

THE CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENT AND FOOD ADULTERATION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The Co-operative movement served an important purpose during the period of voluntary reform in providing working-class people with food of a higher standard of quality and purity. In an era when little protection existed for the consumer the movement was in advance of state legislation - the principle of selling only pure and unadulterated provisions being evident from earliest times. Indeed it could be claimed that the Co-op acted somewhat as a standard bearer in the struggle to counteract misrepresentation and adulteration. By focussing on the Co-op's role as supplier and producer this article examines firstly the endeavours of the early Co-operative societies and the obstacles they faced, not just in terms of securing pure and unadulterated provisions, but also in overcoming resistance and persuading consumers and societies of the importance and virtue of purity. The role and nature of the C.W.S. is then considered as a response to the problem of obtaining adequate and reliable supplies and also in acting as a supply channel for constituent societies. Some of the problems associated with quality control and consumer attitudes are considered and highlighted particularly through an examination of butter, an increasingly important commodity in the nineteenth century.

Food Adulteration: Incidence and Legislation

The adulteration of food was essentially a feature of urban, industrialised society as opportunities for its practice intensified and increased. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century the problem had proliferated to an unprecedented extent, attracting increasing attention as a result of the decline of old regulatory methods of control, intensifying trade competition and increasing concern over public health issues.¹ Economic, legislative and social factors had therefore combined to account for the prevalence of adulteration at mid-century, and its effect on a generally unsuspecting and uneducated public. Despite earlier disclosures of contemporaries, and agitation for control led by the medical and analytical chemist professions, the problem was not considered sufficiently serious to warrant state intervention until the 1850s. Indeed it was often defended, not least by its perpetrators, in terms of lowering the cost of food for the poor or serving the public palate. The 1850s, though, was to mark a watershed in attitudes and perceptions, beyond which time it could be seen as nothing other than a serious and pressing social problem.² Instrumental in this change of attitudes were the publications of Hassall's investigations in the *Lancet* between 1851-54. With the aid of the microscope many previously suspected frauds were revealed and other new ones confirmed with most of the commonest foods, drinks and condiments shown to contain various adulterants for adding weight and bulk, imparting smell and taste and other properties. The *Lancet* articles, published in popularised version, brought widespread public awareness and were an important stimulus precipitating a parliamentary inquiry.³ Evidence presented at the Select Committees of 1855 and 1856 corroborated Hassall's findings,

as witnesses testified as to how some imported products arrived adulterated, whilst others were adulterated by English dealers or suppliers. Though many traders refused to indulge in such practices, large numbers had reluctantly yielded to the pressure of competition from their less scrupulous competitors. Representatives of the trade, except those concerned with the Co-operative movement, endeavoured to minimise the extent of harmful adulteration.⁴

28 Advertisements.

UNADULTERATED GROCERIES.

THE CENTRAL CO-OPERATIVE AGENCY

356, — OXFORD STREET, — 356,

Established under the supervision of trustees, with the view of protecting the Consumer from the frauds and other evils arising from the almost general practice of adulteration by tradesmen, particularly Grocers. The distinguishing features of the agency are, that it describes each article correctly, and sells it for what it really is, and in addition guarantees right quantity and fair value.

TRUSTEES:
E. V. NEALE, Esq. | THOMAS HUGHES, Esq.

Few CONGOU or SOUCHONG TEAS

Are satisfactory to the consumer when unmixed. The following mixtures have been found to give satisfaction, both as regards strength and flavour, and are therefore recommended for Family use.

Black Tea, first quality	4s. 6d. per lb.
" second quality	4 0 "
" third quality	3 6 "
Common Congou from	2 8 "
Green Tea, Young Hyson, true green leaf	3 8 "
Fine Gunpowder, burnt flavour	5 0 "

COFFEE.

All Coffee sold by the Agency is guaranteed to be without mixture with Chicory, or any other adulterating substance. The firm being pledged not to sell mixtures of Coffee and Chicory, decline mixing even at the request of their Customers. Persons who like Chicory can have it by itself at its proper price.

Finest Coffee imported	1s. 8d. per lb.
Strong fine flavoured	1 4 "
Common	1 0 "
Pure Chicory	0 4 "

COCOA

Manufactured on the premises by steam power, and warranted genuine.

Cocoa nibs	1s. 0d. per lb.
Ground ditto	1 0 "
Ground, flaked, and rock'd Cocoa	0 10 "

All purchases are registered, and a bonus of five per cent. returned at the end of each quarter.
Customers waited on for orders, and goods delivered in any part of London.
Orders from the country amounting to 5*l.* and upwards, sent carriage free to any part of the United Kingdom.

COMMERCIAL FIRM.
WOODIN AND JONES,
356, OXFORD STREET (Three doors west of the Pantheon).

