

According to several accounts, the Co-op in Helensburgh began as a branch of the Dumbarton Equitable Co-operative Society (DECS) in 1892, although local directories refer only to the "Co-op store" until 1907, when the Dumbarton Equitable designation is used. It may be of interest to look briefly at the origins and development of the DECS before turning to look specifically at the situation in Helensburgh.

In 1861, a group of some 60 Dumbarton housewives came together with a view to setting up a co-operative store in the Town. There were many setbacks, and the whole scheme seemed likely to founder until a benefactor provided a gift of £200. This enabled the vision to become a reality. At the end of the first year of business, turnover was £900, and profits amounted to £55. The basic idea behind the co-operative movement was of course that registered customers were in effect shareholders, and were entitled to a portion of the profits, if any, known as the dividend, or "divi". Accounts were dealt with on a quarterly basis, with details being recorded in a share book. The dividend paid out corresponded to the profits for the quarter, and amounted to between 1/6d. and 2/6d. in the pound, pre-decimalisation. If profits were good, an extra bonus might be forthcoming. In former times, when it was often difficult for families to make ends meet, the "divi" could well mean the difference between solvency and insolvency. The Dumbarton store soon became a considerable success, growing from strength to strength over the next 30 years or so. This all changed, however, when a bitter feud arose over the choice of general manager, resulting in a breakaway group, which set up a rival enterprise, known as the Lennox Co-operative Society. These societies are not to be confused with the Vale of Leven Co-operative Society, which was a separate entity. The Dumbarton split lasted until the First World War, when the Lennox Co-op went out of existence.

Given the shareholder structure of the Co-op, the Organisation, along with its customers, was perhaps particularly vulnerable to the fortunes of the marketplace. This was clearly revealed at the time of the Great Depression of 1929-1936. A place like Dumbarton, with its strong reliance on industries such as shipbuilding and whisky distilling, was hit very hard. Many people became unemployed, spending power was reduced, and the "divi" was minimal. However, the ledgers record that £500 was given by the Organisation for distribution to the poor, underlining its commitment to the community.

The Co-op has indeed always prided itself on what could be termed social responsibility. At an early stage in the history of Dumbarton Co-op, a Women's Guild was set up (not to be confused with the Church institution). This aimed to foster confidence and a range of aptitudes and abilities at a time when many thought that a woman's place should simply be in the home. Classes were run in matters like self-sufficiency, while social events also organised. As well as the Guild, there were other endeavours such as the Co-op Choir, and courses in elocution. There were insurance services, and funeral provision was offered as well. There was staff development too, well before the era of day-release at college.

With the end of the Depression, it was possible to look ahead with optimism, and certainly it was the case that there was much to celebrate. At a meeting of DECS in the Victoria Halls, Helensburgh, in 1938, it was revealed that the Society was one of 230 sister organisations in Scotland, supported by the Scottish Wholesale Co-operative Society (founded 1868). Not only had DECS a number of branches in and around Dumbarton itself, but it also had stores operating in many other communities as well. An article in the "Helensburgh Advertiser" of 17 November 1967 informs us that there were branches of DECS in Milton (1883), Bowling (1889), Helensburgh (1892), Old Kilpatrick (1896), Dunoon (1898), Cardross (1931), and Garelochhead (1932). Indeed, it was understood that the Society had the longest geographical spread in the Country.

Having survived bombing damage in World War Two, the Co-op in Dumbarton proved to be a pioneer in a number of ways. In the wake of post-war housing scheme developments, many traditional customers now found themselves living well away from town centre shops. In response to the criticisms, branches were built in the schemes, often at considerable cost - the Castlehill Branch cost £50,000. Dumbarton claimed to have been the first store in Dumbarton to introduce self-service, and indeed believed itself to be one of the first in Scotland to do so. The 1960's represented an era of optimism within the Co-op, and the "Advertiser" article coincided with the opening of a fine new store in Dumbarton

High Street. This was the era of the slogan "It's all at the Co-op now", replaced in the mid-1970's by "Your caring sharing Co-op".

With the 1970's, however, the winds of change began to impinge upon the co-operative movement. 1973 saw the merger of the Scottish Wholesale Co-operative Society with the Manchester-based Co-operative Wholesale Society, at least in part because of difficulties within the SCWS Bank. From the 1960's onwards, pressure began to steadily build on the Co-op from a number of quarters, including competition from supermarket chains, and the growth of car ownership, which gave customers the mobility to shop far and wide. In a bid to keep abreast of the market, local co-ops were modernised in Dumbarton, Vale of Leven, Helensburgh, Cardross and Garelochhead through the 1990's, but the competition made it inevitable that rationalisation was inevitable. In 2001, DECS became part of the CWS Group, presaging branch re-structuring and closure in a number of cases. Further rationalisation took place in 2005, when the Co-op Group announced the planned closure of 36 Department and Home Stores. On the other hand, of course, a number of new stores have opened under the auspices of the Co-op Group, but the net effect was that several local communities such as Cardross and Garelochhead lost their Co-ops.

