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Early Years of Co-operation in the Chorley District

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We are in danger today of forgetting how important the Co-operative movement was in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There is a case that could be made that in the century following the establishment of the Co-op shop in Toad Lane, Rochdale, the Co-operative movement was the most successful enterprise in the country. Leaving aside its businesses, through its dividend system, its educational activities, its youth and women's activities and the Co-operative Party, it gave ordinary people a chance to shape their own lives. By 1950 it had 12 million members and as a mass organisation it dwarfed other mass member organisations such as the Labour Party, Trade Unions and even the Church of England.

My interest in this topic was triggered initially in 2008 by my attendance at a study day run by the Institute of Local and Family History at UCLAN in Preston. The day focussed on different aspects of the Co-operative movement, but I was particularly taken by a talk on Co-operative Cotton Companies. Reference was made to there being such a company in Chorley, about which little was known.



1 Robert Owen as depicted in a memorial at his grave in Newtown churchyard, Powys.

Like anyone who has studied 19th century Economic and Social History, I was aware of the main threads of Co-operative history; of the idealism of Robert Owen and of the later development of retail co-operation based on the successful model of the Rochdale Pioneers. But of Chorley I knew nothing, other than being aware that at one time there had been a Chorley Co-op, before it had been subsumed into larger and larger amalgamated Co-ops.

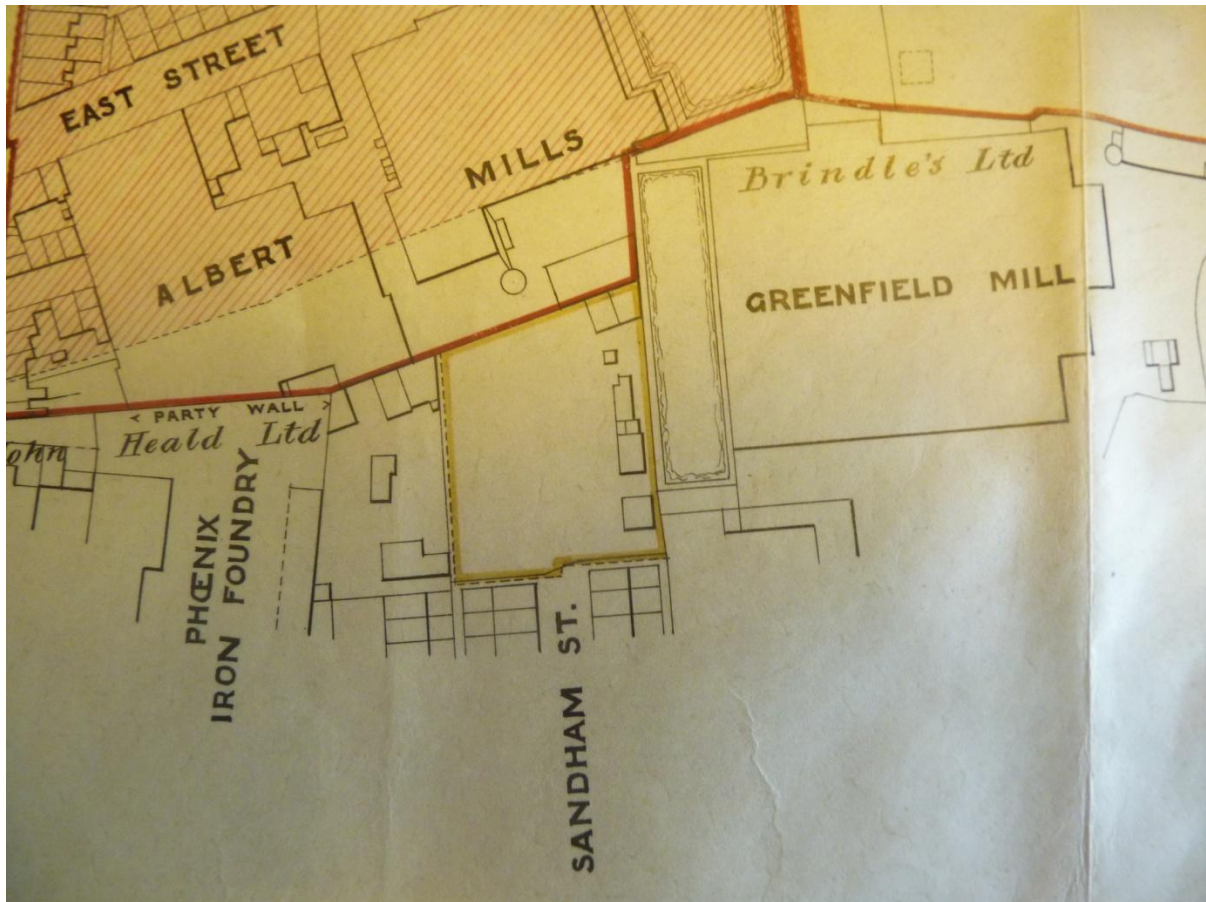
A search of Chorley Library's Local Studies section led to the discovery of a piece of gold dust. This was Frank Longton's 93 page book "Fifty Years of Co-operation in Chorley 1887-1937", the Jubilee Souvenir of the Chorley Co-operative Society Limited. The book is typical of many such local Co-op histories produced by the CWS Printing Works at Reddish in Stockport to celebrate Jubilees and promote the aims of Co-operation. As such it is an uncritical account but contains valuable photographs of premises and members as well as data on numbers of members, share capital, sales and dividend and interest paid out.