The ensuing Adulteration of Food Act of 1860 represented a compromise between conflicting interests and, like other Victorian social legislation, was weakened by its permissive nature. The responsibility for the quality of food became a purely local and optional one. This Act was to all intents and purposes a failure, hindered not only by its adoptive character, but also by trade opposition. Nonetheless, despite its weaknesses and general ineffectiveness, it did set an important precedent, in that it was now recognised that it was within the responsibility of the state to protect the consumer.⁵ An Act passed in 1872 was an improvement, being more extensive in scope and vigorous in enforcement, although there were still limitations most noticeably

in terms of definitions and interpretation and because the *mens rea* (criminal intent) requirement remained. Criticism of some elements was to lead to the passing of the Sale of Food and Drugs Act of 1875. This Act was more effective because it defined purity more precisely, increased the powers of prosecution and punishment and raised the profile of the analysts, thus establishing a more adequate legal framework for the suppression of adulteration.⁶

WOMAN'S OUTLOOK.

The
C.W.S.
GUARANTEE



Pure foods, best materials,
clean packing, full weight
without wrapper, fair treatment,
and full dividend.

**Look for the C.W.S. Brand
name on everything you buy at the
CO-OPERATIVE STORES.**

Voluntary Reform

Before the implementation of effective legislation, however, providing consumers with pure and unadulterated goods was essentially left to voluntary initiatives. In the intervening decades between the Select Committee investigations of 1855 and 1856 and the implementation of effective legislation in 1875 there was some improvement in the quality of foodstuffs as publicity stimulated awareness and prompted the establishment of various agencies of voluntary reform. These included agencies dedicated to securing legislative control, other organisations committed to the supply of unadulterated provisions, and not least, the expansion of Co-operative retailing. With a heightened public conscience many manufacturers and traders took steps to secure improvements in their own practices and, with pleas for 'fair dealing' voluntary reform measures within the retail trade became an important precedent to future legislation. In the new climate it became fashionable, if not imperative if reputations and livelihoods were to be maintained, to be able to offer provisions which could be guaranteed pure and approved by a doctor or analyst.⁷ However, although many 'respectable' traders made concerted efforts in attempting to curb some of the more

fraudulent and disreputable trade practices, such initiatives rarely reached down to the majority of the urban poor. Food for the majority of the working classes continued to be heavily adulterated, with cruder methods being replaced by more sophisticated methods until they were also detected. Needless to say, it was the urban poor who were most vulnerable, being restricted not only in what they could purchase, but also in the shops which they could patronise, frequently being tied to local tradesmen through debt and credit, and at the mercy of unscrupulous dealers.

Responses of the Early Co-operative Societies

It is well known that Co-operation was from earliest times seen as an effective means of suppressing adulteration and deception by removing what it saw as the major cause - competition - by making the interests of the buyer and seller identical. From earliest times Co-operative retail stores had been providers and purveyors of basic provisions and groceries such as butter, flour and sugar and thus seemingly played a valuable role in bringing within reach to the poor food of a higher standard of purity and quality.⁸ It was through the efforts and enterprise of the early Co-operators, often in the face of hostility and suspicion, that many members of the working classes became aware, and had made available to them, food of a higher standard of purity which they had previously not had the opportunity of obtaining.⁹ Co-operative stores, for the most part, gave their members a surety of quantity and quality in the purchase of their provisions and it is generally assumed that Co-operative stores' commitment to supplying only pure and unadulterated provisions was an important element in their success.¹⁰ Gurney highlights how in setting up their own shops workers sought to free themselves from the exploitation

THE WHEATSHEAF. 37

"Every man shall eat in safety."
—Henry VIII., c. 5.

Bread

AND

Pastry

MADE FROM

DUNSTON

FLOUR . .

MANUFACTURED BY THE



**CO-OPERATIVE
WHOLESALE
SOCIETY**

IN THREE GRADES:

UNITY PATENT,

EXTRA SUPERS,

SUPERFINES. . .

MADE UNDER CONDITIONS
THAT ENSURE

**An Excellent
Production.**

of truck and adulteration.¹¹

Traditionally the issue of purity has been seen as important in

the origins and success of the Co-op. However, in terms of the evidence examined for the present study, it appears that the policy of purity may not necessarily have been of such prime consideration to all consumers. Even when people became aware of the injurious effects of adulterated food and were offered the pure alternative, many, it seemed, already accustomed to its taste and texture, continued to choose the adulterated or inferior (and usually cheaper) article. Although it is not possible to quantify such statements, it seems that despite increased choice between the pure and impure, many consumers, not just of the Co-op, took much persuading of the virtues of purity and quality, for whatever reasons. This was a particular obstacle to some of the early Co-operators and pioneers and a perpetual complaint of the later movement.¹² Such difficulties of conversion amongst the general public also seemed to have been one factor prompting the ultimate necessity of legislation. Hence, the early Co-operators' endeavours to provide working-class consumers with pure food were not only frustrated by difficulties in securing adequate supplies, which led to moves towards co-operative production by them and later other societies, but also by resistance to the new products by people unaccustomed and unused to the taste and appearance of unadulterated food.¹³ This had been predicted by Holyoake in 1843 when he alerted the Pioneers to the difficulties which they would face in this respect:

When you have a little store and have reached the point of getting pure provisions, you may find that your purchasers will not like them, nor know them when they taste them. Their taste will require to be educated. They

THE WHEATSHEAF. 47

"I hope we shall drink down all unkindness"
—Merry Wives, i, 1.

