

CAMELON CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY LTD

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In the year 1857 twelve of the inhabitants of Camelon, having heard of the success of the new method of trading inaugurated by the Rochdale pioneers some eight years previously, held a meeting, and having agreed to subscribe £1 each as capital, formed themselves into the "Camelon Pioneer Industrial Society Limited" under the "Industrial and Provident Societies Act, 1850". They rented a small shop (now demolished) on the south side of the Main Street at the corner of Deantree Terrace, and having stocked it with grocery goods as far as their limited capital would allow, opened three nights weekly, the Committee taking turns in manning the shop. The shop started business on 25 April 1858.

The concept of people grouping together as a co-operative was seen as antagonistic to more open forms of commerce and some tradesmen tried to oppose it. It was probably for this reason that in August 1861 Donald McIntosh, a blacksmith at Port Downie, placed a public notice in the Falkirk Herald intimating that he had no further interest in Camelon Pioneers Industrial Society.

The beginning was small, but the progress, if slow was sure. In a comparatively short time a large shop was rented and kept open for more days, and according to one history "females" were appointed to take charge of the business. Actually, it started in 1862 with a single saleswoman who seems to have been employed due to her low costs. That person was Ann Drummond, who the Falkirk Herald reported "despite youthful age" was a great asset and increased sales and membership dramatically due to her hard work.

In May 1862 the Camelon Pioneers Industrial Society's store was broken into between Thursday night and Saturday morning, suggesting that it was still not open daily. Two large hams - a beef one weighing 50lbs and a pork one 80lbs - were carried off. Also 12-16 bars of soap, a number of loaves and a quantity of sugar. False keys had been used to gain entry.

1864 is the last time that it was called the "Camelon Pioneer Industrial Society Limited" and it became simply the Camelon Co-operative Society Ltd.

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Year	No. of members
1866	62
1867	78
1874	122
1875	186
1877	189
1884	294
1888	386
1889	400-408
1890	442
1891	463
1892	478
1893	510
1894	508
1896	643
1898	736-774
1903	1153
1907	1324
1908	1326
1916	1553

The Society continued to rent till the year 1874, when the Committee felt they ought to be their own landlords, and a feu was therefore taken in Burnside Terrace, and building operations commenced at an estimated total cost of £1,600. This was regarded as madness by many but the committee pressed on. The premises were modern with large rooms and larger than usual windows with



Illus: The Burnside Terrace premises.

a frontage of 60ft and a width of 30ft. The new two-storey building had shops, back storage which doubled as a committee room, on the ground floor and dwellings for let on the upper. The shops consisted of a grocery shop and a bread shop. Attached was a small bakehouse with a single oven which started production in 1875. Two years later it was noted that the bread sold at 6d a loaf provided a handsome profit at a price not matched by other bakers in the area. The new shops were ready for business by

late 1877 and a new footpath was formed in front of them "at considerable expense". Within a year a storage room for flour with a committee room above was added to the premises.

However before long yet more room was required and the houses above the shops were converted into a drapery and boot department. Eventually in 1886-7 another building was erected adjoining the first providing three more shops with dwelling houses. James Strang was the architect. Two of these shops were used for drapery and boots – these departments having been separated. The third shop was let out as a dwelling house. New departments of business were added, the members up to this point having been supplied with meat through private butchers, a system which it was thought was not working well. So a byre and killing-house were erected by the Society in 1888. The trade had now reached £4,203 per quarter and was increasing. In 1889 a millinery department was added. The old buildings were brought up to scratch – repairing interiors, altering doors and windows, cementing cornices and trusses, etc.

An indication of the level of business can be gauged from the use of 396 bags of flour in the second quarter of 1890 to produce 14,030 fine loaves, plus 16,703 common loaves (4lb), as well as small bread. 35 bullocks and 21 sheep were slaughtered. The output of bread just kept growing and in February 1893 a new oven had to be added. These sales allowed the Society to invest in other co-operative businesses. In 1892 it took £466 worth of shares in the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society, £40 in the Paisley Manufacturing Co-operative Society, and £25 in the Industrial Co-operative Pottery Co at Bo'ness.