Frank Longton provided a brief lead on three earlier co-operative ventures in Chorley.

1 "It is on record that one of the first co-operative societies to be formed in Lancashire, was formed at Birkacre in 1827....Holyoake's "History of Co-operation" mentions that this was one of the societies in existence in 1831...There are no particulars of this society available."

2 Longton describes the first Co-op in Chorley under the Rochdale model as being founded in 1860 "or thereabouts". This was the Pilot Co-operative Society. Its first shop was at the corner of Livesey Street and the Market Place, with other branches on Park Road, Cowling and in Adlington. Longton said this Society closed in 1873, perhaps because the people running it "lacked business ability, knowledge or training."

3 The third venture was the co-operative cotton company, which ran at Greenfield Mill, which still in 1937 was known as "th' Co-op factory". This had been "no more permanently successful than the retail society". Longton stated that "there was no connection between the two ventures".



2 This 1914 plan of the Green field Mill shows a similar “footprint” to the Co-operative Mill

My subsequent researches have shown that the Pilot Co-op did not close in 1873 and there were connections between that Co-op and the mill through common leading figures; So perhaps other statements and conclusions made by Longton, particularly about the beginnings of Co-operation in Chorley should be treated with caution and are due for re-evaluation.

There is a wealth of information about the Pilot Co-op in the Chorley Standard and Chorley Guardian, and the Co-op Mill has business records in the National Archives as well as limited reports in the local papers. However of the earlier venture in Birkacre there is little information.

Longton’s description does not make state whether it was a retail or producer co-operative. However M D Smith in “About Coppull” writes that the Birkacre works were operated by John Mellor until his death in 1828, after which the works were unused for three years. Hubert Walsh in his 1978 History of Coppull refers to the lease of the Birkacre Printworks being taken up by the Block Printers Union in 1831 and “worked for about two years under the

management of Ellis Piggott, the Secretary of the Union.” As such it was one of about 100 producer co-ops at around that time. The earliest ones were formed in the late 18th century. J D Marshall has written that “numerous Owenite co-operative societies were formed in South Lancashire in 1829-32....the ultimate aim of many of these Owenite Societies was that of going on to productive co-operation and then later including an agricultural sector to make a complete community.”

