six months ended 10 November 1925 the committee of Gorslas Co-operative Society states the adverse conditions that the society has faced during the first quarter of the twentieth century: World War One and specific mention to rationing, a succession of strikes, and "the great slump in trade and reduction of wages in the coal mines". However, in spite of these difficulties in establishing the society the committee reports that "the result is quite as good as we expected" and that it is "one of the best societies in South Wales to-day".³ Not every society represented in the research files has an example of report and balance sheets, but one which has a particularly good collection is Cardiff Co-operative Society. As well as report and balance sheets for 1936, when it transferred its services to Co-operative Retail Services, there is also a fairly consecutive run of report and balance sheets for 1945 to 1964.

The movement from small independent local co-operative societies to larger amalgamations and then to regional and national organisations can also be gleaned from the collection. The research files for Ynysybwll Co-operative Society contain photocopies of papers including an assignment by the Senghenydd and Aber Valley Co-operative Society (in liquidation) to the Ynysybwll Co-operative Society of property at Senghenydd and Abertridwr in 1940. The lead up to the mergers of the Mid-Rhondda Co-operative Society with Ton Co-operative Society in 1968 and with the Treorchy Co-operative Society in 1971 are quite well documented in a variety of correspondence and other papers. The miscellaneous

research files also contain records recording the dates of foundation, registration, merger and dissolution of co-operative societies in South Wales, and some elsewhere.

Correspondence about a diverse range of subjects, including the histories of a handful of societies, is also found within the research files. However, there are more numerous letters regarding business affairs of the societies. One piece of correspondence which stands out is a letter of thanks to Ton Co-operative Society from Treorchy Co-operative Society, shortly after bread rationing was introduced, expressing their gratitude for their assistance following the breakdown of the bakery. The Treorchy Co-operative Society are effusive in their praise of the actions of the neighbouring society, stating that it was "co-operation in its fullest sense".⁴ There are also letters regarding financial matters and property, such as that held in Six Bells, Maesteg and Newport, sometimes accompanying title deeds and other legal papers.

The variety of material found in the research files extends far beyond business papers for individual and encapsulates the richness of the co-operative movement. The international element of co-operation is illustrated by the inclusion of a programme for the sixteenth International Co-operative Day, 2 July 1938, Festival of Co-operation held at Empire Stadium, Wembley. Documents demonstrating the celebration and commemoration of individual co-operative societies are found throughout the research files. These range from published histories of societies such as *Abersychan British and Talywain Industrial Co-operative Society Ltd Coming-of-Age Celebrations July 8th 9th and 10th 1911 History and Progress of the Society for Twenty-One Years to A History of Blaengarw Co-operative Society, 1890-1990* produced by Co-operative Retail Services as part of Co-operative Heritage Wales. In addition to published histories there are also photographic illustrations of co-operative events such as the opening of stores, including the Leo's superstore at Porth in 1988, and a postcard of the jubilee parade by Cwmbach Co-operative Society on 23 June 1910.

The social aspect of co-operative societies is apparent through the research files, both in text and image items. There is a programme

and menu for a Christmas event of the Co-operative Wholesale Society, South Wales Depot, on 16 December 1937 and a photograph of the buyers and salesmen of CWS Cardiff Depot at their annual cricket match, Porthkerry Park, Vale of Glamorgan, on 15 July 1909. There are also photographs of other staff outings and of trips participated in by members of various societies, such by the Ferndale Co-operative Society in the early twentieth century and that made to Cardiff in 1932 by Blaengarw Co-operative Society. Other documents illustrative of the social aspect of co-operative life include a programme for the Blaina CRS Employees' Staff Association Social Committee presentation dinner dance, 9 January 1963, correspondence and programmes for various choirs, and a photocopy of an article in *The Co-operative Home Magazine*, about the National Co-operative Sports Association Bowls Triples Tournament in 1955.