WITH THE
Co-operative Wholesale Society's

TEA, * * * *
COFFEE, or
COCOA. * *

Specially Blended and Prepared

FOR CO-OPERATORS' CONSUMPTION.
WITH CO-OPERATORS' CAPITAL.
BY CO-OPERATORS' ENTERPRISE.
IN CO-OPERATORS' PREMISES.
TO CO-OPERATORS' TASTE.

have never eaten the pure food of gentleman.¹⁴

Holyoake's warning was accurate. The evidence of Edward Farrand, on behalf of the Rochdale Corn Mill at a Parliamentary Inquiry, illustrates the difficulties experienced by the Society. He explains how the origin and purpose of the Society had been to obtain the pure and unadulterated article. After having called for such however, members were not satisfied with it as the darker colour of the pure flour displeased them and was met with suspicion and wariness. The consequence was that, after a loss of 450/- in the first nine months of operation, the Society was compelled to return to adulterating with alum in order to win back customers and retrieve the losses. However as the continuance of the practice would have meant betrayal of such a fundamental principle, it was decided to take the financial risk and return to purity. Following efforts at educating consumers to the superiority of the new product for the constitution, they were eventually converted and came to prefer the unadulterated flour, particularly as some improvement was affected in its colour. After three years of using alum, the Society returned to the sale of pure flour.¹⁵

THE WHEATSHEAF. 87

THE TRUE **Co-operator's Breakfast**

SHOULD INCLUDE

COFFEE - - from the	C.W.S.
BACON - - cured by the	C.W.S.
EGGS - - imported fresh by the	C.W.S.
BREAD of Dunston Flour made by the	C.W.S.
BUTTER from the Irish Creameries of the	C.W.S.
JAM - made at Middleton by the	C.W.S.
PLEASURE in being loyal to the	C.W.S.

The commitment to providing pure and wholesome products only was not an easy one to maintain and difficulties of procuring supplies, as well as consumer prejudice had to be overcome:

There was a determination to deal in pure provisions only. Many members were willing to give up the endeavour because of the impossibility of getting them, but many others persisted. There was a feeling that the pure provisions ought to be obtained which led to the working of the wholesale idea. It was though an up-hill task, hardly conceivable now to keep up agitation for pure food. Everyone had the idea that pure food was the best; but,

*unfortunately, many did not like it when they got it. Taste had to be educated; and many people no more like having their taste educated than having their minds educated.*¹⁶

It is interesting to note, however, that the Pioneers' policy of purity was not completely untarnished: rice continued to be put into flour, although this was not really considered an adulteration, and chicory was added to coffee until members became aware of it and the practice was halted.¹⁷

Consumer Attitudes

There was a recurrent feeling amongst retailers and others, often articulated by Co-operative sources, that to some extent, at least, the public were to blame for the systematic and general fraud which it had encouraged. This theme is highlighted by the *Co-operative News* in the mid-1870s. The News quoted the *Leeds Mercury* as arguing that an insatiable craving for something cheap on the part of consumers had prompted wholesale dealers to produce, firstly an article mixed with the genuine article, and then a complex compound which possessed a little of the flavour but none of the reality of the genuine article. Thus, although retailers could not be blamed for servicing demand and providing such mixtures, they were at fault both in selling that which was adulterated as pure without declaring the fact, and also in denying that such was poisonous or detrimental to the health of the consumer.¹⁸ These remarks reveal not only a lack of understanding of the conditions under which the poor purchased their food, but also disguise the reality of retail competition by attributing the necessity of such practices merely to public demand.

The *Co-operator* in 1870 challenged the supposition that people brought adulteration on themselves by buying such cheap articles, as for the most part people did so in ignorance. It remarked on how, despite the attention given to general sanitary matters, that of food and its purity had been overlooked, and urged that all articles of consumption should have their ingredients declared so that buyers knew what they had purchased, whether the goods be harmful or otherwise. If the public were made aware of the true nature of products by the means of labelling, ie "best butter, mixed with starch, mashed potatoes, and horse-bone oil", "coffee, with bread crumbs and sand", "tea with iron fillings", "sugar, with chromate of lead", "beer, with salt and cocculus indicus", then the public would be less inclined to be induced by cheapness.¹⁹ Nonetheless the Co-op was not averse at times to deriding the "stupidity of members", many of whom refused to comprehend that adulteration detracted from the value of articles, more so than higher prices; people were continually scheming to get cheaper food and this was seen as the chief cause of adulteration.²⁰ Moreover, according to the *Co-operative News* along with public interest, public apathy was one reason why the Adulteration Acts were so half-heartedly enforced.²¹ It occasionally also had to remind traders of the necessity of being more vigilant and putting their own house in order by being true to first principles, suggesting on occasions that the grand old rule (purity) had been buried by modern Co-operators and needed to be resurrected by being loyal to each other and purchasing only through the Co-operative Wholesale Society (henceforth C.W.S.). This same source suggests that Co-operative stores had been vulnerable to various adulterations in bread, tea, cocoa, coffee and butter and the necessity of having pure food in stores

was impressed.