The print works at Birkacre were long-established and had originally belonged, like Arkwright’s mill, to the Chadwicks of Burgh and Birkacre. That estate was sold to James Anderton in 1824. The Block Printers Union Co-op was short-lived as Robinson’s History and Directory of Chorley produced in 1835 lists Wardley and Hudson as being Calico Printers of Birkacre.

Ellis Piggott seems to have come from Manchester as the parish records of St. Ann’s in 1814 include the baptism of a son to Ellis Piggott, Calico Printer. Smith wrote that the business failed after two years due to bad workmanship. Worker’s organisations at this time had little or no protection in law and indeed were frequently persecuted by the authorities. There is as yet little more known about this business and therefore much more to discover in future researches.

Working class activity in the rest of the 1830s and 1840s took a more political focus with the dissatisfaction with the 1832 Reform Act and the demands of the Chartists which included votes for men over 21, payment for MPs and a secret ballot. Indeed in 1833 the Preston Chronicle included a letter from Lawrence Garstang reporting that at a recent “numerous” meeting of the Chorley National Union “it was unanimously agreed that this meeting has no confidence in the present ministers, neither do we expect any good from the reformed parliament.”

Notwithstanding the founding of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society in 1844, the hiatus in the development of the Co-ops lasted until legal changes were introduced by parliament which gave them a legal status and allowed them to rent and own property and gave protection against fraud. For the retail societies this legislation occurred in 1852 when the first Industrial and Provident Societies Act was passed. For other Co-operatives the key

legislation came with the Limited Liability Act of 1855, and the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1856. (The Chorley Co-operative Spinning and Manufacturing Company Limited was specifically formed under the latter's regulations).

The next phase of Co-operation in Chorley, however, did not start until the beginning of the next decade. John Walton in his Social History of Lancashire describes 21 Lancashire Societies being founded between 1845 and 1854 and still in operation in 1912, "and for 1855-64 the figure was 67, with a spectacular peak in 1860-1." The local contribution to this peak was made by Withnell (1861), Blackrod (1861), Bamber Bridge (1861) and Chorley Pilot Industrial Co-operative Society (1860). Other local Societies founded later in the decade were at Wheelton (1867), and Whittle-Le-Woods (1868). John Walton describes the Rochdale model of retail co-ops as spreading rapidly in the cotton district during the 1850s. The earliest successes were in the district around Manchester, and they spread north and west a few years later, especially after 1860. Chorley and District was clearly part of the second phase, on the north west fringe of the main textile manufacturing area.



3 Detail from plate celebrating 50 years of the Withnell Industrial Co-operative Society

It is very important to remind ourselves that these were all local businesses, formed by local people, to serve specific communities. More than half of the 28 initial subscribers to the Rochdale Society were from the textile trades, the rest being “better-placed” artisans, such as shoemakers, a clogger, tailor, a joiner and a cabinet maker. They included Chartists, Owenite Co-operators and Teetotallers. There is inevitably less detailed knowledge about a less important Society, such as Chorley’s, particularly when it was not long-lasting.

The founding of the Chorley Society was reported in the co-operative movement’s newspaper “The Co-operator”. The report seems to have been submitted by a Chorley member: “We had heard of the Rochdale Stores, and a poor working man purchased that useful book “Self Help”. After reading it to a few friends they resolved, if possible, to open a grocery store in Chorley....the greater part refused. However we collected our shillings together, and a few joined us weekly until we got 36 members with a capital

of £30. We then took a shop fronting the Market Place, and forwarded our rules-which are the same as those of Manchester-to be registered.” (Frank Longton placed the first shop at the corner of Livesey Street and Market Place).