This breadth of variety within the recent deposit makes it stand apart from the more business orientated material found in the earlier collections. For example many of the research files contain photographs, both originals and reprints, which are a type of document not featured in the material collected as part of the South Wales Coalfield projects. One notable instance of this is the collection of reprints of photographs of the staff at Garndiffaith and Varteg Co-operative Society from the 1920s and 1930s, as individuals and in groups, including on the roof. A particular bonus with these photographs is that many have the names of the individuals in the images written on the back. There are many photographs of the exteriors and interiors of stores, often with staff, from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. These photographs often give more than just architectural interest, with many showing elaborate window displays and occasionally notices, such as that for the chocolate club at Pembroke Dock Co-operative Society and the Christmas Club at Llantwit Fardre Co-operative Society.

The research files also contain other types of document not found in the earlier collections. For example there are many newspaper cuttings giving information about the opening, operation and closing of stores and co-operative societies. The volume of newspaper cuttings compiled about Cardiff is

noteworthy as the only example of a compilation of such work, for the period covered (1944-1959) and for the articles contained within, such as the opening of a self-service in 1957, as well as other items of interest such as fashion shows, appointments and retirements, weddings and anniversaries, robberies and court cases etc from a variety of publications. In addition to cuttings from the local press there are also examples in the research files of co-operative publications, such as a selection of the Aberdare Co-operative Society versions of *The Wheatsheaf* and *Co-operative Home Magazine* between 1898 and 1963.

Extracts from co-operative publications are also found in the research files. The miscellaneous files contain a couple of photocopies from cookery publications - *From Savoury to Sweet* and *Family Fare*, both Co-operative Wholesale Society publications. Other forms of advertising are also represented in the miscellaneous research files, such as handbills promoting English & Scottish Joint Co-operative Wholesale Society Tea, and photocopies of advertisements for non-food products including as bicycles, flooring and kitchen appliances. There is also a volume of advertising sketches compiled for use by co-operative societies. In addition to advertising goods there is also evidence of co-operative societies taking new approaches to highlighting their existence. For example, as well as featuring on programmes for events, such as sports matches and theatrical performances, the Mid-Rhondda Co-operative Society also advertised their business on the dust jacket for books issued by Tonypany branch of Rhondda Public Libraries.

In addition to the co-operative societies and their business there is also a selection of documents relating to the Co-operative Women's Guild. Amongst other material in the research files for the Co-operative Women's Guild there are a few magazines, and in the publications series there is a poster celebrating the Co-operative Women's Guild Centenary, 1883 to 1983. Within the series of minute books there is a volume of minutes for the Llanelli Branch of the Guild, 1975 to 1977. This volume includes the annual reports for 1975 and 1976 and a small amount of correspondence, recording the thoughts of the branch on matters ranging from a lost prize

winning jumper to an Abortion Bill. There is also an account book of the West Wales District of the Guild for 1969 to 1999, adding to an earlier account book and other documents relating to the District already catalogued as part of the South Wales Coalfield Collection.

The collection held at Swansea University Archives is a broad range of documents, full of research potential and general interest, and

it is supported by the substantial assortment of printed material on co-operative societies and the co-operative movement held at the South Wales Miners' Library.⁵ It is hoped that the collections at Swansea University will be of relevance not only for those with a connection to the coalfield and South Wales but also to those with a wider interest in the co-operative movement and we look forward to receiving enquiries.

Katrina Legg, Assistant Archivist at Swansea University. Catalogued SWCC/MND/137 (Co-operative Societies of South Wales Collection) and created webpages on Co-operative Societies in the South Wales Coalfield for the Coalfield Web Materials site (www.agor.org.uk/cwm/themes/co-op).

Notes

- 1 For more information about the South Wales Coalfield Collection see <http://www.swan.ac.uk/swcc/>
- 2 Swansea University Archives are open by appointment only, Monday to Friday 09:15-13:00 and 14:00-17:00. To make an appointment please contact the Archives by post (Swansea University Archives, Swansea University, Singleton Park, Swansea SA2 8PP), telephone (01792 295021), or email (archives@swan.ac.uk). For further information about Swansea University Archives see <http://www.swansea.ac.uk/lis/historicalcollections/Archives>
- 3 SWCC/MND/137/2/32/2
- 4 SWCC/MND/137/2/70/9
- 5 For more information about the South Wales Miners' Library see www.swansea.ac.uk/lis/historicalcollections/swml