Consumer resistance and desire for cheap commodities, whether out of necessity or not, was a recurrent theme. Even in the early twentieth century when the most pernicious adulterations had been counteracted, Co-operative sources could still deride the public for continuing to prefer cheaper and inferior substitutes to the genuine article and be misled by products with "high-sounding names". How, for example, many still preferred coffee mixed with chicory, and left the admixture to the grocer. How people liked the whitest flour (generally a sign of adulteration), the darkest sugar, which contained the greatest amount of saccharine matter. Such sentiments are reminiscent of Allen Clarke's proclamations on the appetites of cotton workers who craved only highly seasoned and artificial dishes. The same applied to drink, with people not content to have the pure juice of grape; unless wine was rendered intoxicating, people would not drink it. There remained a demand for adulterated food, which could only be checked by showing people the difference between the genuine and adulterated article. This was seen as evidence of the unfulfilled moral mission in educating public taste and buying behaviour; people brought merely to please the palate rather than considering whether articles could be conducive to health.²² In drawing attention to the principle causes of continuing adulteration in 1910 the *Co-operative News* drew attention to three - the desire on the part of the seller to get rich quickly, the desire for cheapness on the part of the buyer, the ignorance of the consumer as to the goods he purchased, where professional skill and knowledge was required to detect adulterations.²³ Nonetheless, along with legislation which had done much to restrain the greed of competitive trading, the Co-operative movement had played some part in bringing about improvement.²⁴ Tea was but one example of a widely used but heavily adulterated commodity which the early Co-operative movement strove to supply in pure form. However, similar resistance to that of the pioneers of pure flour was encountered by the tea merchant Joseph Woodin, when consumers, particularly in the north and midlands, would not buy his green tea which had a dull, olive-coloured appearance - being accustomed as they were to leaves which looked bright and highly glazed.²⁵

The Role of the C.W.S.

Alongside the efforts of individual societies, the establishment of the C.W.S. was a response to the problem of obtaining regular and adequate supplies of pure provisions. Such problems had been evident from the times of the Pioneers onwards, and had acted as a stimulus to the revival and spread of ideas of co-operative production. Earlier largely successful attempts to establish wholesale Co-operation had already been made from at least the 1830s as an inevitable response to the spread of Co-operative societies which endeavoured to arrange for the exchange of each others' products. The short-lived Central Co-operative Agency for example had been established in 1850:

*...for the purpose of counteracting the system of adulteration and fraud prevailing in the trade, and for supplying to Co-operative stores a quality of goods that could be relied upon, and in the highest state of purity.*²⁶

It proposed wherever possible to manufacture articles for themselves, and where this was not possible, to sell only such proprietary articles as could be guaranteed by analysts to be pure. This policy is demonstrated in the case of oatmeal:

Oatmeal is a thing we cannot make ourselves, and if we sold it, we must trust to the honesty of the maker, or wholesale trader (and we must confess our faith in the honesty of traders is considerably shaken). These considerations decided us not to sell the article at all, rather than incur the risk of putting ourselves in an equivocal position by doing so. Fortunately we heard that the Co-operative Mill at Rochdale (in connection with the Equitable Pioneers' Society) were making oatmeal, and such is our faith in Co-operation as THE cure for adulteration of every kind, that without the least hesitation we undertake the responsibility of guaranteeing the Rochdale oatmeal to be perfectly pure, without mixture

TO MAKE SURE

of pure food,
best materials,
clean packing,
fair treatment,
and full weight
without wrapper
shop at the
Co-operative
Stores, and—

SAY "C.W.S."

CO-OPERATIVE WHOLESALE SOCIETY LIMITED.

Printed and Published by the National Co-operative Publishing Society, Manchester.

*of any kind, and of the best quality.*²⁷

The agency was not successful, due partly to its location in London which was too removed from the centre of Co-operation, and was thus difficult to patronise, but also because as it was not a federation of societies, the latter felt no interest or loyalty to it.²⁸ The Rochdale Pioneers' Wholesale Department was also established in 1850 as a precursor to the C.W.S. for the purpose of supplying the stores of Lancashire and Yorkshire, whose small capital prohibited them from purchasing in the best markets.²⁹

This too was not generally successful, due partly to the lack of support and loyalty to the cause, but also because there were probably too few stores in existence to make it viable.

By the 1860s then many attempts had already been made to create federal purchasing structures at local and regional level. When Abraham proposed his new plan, the movement had since spread widely bringing a greater need for co-ordination. There were now hundreds of stores, sufficient to justify the establishment of a Wholesale, particularly with legal impediments to progress having been removed. Amongst the benefits to be derived from the Wholesale were that stores, particularly small and new ones without the benefit of expertise in purchasing, would be relieved of the problems of obtaining quality provisions at reasonable prices by being able to reach the best markets, thus enabling them to sell as cheaply as any first-class shopkeeper.³⁰ Although small Co-operative stores may have been able to function effectively in a retailing capacity in circumstances where only a small range of goods was stocked and the functions of breaking bulk and packaging was relatively easy, the procurement of sufficient quantities of products must have become increasingly difficult in an environment where markets were local and limited and supplies irregular and seasonal.