Thomas Hodgkinson, the Society’s Secretary, provided similar information, when speaking at the opening of the new Co-operative Hall in January 1864: “A few working men of this town, having heard of the benefits arising from the co-operative societies established in Rochdale and other places, met together occasionally in a cottage to discuss the propriety of establishing a society in Chorley on the Rochdale principles. A few of them went over to Rochdale to get information on the subject which was freely given, and the result was that a committee was soon formed.....A subscription of 3d per week was collected, and then they got the society enrolled according to law, and when the subscription amounted to a few pounds in the aggregate, a shop was taken and opened at nights for the first three months, the committee serving the customers in their turns and rendering their services gratis.” At the end of the first quarter there were 84 members.



4 Chorley Pilot Industrial Co-operative Society Token

A further clue as to the possible background of the founders of the Chorley Society is in the inclusion of the term “Pilot” in its title. It seems quite possible that this derived from a local lodge of Oddfellows that went under the name of “Pilot that weathered the Storm Lodge”. The Lodge had been founded in 1818 by a veteran of the Peninsular War. (The phrase originated as a description of William Pitt the Younger). One of the leading figures in the co-operative movement in Chorley in the 1860s and 1870s, in both the mill and the retail business, was William Karfoot, and he was also a senior

Oddfellow. Karfoot was for several years President of the Pilot Industrial Co-operative Society and Manager of the Co-operative Mill.

Looking at the names of members who were mentioned in reports in the Preston Guardian in 1861-63, and checking them against occupations in the 1861 census and in the list of shareholder for the Co-operative Spinning and Manufacturing Company, there is clearly a strong link to the textile industry, but not just at shop-floor level as there is a cloth inspector, a book-keeper at a cotton mill, a cotton weaving manager, and two overlookers. There was also a strong teetotal faction at one time and this was the cause of some friction.

The Pilot Co-op had as its motto "Our Own", and attracted 500 people to the opening of the new Co-operative Hall in 1864. It expanded rapidly with a new bakehouse in 1863, and discussion of branch stores in Euxton and Whittle in 1865 in addition to the existing Adlington branch. At its peak it had about 1,000 members.

Although this society was relatively short-lived, and Frank Longton was somewhat dismissive in his description, it successfully survived the Cotton Famine and grew in terms of members and branches to be the most important retail business in Chorley. Its subsequent collapse will warrant a separate discussion.

The Chorley Co-operative Spinning and Manufacturing Company, formed one year later than the retail co-op, needed more capital to set itself up as a manufacturing business, and therefore sought to achieve that by being a joint stock company. Many Lancashire businesses of this period took advantage of the new legislation to attract share capital in modest amounts from local investors. Any group of seven people could form a company with limited liability, meaning that they only risked their investment. Most of these companies were not "floated" on the stock exchange as that was too expensive a process. Instead a "grey" market developed for trading these shares. Many of these new types of companies were Lancashire cotton businesses. Shares in small manufacturing business were relatively cheap at £5 or £10, but the full value was called up over a relatively short period.

These small businesses often appealed to the smaller saver as they would ask, as at the Blackburn Co-operative Cotton Spinning and Weaving Co. Ltd for example, for a deposit of 2s 6d, and calls of no more than 5s per month. In Bamford, shares were sold in a local pub on a Saturday night. In one 12 month period from 1st July 1860 to 30 June 1861, companies with a capital of about £1.7m were floated in the Blackburn, Bolton, Bury and Rochdale area. Many of the investors would be working men or small retailers. (Not all such companies that had "Co-operative" in their title had connections to the co-operative movement.)

The Preston Guardian on 2nd March 1861 reported "On Tuesday last at a numerous meeting at the Curriers Arms Inn, Chorley, it was resolved to establish a spinning and weaving company on co-operative principles, in Chorley. It is proposed to raise £20,000 in shares of small amounts." By January 1862, when the company submitted the first of its annual lists of shareholders, we learn that the nominal capital of the company was £20,000 divided up into 20,000 shares of £1 each, payable in 20 monthly calls of a shilling each. At that time 3788 shares had been taken up. There had been 8 monthly calls of a shilling and £1,584 11s had been received. This was clearly a long way short of the proposed £20,000. However by April 1862 the mill was under construction, and by 1863 the Improvement Commissioners' Valuation list shows a weaving shed on Steeley Lane belonging to the Co-operative Company with a rateable value of £145. This appeared to be mid range in terms of mill rateable values in Chorley, as Barton's at Crosse Hall was £220 and Saville's in Bolton Street was £99.