With regard to the Co-op in Helensburgh, the setting up of the Town branch of DECS in 1892 saw the establishment of the enterprise at 19-21 Sinclair Street. By 1907, a move "up the hill" had taken place, although on not too drastic a scale, with the store settling down at 64A Sinclair Street. Part of the business was now also being run from 5 East King Street. By the end of the First World War, business seems to have prospered, in that expansion had taken place into 62 and 64 Sinclair Street. Indeed it looks as if the expanded premises may not have matched the Society's ambitions, because by 1921 the move had taken place to 20-28 West Princes Street, with the store being housed in William Tait's fine tenement of 1878. Still more growth was achieved such that by 1930, we are told that Drapery and Boots were to be found at no.14, fleshers at no.22, while groceries and provisions could be had at no.28.

Business continued to flourish, and by the outbreak of the Second World War, the range had developed so that the shopper could start with Drapery and Boots at nos.12-16, move on to Dairy and Bakery at no.20., continue to no.22, where the Fleshers were located, and could finish with Grocery and Provisions at Nos. 26-26. Clothing and millinery were to follow in due course. It was also at this time that the Old Luss Road branch was opened. The store had succeeded in winning a secure place in the retail heart of Helensburgh, a success which stretched through World War Two, and beyond.

A fascinating insight into the workings of the Co-op during what might be termed the Classic Age of Shopping is to be found within the pages of Pat Drayton's delightful little book "Trading Places". At the time of the period described, it was very much a case of counter service, with an appropriate staff complement to match, and the purchase of various commodities such as butter and cheese provided the staff with an opportunity to display their skill in serving customers from what was a bulk resource- the portion was typically won from the stockpile with some panache- and with not a single plastic wrapping in sight! The book provides details on practices such as the paying out of the "divi", and the daily ritual of setting down a fresh covering of sawdust on the floor.

As the Sixties came along, however, a few clouds began to appear on the horizon. The first supermarket in the Town was opened in 1966, when William Low set up shop in what had been Spy's Sinclair Street yard (now occupied by Tesco's). This was a decade of change, with the onset of the era of self-service, and from 1969, the discontinuation of the time-honoured dividend book, when trading stamps were brought in Nationally. The next two decades saw the pressure intensify on department stores like the Co-op, one result being that in 1992, the Scottish Co-op/CWS announced plans to build a superstore on the seafront. Two years later, and following a public enquiry, the plan was turned down. To be fair, of course, the Co-op was not the only group seeking to build a superstore at the seafront or on the outskirts of the Town, a pressure which continues to this day, but there has been the development of a massive lobby against the use of these sites for such a purpose.

The 1990's programme of refurbishment of branches by DECS led to an application by the Helensburgh Branch in 1997 for alteration of the shop frontage, and extension of retail units so that the store would take in nos. 8-28 West Princes Street. There was a substantial increase in the range of household goods, including many electrical products. Following the assimilation of DECS into the wider Co-op movement in 2001, the grocery and provision side was dropped at West Princes Street, and the 2005 rationalisation saw the complete closure of the store the following year. Many will have regrets at the

ending of another chapter in the history of the Town, but equally, many will have fond memories of the friendly and personal service offered by the staff.

Yet the connection of the Co-op with Helensburgh has not ended. In 1982, the supermarket chain, Finefare, had been announced as the successful bidder for the site of the former railway goods yard off Sinclair Street. With the supermarket established, Finefare was replaced in due course by Somerfield, and then, as the chapter of the the west Princes Street store drew to a close, continuity was achieved through the establishment of the Co-op Group's supermarket at the Sinclair Street site. Inevitably, of course, there have been further changes. In place of the dividend book and the successor stamps, there is now the plastic card and spending vouchers. However, the tradition of customers as shareholders continues, as does the principle of social responsibility-the plastic carrier bags are claimed to be Britain's first such bags which are completely bio-degradable, and there is the claim that Co-op toiletries and household products have not been tested on animals.

What then does the future hold? Crystal ball gazing is notoriously difficult, but whatever happens, one thing is clear: the Co-op must surely have achieved a record as being one of the oldest, and may well actually be the oldest, retail business in Helensburgh, once allowance is made for the rationalisation process.