The North of England C.W.S. thus came into existence in 1863, with the support of 48 societies. Its establishment being made possible by the Industrial and Provident Societies Act of 1862 which provided for a secure legal basis for federal action by Co-operative societies and especially for the creation of an effective Wholesale society.³¹ The initial title illustrates its immediate purpose, being primarily intended to serve the Co-operative movement in the north. Through its immediate structures it was to enable local stores to obtain reliable, quality-controlled supplies, whilst affording access to large scale, and therefore economical, purchasing. Commencing business on the 14th March 1864 the C.W.S. was able to supply stores with a range of articles including tea, coffee, chicory, cocoa, sugar, syrup, treacle, dried fruits, rice, sago, spices, pot barleys, soap, starch, mustard, butter, cheese etc.³²

In examining the origins of the C.W.S. it is apparent that it was established to fulfil a number of objectives. These included providing consistent and reliable supplies to service Co-operative societies as well as ensuring cheapness through bulk purchasing and production. The problems of individual societies as they related to producing and procuring pure provisions was one which was recognised by both the founders and subsequent controllers of the C.W.S., and the remedy was seen in terms of patronage of the C.W.S.³³

The establishment of the C.W.S. can then be seen as a further weapon in the fight against adulteration and fraud. The *Co-operator* noted in 1866 how, though little could be done at present to counteract such pressures, much more could be achieved when the Wholesale Societies were in operation and well supported. Collective importation and buying was to be an effective safeguard against counteracting adulteration, lessening the risks entailed in purchasing from several different sources of supply. Co-operators could have their:

...flour from Rochdale, Huddersfield and Leeds, our

blankets, flannel and bedding from Heckmondwike, our boots and shoes from Northampton, and our groceries from the North of England Wholesale Society at Manchester. Hence “where wholesale societies are in operation to deal with, they will be found wisest, safest, best and ought to be preferred to individual sources of supply, whatever their pretension.”³⁴

Dispensing with the services of unnecessary and profit-making agents which came between the consumers of commodities and their products, removed all temptations to adulteration and every other form of retail cheating. Thus by going as near to the producing stage as possible, they were able to protect the constituent societies more fully against adulteration and fraud and provide them with more pure and wholesome products. Both producer and consumers therefore benefited. As a C.W.S. article put it:

*The consumer gets food of the nature and quality he wants. His ignorance of technical points in manufacture cannot be used to defraud him. If he buys C.W.S. pure cocoa he gets pure cocoa, if he buys C.W.S. cocoa mixture he pays a lower price consistent with the lesser cost of manufacture. By a highly organised system of distribution he gets his cocoa at much less cost than if it passed through the hands of several persons, each keenly intent on selling it at the greatest price he can get, and each unscrupulous and expert in deceiving and taking advantages of the ignorance of the consumer. Whether the latter demands goods of a high standard of purity and appearance or otherwise, he gets what he wants at a fair price.*³⁵

The C.W.S. also had an important role in the educative process. Those societies who did not use the C.W.S. remained vulnerable to being deceived into purchasing adulterated and inferior goods. A significant, and much regretted example of how this could operate is illustrated in a case involving the Lancaster Co-operative Society. The Society was brought before Lancaster Castle and charged with a breach of the Sale of Food and Drugs Act of 1875 when it was proved that a purchase of a pound of pepper had been certified by an analyst to contain upwards of 15% of foreign vegetable matter, consisting principally of ground rice. The pepper was from a cask purchased from a wholesale dealer in Preston who had invoiced it as “genuine white pepper”. The dealer stated the pepper had been obtained from a Liverpool firm, who themselves stated it had been ground by another firm. Though the Co-operative Society had not itself been fraudulent, it had allowed itself to be deceived.³⁶

Although it is not possible to quantify the extent of the occurrence, the columns of the Co-operative press do seem to indicate that many stores, particularly it seems those who did not trade through the C.W.S., remained vulnerable to dealing in adulterated goods. Explaining this was something which the Co-operative authorities had difficulty with, as evidenced by a discussion of the subject in one edition of the Co-operative News. Such a situation was thought to be attributable to a number of factors. These included the fact that membership of societies

was open to all kinds of people; those who understood and were anxious to realise the highest aims of Co-operation, moral and financial, as well as those who, as long as they could keep the financial movement in a satisfactory condition, were quite willing for the moral side to take care of itself. Thus, with the objective of achieving large dividends, fraudulent trade practices were being employed behind the counters of Co-operation. However, it appeared to be the case that less scrupulous trading practices were practised only by a minority of the stores, and that most were faithful to Co-operative methods.³⁷

The C.W.S. also faced the problem of convincing societies and customers to use them as a channel through which to obtain their supplies, and despite initial optimism it encountered some resistance to its development. Relations between the C.W.S. and the retail societies were not always untroubled, with a distinct lack of early support from many societies.³⁸ Societies did not readily join the C.W.S. and even amongst those who did trade with it, support was often irregular with many societies often achieving more favourable trading conditions from other sources. Early organisational and operation difficulties were however eventually overcome, aided by the opening of other branches in Newcastle and London, and increasing numbers of retail societies came to put their faith in the C.W.S. and trade regularly with them facilitating the rapid extension of the distributive network.