That notwithstanding, the company required more capital and in 1863 decided "that the present shares be made into £10 shares in lieu of £1 shares, and that Half Shares be allowed to be taken up". Presumably they were not hopeful of widening the range of investors and therefore sought to raise more from the existing investors. This was of course in the midst of the Cotton Famine! By June 1868, 599 shares had been fully called up, giving capital of just under £6,000.

Who were these shareholders? Some are names that are known through involvement with the Chorley Pilot Industrial Co-operative Society. At a tea party in 1866, John Windsor (Power-loom weaver of Crosse Hall), who was

not one of the directors, claimed that it was he along with two others who had first “mooted the erection of a co-operative shed.” (In the following year Windsor chaired a meeting in Chorley in support of the Eight Hours Movement.) William Asting (Hand Loom Weaver) declared that he was one of the others.

From the 1862 list of shareholders we have 167 names, one of which was a male and female joint shareholding, presumably man and wife. 29 of the shareholders were women, almost a fifth. The majority of shareholders lived within Chorley. Of the 45 who lived outside, the vast majority lived in neighbouring communities such as Heapey, Whittle le Woods and Wheelton. There were single shareholders in Blackburn and Preston and 3 in Bolton.

The addresses of the Chorley shareholders were scattered across the town, but the two most frequently mentioned streets were on the east side of the town close to the site of the mill. These were Lyons Lane and Eaves Lane with 20 and 21 shareholders respectively.

Unsurprisingly, most of the shareholders (98/167) had occupations associated with textiles, be it in preparation, spinning, weaving or finishing. The largest group, however was that of powerloom weavers (37/98). It is not known where they worked, but it is probable that many worked at the Co-op mill. As well as shop floor workers, there were also shareholders from the supervisory level; 5 overlookers and 2 cloth inspectors.

Those shareholders from a non-textile background were thinly spread across a range of occupations from innkeeper, sexton, butler, surgeon, veterinary surgeon, and collier to farmers (4). Many of the largest shareholders were drawn from this non-textile group. The largest shareholder, with £200 of shares was George Livesey, a veterinary surgeon. There were 14 shareholders with holdings of £100 or more, and they and their families and households held £1590, or 42% of the total share capital.

I intend to analyse the reasons for the collapse of these two co-operative businesses on a future occasion as it is the subject of on-going research. However indications about the problems that they faced can be seen from their first beginnings. In particular the description of the founding of the retail Co-op in the “Co-operator” refers to “the greater part refused”. There was

not universal support for the Co-op, and indeed there was strong opposition from other retailers. At times there were disagreements between the members themselves, and I referred earlier to teetotallers and non-teetotallers.

In terms of the Co-op mill the founders were perhaps over cautious in initially pricing their shares at £1, when compared to a regional norm for small manufacturing businesses of £5 to £10 and it was under-capitalised still in 1868 with only £6,000, when compared to the aim of £20,000. That must have left it vulnerable to economic swings and inevitably meant that it struggled to grow during the years of the cotton famine.

Both businesses had gone by the late 1870s, but this was not total failure. They both traded for nearly 20 years and provided employment for local people. At this stage I do not know what dividends were received by Co-op Mill shareholders over the period. However shareholders and members of the Pilot Retail society were in regular receipt of interest and dividend and the business was at least a major retailer in the town for this period, if not the major retailer. Perhaps their greatest success was in providing the foundations which led to the belated recognition of the value of co-operative principles when in 1887 the Chorley Co-operative Society was established.

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Photographs 3 and 4 are provided by Chorley Heritage Centre.

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