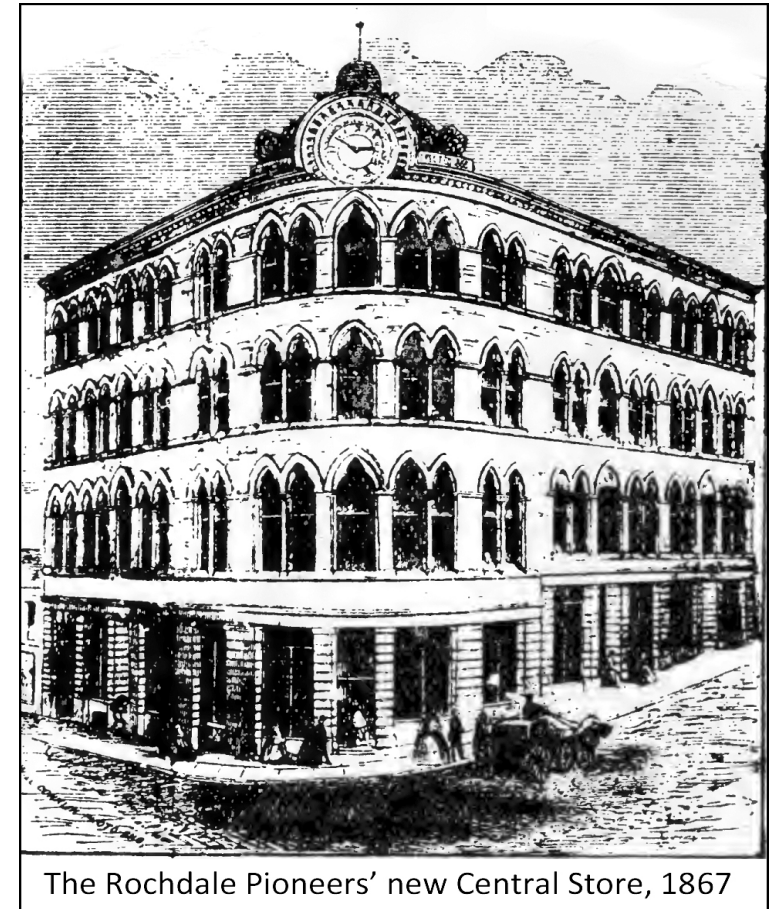


*'A History of the Co-operative Movement;
from the Rochdale Pioneers to the Present Day'*



On the last page is a list of the original 28 Rochdale Pioneers, compiled by Dorothy Greaves,
and included courtesy and © of the Rochdale Pioneers Museum

This meeting review was first published in the October 2021 Oldham & District Branch newsletter and in the *Manchester Genealogist*, winter 2021.

Zoom meetings ... once again we had a full-house signed up on Eventbrite, for Sophie's talk at September's Oldham & District Branch Meeting

*'A History of the Co-operative Movement;
from the Rochdale Pioneers to the Present Day'*

an illustrated talk given by Sophie McCulloch, Archivist, Co-operative Heritage Trust.

Trying to take notes, for this write-up, was more than a little difficult! Sophie's presentation was packed full of detail and pictures ... a really interesting, enjoyable and informative talk. This was one of the occasions when you might start off believing that you know something about a subject and then realise that, actually, you've known very little!

Sophie began with the question, "What is a Co-op?" The short answer is, of course, "An organisation that is owned and controlled by its own members for their mutual benefit."

Sophie then went on to give us some background to this concept of 'co-operation' which could be traced back to as early as 1761 and the Scottish Fenwick weavers. In response to poverty and social difficulties, a number of other co-operative groups were started, and founded, over differing periods of time during the following years. The Rochdale Pioneers were unique in that they went from strength to strength and became the model upon which future co-operatives, around the world, would be based.