One solution sought in persuading societies and consumers to purchase their products from the C.W.S. was through its marketing techniques, as can be seen from some of the illustrations from the Wheatsheaf from the early twentieth century. The principle of selling only pure and unadulterated foods at reasonable prices was constantly reflected in C.W.S. advertising and publicity material, which extolled the virtues of purity, honest weights and measures, and quality packaging. The use of the C.W.S. brand name was also an important feature in selling its products. The language used reflected the image and reputation which the C.W.S. attempted to portray, with words such as “honest, cheap, good, reliable, pure, quality, produced under best condition of labour, wholesome...” employed to reflect and reinforce the Co-operative message. It also sought to play on the “loyalty” of its members and customers in ensuring the continuing survival and prosperity of the movement. Hence, those who purchased C.W.S. products were portrayed as “virtuous, principled, moral, serving the cause...”, and so on.

The C.W.S.’s task of ensuring consistency of supply was therefore sought in a variety of ways. It aimed to ensure that it was able to obtain regular and reliable supplies, while also maintaining quality control. As a merchant and buyer, C.W.S. agents established close links with suppliers, and by a process of regular inspection and monitoring, as well as scientific analysis by analytical chemistry, endeavoured to ensure the purity and quality of its products.³⁹ It made concerted efforts to ensure the quality of its products and would act immediately when there was any doubt cast on their credibility. Such vigilance is demonstrated in the case of pepper when, in 1887, difficulty was found in obtaining it absolutely free from natural impurities from existing suppliers. The C.W.S. Committee immediately announced an intention of undertaking the grinding of pepper in an effort to supply societies with a pure article. This led in turn to the establishment of a small

factory dedicated to pepper grinding.⁴⁰ The eventual move by the C.W.S. into various areas of production was also partly prompted by continuing concerns over regularity and consistency of supply, but also represented a logical progression and the second stage in Co-operative development.

The Co-op and Butter

Concerns over supply and quality control remained recurrent themes in the Co-op's purchasing and producing strategy. Such processes were clearly evident in its involvement in the butter trade. Throughout the period of voluntary reform dairy products, particularly milk, remained commodities that were particularly susceptible to adulteration. The *Co-operator* in 1871 could report how Manchester milk, a much maligned article, was still so bad that no serious effort could be made in its defence and how, though Manchester was no worse off in this respect than other large cities and towns, the startling fact was that 66% of milk supplied was adulterated.⁴¹ Such a situation had obvious repercussions for the quality of butter. Fussell has noted how bad flavours imparted by feed, as well as dirty and unventilated housing, gave a cowhouse flavour to milk, which was perceptible in the butter made from it.⁴² In some cases though it seemed the condition of milk was of little consequence as what passed off as 'butter' apparently consisted of completely different substances. Investigations by Hassall and others in the 1850s had revealed butter to be adulterated in some cases with potato flour, curds, and, very rarely, with the fat of veal or lard. Similarly a letter in the *Manchester Guardian*, reproduced in the *Co-operative News*, had revealed how some of the lowest-priced butter was nothing more or less than grease from horses' bones out of the knacker's yard, coloured and tasted by drugs and waste butter mixed in. The writer, a confectioner, had "heaved at the stomach and spit about the place for hours after tasting it".⁴³ The already variable quality of home-produced butter was then, in some cases, aggravated by adulteration. Moreover, despite some improvement as a result of the Adulteration Acts, there was still little uniformity in home produced butter by the end of the century.⁴⁴ Though various grades were available in the period before refrigeration, butter which had by necessity undergone transportation or storage for any length of time must have left much to be desired. Atkins illustrates the extent of dishonesty in the milk trade with evidence of samples of milk in London before 1872 showing milk to contain on average 25% of water. He further highlights how milk was still causing concern at the end of the 1880s⁴⁵ and how the water so frequently introduced was often contaminated and exhibited a general lack of cleanliness in the milking and handling process. Atkins asserted that cows' milk was indeed a dangerous commodity for the nineteenth century consumer.⁴⁶

Evidence from early *Co-operator* sources appear to suggest that Co-operative stores were themselves vulnerable to being supplied with impure butter. Commenting on the general trade in the early 1860s, the *Co-operator* revealed how many tons of butter which had never been near the cow had reached the London markets, with some Dutch butter reported to have been composed of palm oil, lard and tallow. Moreover, some stores in the north were found to be selling a "good deal of vile stuff" which had been sold to them as butter. Managers and committees were warned not to press too hard for cheap or mild butter and to be vigilant in their purchases as in allowing themselves to be deceived and supplied with such impure commodities, nothing could do