Despite these large building works a new block was begun in 1891, which accommodated drapery, tailoring workshops and fitting rooms, dressmaking and fleshing departments, the shops vacated being taken up by boot and fish (a new venture) departments, leaving only one empty shop. The successful contractors for the building work were – mason and brick work, J & W Scott, Camelon; joiner work, Peter Cowan, Falkirk; slater work, James Miller, Grahamston; plumber & gasfitter work, Robert Brown, Falkirk; plaster work, David McNair, Falkirk; and glazier work, Daniel O'May, Falkirk. The work was completed in April 1892. It was decided to have a managing secretary and in December 1892 John Lennox was appointed. In 1894 delf (earthenware) and ironmongery, in 1895 millinery, and in 1897 coal departments were started. Further increase in trade compelled the building of a new bakery with six ovens and the newest machinery and an engine room and stores in 1896, and a new grocery in 1897. The contractors who carried out the 1897 work were builder, Dalziel; joiner, Kelloch & Kilgour; plasterer, David McNair; plumber, George Summers; slater, Drummond & Crowe; painter Charles Johnston. William Scott was the architect.

In 1895 a new system of parcel and bread delivery was begun with one horse and a van (stables were built) and by 1901 had developed into a stud of nine horses, and included the delivery of parcels, bread, butcher meat and coal direct to the home. 1895 also saw the parish council resurface the road at Burnside Terrace. It had been in an atrocious condition.

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Year (1/4)	Bags of flour	Fine loaves	Common loaves	Small bread	bullocks	sheep	other	coal
1890	396	14,030	16,703		35	21		
1891	395	15,935	13,529		40	69	1 pig	
1900	713	38,842	18,248	£733	71	93	26 pigs, 1 calf	513 tons
1903	905	64,520	5,335	715 malte d loave s & £799	68	145	41 pigs, 19 calve s	

A scam involving John Sibbald, one of the grocer's assistants at the Camelon Co-operative Society, and two of the female customers from Grangemouth was uncovered in 1894. He issued his co-conspirators with more tokens than they were due and it was alleged that £177 worth of tokens was thus misappropriated. The women bought expensive goods with the tokens and then sold them, giving Sibbald a small payment in return. The complex system of receipts, slips and tokens was more often the means of financial loss for the co-operative movement than straight forward theft.

In 1877 the Camelon Co-operative Society had looked at the possibility of establishing a building society and twenty years on it took a fresh look at the idea. A building department to provide loans to members was inaugurated in 1898 and within the first ten years it loaned a total of £4728 of which £3180 had been repaid. The houses erected lay to the west of the parish church and comprised four double cottages each consisting of kitchen, back-kitchen,



Illus: The 1900-1901 branch at the west end of Camelon Village adjacent to St John's Parish Church.

parlour, two bedrooms; eight houses of two rooms, kitchen, scullery and wc; and four houses of room and kitchen with scullery and wc. A further tenement of dwelling houses was erected in 1901.

At west end of the village in Glasgow Road the society also added a branch grocery and a branch drapery in 1901, opening in July that year with a dairy branch. The three month trial of shutting Camelon Co-operative Society shops at 8pm on

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Saturdays, begun in October 1900, was extended to the new branches.

Camelon Co-operative Society started to organise an annual gala in Camelon Public Park. It provided treats for the children, vehicles for use as floats and a small sum of money to enable its running. It had long provided donations to the Wright Memorial Band to acquire instruments and the band took part in many co-operative led events. In 1897 it was noted that the band's stylish uniforms had been cut by Mr Dingwall, head cutter of Camelon Co-operative Society. In 1900



an education committee was formed and quickly created senior and junior choirs, programmes of talks, lantern shows, social meetings, and women's and men's guilds. A savings bank was also established for children – or adults if they so wished – with 800 members and deposits amounting to £1280 in 1908. Excursions were normal for co-operative societies and in the early days these were always by train. In May 1899 its members and families went for a picnic at Castle Campbell. September 1903 saw an even more exotic destination. Between 600 and 700 trippers went to Shieldhall, Glasgow, to see the extensive SCWS works. The works were massive and made a wide range of products, including some of the purvey to which the Mariners were treated before returning home. In August 1909 the Camelon Co-operative Society's first annual drive took place – road transport was now in vogue. 46 people were conveyed to Alva in brakes supplied by Andrew Wright, carriage hirer, Bainsford. The following year they drove to the beach – at Blackness.



Illus: Architect's drawing of the new building from *The Falkirk Herald* November 1911.

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It must have seemed that whatever the Society touched brought it more success. Even so many were surprised when it was announced in 1911 that JG Callendar, architect, had won an open competition to design a huge new building on the corner of the Main Street and the Hedges.

The new building was three-storeys high with fireproof floors (ie steel and concrete). The ground floor had massive plate glass windows whilst the upper floors were of polished blonde sandstone with channelled pilasters ascending to a shallow flat parapet and fine window detailing. The frontage onto Main St measured 56ft and 124ft to the Hedges. A pediment flanked on either side by



octagonal pilasters supported on moulded corbels forms the main feature of the north facade. A nicely proportioned dome is carried up at the junction of the two thoroughfares, giving prominence to the architectural scheme. 21 plate glass windows to shop fronts provided almost 130 lineal feet for "dustproof" show purposes. The building was lighted with electricity and heated on the low-pressure hot water system.

