

CO-OPERATION

The Life and Times of a Co-Operative Manager: FRED BAYLIS – 1866-1935

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On 24 October 1844, the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers was registered under the Friendly Societies Act. It was set up by seven flannel weavers who had witnessed poverty, unemployment and the supply of poor quality food to working people. They wanted to give the people of Rochdale a better deal by selling pure unadulterated food at affordable prices. Early in 1844 they rented the ground floor of a warehouse in Toad (t'owd) Lane for three years at ten pounds per annum. In setting up the society, the 'Rochdale pioneers' established a number of fundamental principles that went on to be the foundation of the Co-operative movement. These were democracy, open membership, commercial honesty and profits returned to members in proportion to their purchases - the famous Co-op divvy.

Initially they sold the bare essentials – butter, sugar, flour and oatmeal – to a small band of sceptical customers. After only a few years however, the spread of the Co-operative idea was truly phenomenal, so much so that it threatened the profits of established traders. Small societies were rebuffed by big private wholesalers, sometimes even boycotted. Supplies were often cut short and were of poor quality, so in 1863 the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) was created, which quickly developed into a major food importer, establishing supply chains for Irish butter, Danish bacon, Indian tea and American wheat – at prices working people could afford. Within a relatively short time the CWS opened depots on five continents to buy directly from the growers; it built its own fleet of ships and it established factories to produce and sell-on to societies a vast range of products, which a now more prosperous working class was demanding.

Whilst the CWS expanded into other activities such as banking and insurance, retail societies diversified beyond food retailing into elaborate department stores, coal distribution, productive units for dairy and bakery output, death benefits and funerals. It was the societies' proud boast that they could give members a comprehensive service from cradle to grave. The Co-operative movement gradually became deeply enmeshed in the social fabric of the time.