Times were bad; labour was cheap and food (meaning mainly bread for the labouring family) was expensive. In 1844, twenty eight men wanted to alleviate this hardship, both for themselves and for their fellow workers. They met together in order to discuss forming a co-operative and set about raising money, at 2d or 3d a week until, with the help of a small loan, they had £28. They named themselves the 'Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society' and found premises for their shop at 31, Toad Lane, in Rochdale which, in earlier times, had been a woollen warehouse. By the time the 28 men had paid off their overheads, they had very little left for stock but opened their doors for business with butter, sugar, flour, oatmeal and a few candles and, after an uncertain start, went on to succeed beyond their wildest expectations.

One of their initial 'objects' was to provide high quality, unadulterated goods which, in those times, was pretty unusual! Commodities would be sold at the normal retail price but the profit made would be returned to the members of the organisation. This was the dividend; the 'divi' as many of our mothers, grandmothers and gt-grandmothers would know it. Even today, so many of us still know our family's number for the 'divi'! The 'divi' was one of the unique keys to their success. Not only did it encourage loyalty by buying better quality goods at the co-op shop, at no higher price than elsewhere, it also gave the families a sense of ownership when they shared in the profits.

So successful had they become that, by 1862, they were attracting visitors from abroad to view this new 'model' of a co-operative enterprise. More and more societies were formed and became part of the Co-op movement. As trade increased the Rochdale Pioneers needed bigger premises and in 1867 moved into a new, purpose-built building, only 100 yards away.

Oldham's own Industrial Co-operative Society was officially formed in November 1850, adopting the same rules as the Rochdale Pioneers. The first shop, on Manchester Street, was opened on December 26th, 1850. As increasing numbers of Co-op societies were set up and, over the years following, the co-operatives provided more and more services for their workforce and members. In addition to the dividend, there were libraries, excursions, holidays and competitions (eg. for window dressing). There were opportunities for education, inter-store sports, drama groups and much more. The Society provided medical care, and had its own fire brigade. In 1901, the Co-op Crumpsall Biscuit Factory introduced the first 8 hour working day for its workers.

Going back to the earlier days, it was realised that it would be advantageous to have their own manufacturing base, to ensure quality and increase profits. The first serious discussions took place at Jumbo Farm, near Rochdale, in 1860. Not quite so straight forward as it might at first seem, as there was no legal legislation in place for setting up a wholesale co-operative. It took 2 years before the 'The Industrial and Provident Societies Act

of 1862' "permitted one society to hold shares in another and thus allowed the creation of the wholesale society..." Subsequently, factories were opened manufacturing a whole range of goods to be sold in their own shops, including such items as footwear, clothing, foodstuffs (eg., jam) household items etc., etc. In 1869, the CWS opened its first warehouse in Balloon Street, Manchester. In 1896, the Co-op Middleton Jam & Preserve making factory was in production and to ensure a quality product the decision was taken to grow their own fruit. As a result, land in Shropshire was purchased for that purpose. A large house, already standing on the land, was later converted into a convalescent home for Co-op workers.

The success story continued up to the outbreak of war, in 1914. Circumstances forced changes. There were shortages of food and raw materials, plus the demand for suitable manufacturing premises to be turned over to producing war necessities. In the past, the Co-op had largely distanced itself from politics, although some of its founding members had come from Chartist and Reform backgrounds, but there was a growing feeling that the Co-op needed to be represented in Parliament. In 1917 an Emergency Conference was held, with the object of having a voice in Parliament, through the Co-op Party and its own MPs. This small Party merged with the Labour Party in 1927.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the Co-op activities began to decline or contract to meet the needs of a different social and economic structure. However, as we all know, it did survive and, in 2007, the Co-op Heritage Trust was set up, "to preserve the heritage assets of the co-operative movement." Their website tells us that, "We also provide secure storage for and access to records in our National Co-operative Archive; housed at Holyoake House, in Manchester where members of the public visit by appointment to do their own research."

Finally, we came to mention of the Women's Co-operative Guild, first formed in 1883. Its beginnings had been in a 'Woman's Corner' column in the 'Co-operative news'. Initially theirs was a 'support function' for the aims of the Society but their interests became more diversified. Local groups came together, in turn linking with other groups, which in turn affiliated to the national organisation of the Women's Co-operative Guild. The Guild members were proactive in improving women's rights in all spheres of social and industrial reform for women, and eventually became a strong voice in the demand for Women's Suffrage.