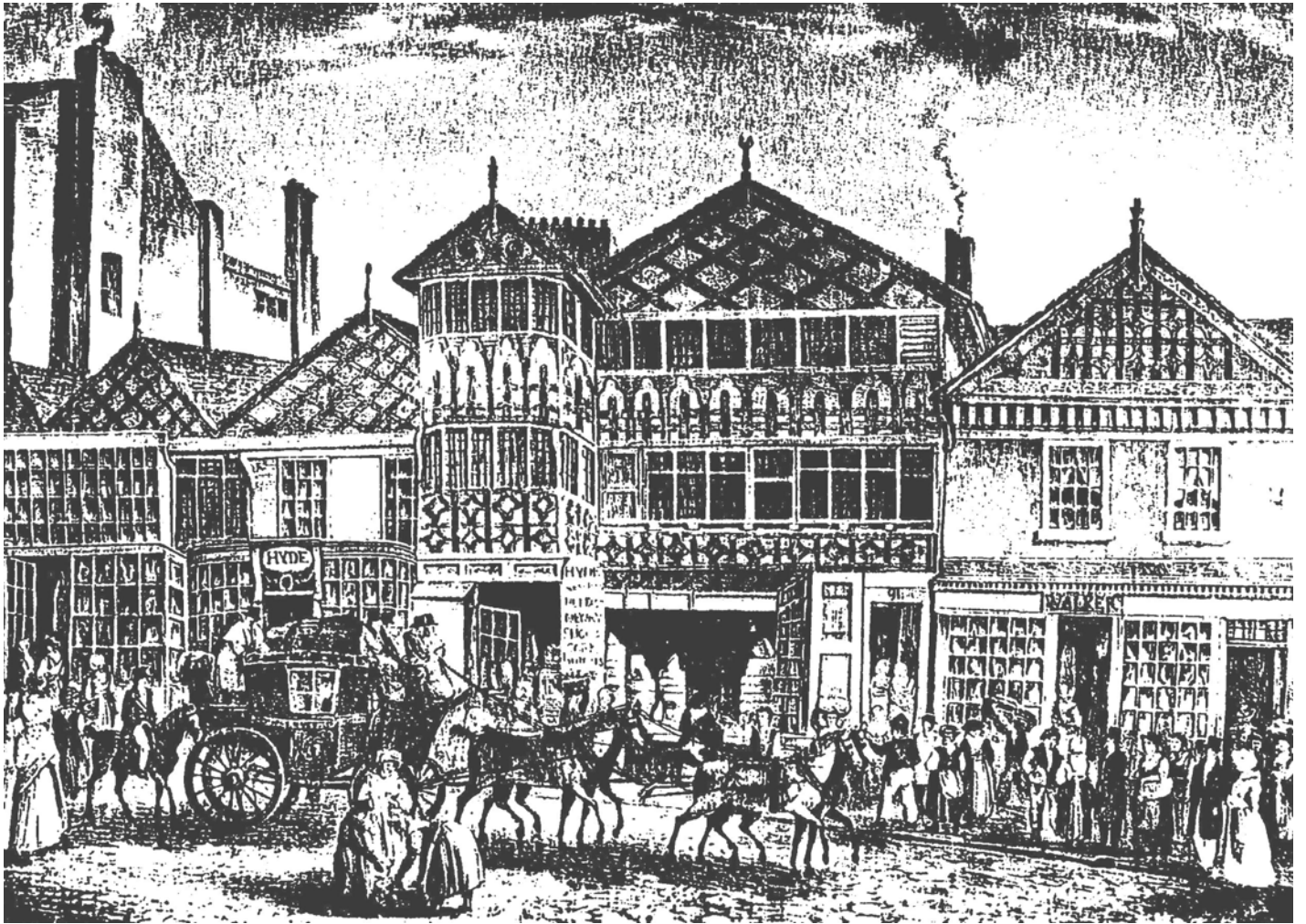
more to damage the cause and reputation of the Co-op:

Imagine the working man's wife going to the store where everything is considered pure and unadulterated, and purchasing palm oil instead of butter... likely result to destroy confidence, and thereby damage the cause... if there is one thing more than another to be looked for from Co-operation, it is purity of food.⁴⁷



Co-operative stores in large industrial towns in particular were frequently perceived to have suffered considerable loss of trade in sticking to their principles of selling only genuine articles. For example, there had been increasing demand for butter in the 1880s which had stimulated the supply of imported adulterated butters or substitutes, such as butterine and the so-called 'milk-blended' butters. Popular because of their cheapness, they adversely affected in particular the trade of medium-quality butters.⁴⁸ In Manchester there were apparently tons of manufactured stuff sold as genuine butters, which had unfairly disadvantaged the Co-operative stores and stimulated the petitioning of Parliament in favour of a bill.⁴⁹ In Lancashire in 1887, 94 out of 286 samples of butter had been adulterated with butterine.⁵⁰ Despite the Margarine Act, it remained freely sold as butter, though later legislation and increasingly sophisticated analytical tests which facilitated easier detection, together with sample inspection, made fraud almost impossible.⁵¹

An interesting, though it seemed necessary, breach of the principle of selling unadulterated food, relates to that of butterine. In 1880 it was reported that the C.W.S. had apparently come out against butterine when it had first been introduced, but had, under the pressure of members, been forced to imitate outside trade by selling it. It appeared the decline in butter sales was attributable partly to the sale of this product, but chiefly to the diminishing purchasing power of people.⁵² The C.W.S. never pushed the sale



Irish butter on sale at Mr Hyde's shop in Market Street, 1873 *at their own Creameries in Ireland, or shipped*

of butterine, supplying it only when demanded. This was done reluctantly, but in recognition that all the societies were not yet educated in the principle of Co-operation, which was to sell unadulterated goods.⁵³ Some stores though remained steadfast, refusing to stock the product. However, unlike some less-reputable private traders, the Co-op did at least ensure that the product was clearly marked as butterine, so as the consumer was not deceived.⁵⁴