Illus: *The Falkirk Herald* photograph of Camelon Co-op on the day of opening May 1913.

The ground floor consisted of a spacious drapery shop facing the Main Street and the Hedges. The Drapery Department was a large and beautifully lighted shop of about 70ft by 30ft. Its interior was fitted up with a polished mahogany island counter with a glass front and top for display of all kinds of articles, and a beautifully carved centre fitting for the accommodation of fancy materials. To the west of the drapery department was the outfitting shop in the same style with waiting, fitting and cutter's room. A hoist ran between the cutter's room and the tailor's workrooms. The cash office and dairy were situated to the south of the feu with large covered-in court at the rear, and a small bakery adjoining. All the walls of the dairy were tiled from floor to ceiling with an artistic design with a painted tiled frieze of local views. The working part of this section had up-to-date refrigerating machine and cold store, the latest pasteurizer, milk separator, butter worker, and churn, all driven electrically. Access to the millinery and mantle showrooms and boot department on the first floors was from the drapery department by a handsome marble staircase of "exquisite" design with French polished panelled sides 5ft high, having a well-proportioned pediment over the entrance with carved and fluted columns at each side. Millinery and mantle showrooms, boardroom and offices comprised the first floor. The showrooms were fitted with the latest pattern of glass-fronted showcases, with trays for holding blouses, etc., each tray being made to lift out. JG Callendar designed all of the decorations and fittings. The tailoring and dressmaking workrooms occupied the top flat and were large, well-ventilated and well-lighted. The sewing machines were all electrically driven.

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Mr Greig from Kirkcaldy acted as the master of works on what was a complex building. This is reflected in the long list of contractors who were: mason work, John Gardner; joiner work, J & A Main; slater work, Drummond & Crowe; plaster and cement work, David McNair; plumber work, George Campbell; steel work, Redpath, Brown & Co Ltd, Glasgow; lath work, D Buchan; glazier work, Bailie & Telfer, Glasgow; granite work, William Roberts & Sons; tile work, James Duncan Ltd, Glasgow; shop fronts, D Grant, Edinburgh; electrical work, T Laurie & Co; painter work, James Marshall; heating work, J Cormack & Sons Ltd, Glasgow;

motors, General Electric Co Ltd, Glasgow; dairy plant, William Douglas & Sons, London.



It commenced trading on Saturday 3 May 1913, the opening ceremony having been performed by James Burns, president of the Society, who was presented by the architect and contractors with a suitably inscribed gold coloured key.

Illus The 1911 store looking south-west.

Camelon Co-operative had previously secured the silver cup presented by the SCWS for competition in the western district for the best-dressed grocery window in the years 1910, 1911 and 1912. The old building continued to be looked after and also won the accolade in 1915.

Many of the members of staff of the Society were called up during the First World War and trading conditions were more difficult afterwards. In April 1920 an important gathering of local co-operative societies took place at which it was agreed that a process of amalgamation should be promoted. Later that year the Grahamston and Bainsford Co-operative Society, the Bainsford and Grahamston Co-operative Baking Society, Camelon Co-operative Society, Larbert Co-operative Society and the; Stenhousemuir Co-operative Society amalgamated to form the Falkirk and District United Co-operative Society. One of its early acts was to take over the "Picture House" in Camelon previously occupied by the bankrupt Robert Pennycook (who also ran La Scala Picture House in Falkirk Town Hall) and to renovate it at considerable cost. Mr Heath, the manager of the cinema in Kelty, was then employed at the Camelon Co-operative Cinema and ran a full programme of films from 12 December 1921. It seems to have operated for little over a year.

The 1920s were poor years for the retail side and trade was slack due to the depression. In December 1927, between Friday night and Saturday morning, the co-operative fruit shop in Burnside Terrace was burgled. Access was gained by a back window and £28 was taken from the till.

Today much remains to be seen of the co-op stores in Camelon. That adjacent to St John's Church has been converted into flats, though the ground floor still contains shops/offices. The handshake emblem of the co-operative movement is carved onto a panel facing the church. The main store on the corner of the Hedges is still an attractive building, but unfortunately a show of its former glory. The whole of the third floor has been removed and along with it much of the architectural embellishment. The beautiful tiles lining the dairy have been covered over, but are still there.

Bibliography

The Falkirk Herald.

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