Afterwards we had Q&A from the zoom chat box, in which there were many appreciative comments from the attendees.

Footnotes & Resources:

(i) after 1867, 31 Toad Lane (t'owd lane) was used by different trades but in 1931 was purchased and eventually became the Museum we know today in its own little conservation area of Rochdale.

(ii) Website of Co-op Heritage Trust : <https://www.co-operativeheritage.coop>

(iii) George Jacob Holyoake, '*The History of the Rochdale Pioneers*' pub. 1908,

(iv) Percy Redfern, '*The Story of the C.W.S. The Jubilee History of the Co-Operative Wholesale Society Ltd. 1863-1913*' pub 1913

(both available for free download at <https://archive.org/details/texts>)

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Original Members of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society Limited

This chart was revised and compiled by Dorothy Greaves of Church View, Norden, Rochdale,
from a chart originally devised by J F Schill Laah Copes and G E Crossley.

Name:	Occupation in 1844:	Persuasion:	Died:	Aged:	Buried:
Miles Ashworth	Flannel Weaver (later Watchman)	Chartist	13 April 1868	76	Rochdale Cemetery
Samuel Ashworth	Flannel Weaver	Chartist	2 February 1871	46	Rochdale Cemetery
James Bamford	Shoe Maker	Congregationalist	22 March 1879	54	Smallbridge Church
John Bent	Tailor	Socialist	25 March 1894	77	Rochdale Cemetery
David Brooks	Block Printer	Chartist	24 November 1882	79	Milnrow Parish Church
John Collier	Engineer	Socialist	24 November 1883	75	Rochdale Cemetery
William Cooper	Flannel Weaver	Socialist	31 October 1868	46	Rochdale Cemetery
James Daly	Joiner	Socialist	29 December 1849	37	SS Transit Mid Atlantic
John Garside	Cabinet Maker	Socialist	29 October 1862	63	Rochdale Cemetery
George Healey	Silk Manufacturer	Socialist	27 December 1899	82	Bowness Cemetery, Windmere
John Hill	Carpenter	Unitarian	23 December 1899	85	Rochdale Cemetery
John Holt	Slubber	Chartist	3 April 1852	74	Rochdale New Burial Ground
Charles Howarth	Warper (later Manufacturer of Washing Soda)	Socialist	25 June 1868	54	Heywood Cemetery
Benjamin Jordan	Pattern Maker (later Inn Keeper)	Chartist	16 July 1904	79	Rochdale Cemetery
John Kershaw	Collier	Chartist	9 November 1893	75	Whitwood Cemetery, Normanton
James Maden	Flannel Weaver	Chartist	25 October 1873	70	Bacup Cemetery
William Mallalieu	Woollen Waste Worker (later Book Keeper)	Socialist	14 June 1863	67	Dean Head Cemetery, Ripponden
James Manock	Flannel Weaver	Chartist	25 March 1877	79	St. Clements Church
Benjamin Rudman	Flannel Weaver (later Scotch Draper)	Chartist	19 April 1876	63	Rochdale Cemetery
John Scowcroft	Hawker	Unitarian	11 March 1870	85	Rochdale Cemetery
Joseph Smith	Woolsorter	Socialist	16 November 1888	65	Nantwich Cemetery
James Smithies	Woolsorter (later Owner of Wool Sorting Business)	Socialist	27 May 1869	50	Rochdale Cemetery
James Standring	Flannel Weaver	Socialist	18 June 1872	68	Rochdale Cemetery
Robert Taylor	Flannel Weaver	Socialist	27 July 1877	77	Rochdale Cemetery
William Taylor	Power Loom Overlooker	Socialist	15 July 1854	40	Rochdale New Burial Ground
James Tweedale	Clogger	Socialist	1 June 1886	67	Rochdale Cemetery
Samuel Tweedale	Emigrated to New Zealand and then to Australia				
James Wilkinson	Shoe Maker	Unitarian	9 May 1858	71	Rochdale Cemetery