The Margarine Act of 1887 was one of a series designed at eliminating misrepresentation. This Act deemed that butterine must be clearly labelled or marked as such on the wrapper.⁵⁵ Such legislation had been campaigned for by the C.W.S. for some time. The Act was effective in many respects, though frauds in the butter trade appeared to continue, frustrated it seemed by a failure of magistrates to effectively enforce it and inspectors to detect it.⁵⁶ Butter fraud was a recurring problem well into the twentieth century and was a good example of how people were easily deceived, thus:

To avoid these spurious and fraudulent qualities of butter Co-operators should purchase only from their own Stores, who are supplied by the Co-operative Wholesale Society with guaranteed pure butter, collected direct from the Dairies in Denmark, or manufactured

*from the Colonies by their own representatives, who see that nothing but the pure and unadulterated article is sent.*⁵⁷

Following the 1875 Act a major improvement was detected in the quality of basic foodstuffs, particularly bread. When the analysts' returns were first published in 1877, 19.2% of all random sample were adulterated; by 1900 this had fallen to 8.8%.⁵⁸ Increased vigilance and powers on the part of authorities also meant that in Lancashire for example, in 1889 12.67% of samples were adulterated, compared with 15.6% in 1888, 20.54% in 1878-9 and 27.35% in 1876-7.⁵⁹ However, as indicated earlier, some forms of adulteration continued to be perpetrated, though these were often innocuous such as water in milk and beer. Gurney cites an editorial in the *Co-operative News* of 1906 which noted the sophisticated techniques adopted by the adulterer who benefited from the latest scientific knowledge and how the movement had to be vigilant as never before if these abuses were to be kept in check.⁶⁰ Quoting evidence from the *Grocer*, Paulus demonstrates how, although injurious adulterations were much diminished after effective legislation, some retailers continued to indulge in fraudulent, rather than dangerous, practices. Thus in some instances adulteration changed form rather than necessarily diminishing.⁶¹ Publicly at least, however, the C.W.S. could continue to claim credit for upholding its principles and

assuring its customers were supplied with unadulterated goods:

*Happily a system of pure commercialism is at work, and when buying butter through their various sources, co-operators have the satisfaction of knowing that, if purchased from co-operative stores, the butter is sold without prejudice to the consumer.*⁶²

A minority of societies was though, at times, found guilty of misdemeanours under the Sale of Food and Drugs Acts. Most acts of infringement though seemed to have been carried out unknowingly or unwittingly, where Co-operative societies, as well as other honest tradesmen, had been deceived as to the purity of goods sold to them, or failed to get certificates of guarantee.⁶³ However, the odd case appeared where fraud was knowingly perpetrated, as in the case of margarine not being properly labelled or butter being sold as the latter.⁶⁴

Conclusion

It is difficult to provide firm conclusions on the overall performance of the Co-op in achieving its aim of purity throughout the whole period under consideration, but evidence from the early days, when adulteration was widespread and ubiquitous, suggests that many stores seemingly had a difficult task in ensuring the quality and purity of their products. However, although early Co-operative stores may not have been entirely successful in this respect, foodstuffs available to ordinary working people did improve markedly as a result of their efforts. Hence, although the ideal was not always maintained this is not altogether surprising given that the standards which the Co-op set out to achieve have to be considered high in the circumstances of the times.

It has frequently been asserted by historians of the Co-op that the principle of purity was an important element in the success of the early stores in attracting the custom of consumers.⁶⁵

However, such premises are difficult to prove and, from the evidence presented here, it is possible to question such assumptions, particularly as it is difficult to isolate such considerations from other benefits which the Co-op stores offered. Certainly in terms of the later movement, some of the evidence tends to suggest that being able to purchase food of a high standard of purity may not necessarily have been of such primary importance to some consumers. Though many consumers initially bought in ignorance, it also seemed that some continued to prefer less nutritious, inferior and cheaper products. By the 1870s the Co-op press was periodically urging a return to the first principle of purity and calling for stores to be more vigilant in their purchases by using the Wholesale as a channel of supply. Both stores and members were berated for not adhering to principles, either because they had temporarily lapsed, or because they did not ever follow the very high ideals of the leading promoters. With the objective of achieving larger dividends, fraudulent trading practices were, in a minority of cases, being carried out behind the counters of Co-operation. Instances of societies trading in adulterated and inferior products appear, alongside general explanations of the continuance of adulteration in non-Co-operative retail outlets. These were attributed to the behaviour of the buying public and their desire for cheap (and consequently inferior) products.

Thus, it seems that some societies and members were less imbued with the creed of Co-operation and the importance of purity than some of the early founders had been. However, given that before 1861 there is no Co-operative press available for consultation, it is difficult to determine whether or not the apparent need for greater efforts represented a new trend. Moreover, such sentiments may have been partly a response to the legislation of 1875. For the most part, however, it seems that societies and the C.W.S. remained vigilant in monitoring the quality and purity of its supplies.

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