

# SLAMANNAN CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY

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**Geoff B Bailey**

It is said that one day after work in 1860 a handful of colliers met on the Water Green in Slamannan and discussed the new co-operative movement then making the news in Rochdale. They decided that each of them would put ½ d into a central fund so that they could send a letter to Rochdale seeking for information. More pennies and much more correspondence left them in such a state of knowledge that on 6 February 1861 the Slamannan Industrial Co-operative Society was registered. Collectors were appointed for each of the miners' rows in the district and subscriptions of between 6d and 1s were collected until sufficient funds were accrued. A large double shop at Yankee's Land in the Main Street was leased for five years and on 7 June it was opened



**Illus: Yankee's Land.**

with 221 members and a subscribed capital of £187.15.6. The complete list of members and their original investment was published in the anniversary book in 1911. The initial stock was a mere £100 worth of goods and trade was slow. Difficulty was experienced in obtaining bread of consistently good quality and in September a source was secured with the Airdrie Bread Society.

A major break – and stimulus – to the development of the Slamannan Co-operative was a miners' strike in September 1862 which lasted for eight weeks. During this time there was much hardship amongst the miners and many had to withdraw their capital from the Co-operative Society to tide them over. But they quickly realised how important that investment had been for them and the Society soon became seen as a savings bank. More strikes followed – nine weeks in 1878, eight weeks in 1879, five weeks in 1887 and thirteen in 1894. Each reinforced the Society's role. When interviewed by a newspaper reporter one of the strikers noted that *"the store is the real saving bank for us... it may interest you to know that one of the best things we have is our Co-*



**Illus: The registered office of the Slamannan Co-operative Society was bought from a tradesman so that land on the Main Street adjacent to it could be used for shops. It housed the board and committee rooms.**

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*operative Store. It was got up and is maintained entirely by ourselves. There are about 1,500 members, and we have two shops here in which everything we need is sold except cloth and boot and shoes."*

Catastrophe struck on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1878 when the City of Glasgow Bank collapsed and it appeared that the £4,650 deposited in it by the Slamannan Co-op would be lost. The dividend was immediately suspended. No capital was allowed to be withdrawn. Negotiations were conducted with merchants who had been supplying goods so that credit could be obtained and the Society bedded down for a long hard slog. Light appeared in January 1879 when the liquidators indicated that they might be able to recover a third of the money. Then in 1880



**Illus: The Slamannan Store in 1911. The section of the building on the right started as a double shop but was soon extended to have one main door and four windows. Left of these is the boot shop – all built in 1867. The next double shop is the drapery**

For a while it then appeared that progress was steady, but more change was in the wind. At the time that the Society was founded the exploitation of the Slamannan coalfield was in substantial development. In 1861 the population of the parish was 2,916; ten years later it was 4,164 and peaked in 1891 at 6,731. There then followed rapid depopulation and in 1911 it was down to 3,443. This was inevitably reflected in the Society's sales and shares.

The following is a summary of the progressive development of the Society in terms of its buildings:

- 1861 First Store opened in Yankee's Land, Slamannan
- 1867 First property built & Slamannan Store opened
- 1868 First bakery built in Slamannan
- 1873 Station property bought

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- 1874 Office opened daily
- 1875 Kirkburn property built & Fleshing Dept started 1876
- 1877 Longriggenged property built & Store opened
- 1877 Longriggenged Bakery started
- 1881 Limerigg property built & Store opened
- 1882 Slamannan Drapery shop opened
- 1885 Tailoring Dept started
- 1886 Boot and shoe Dept started at Limerigg
- 1887 Slamannan Dressmaking Dept started & Boot and Shoe Dept opened
- 1889 Drapery Dept and Boot and Shoe Dept opened at Longriggenged
- 1893 Large bakery with machinery built at Slamannan Station
- 1893 Avonbridge property built and Store opened
- 1899 Hosiery Dept started



**Illus: Station Branch.**

The first branch to be opened was just a mile away near the station where there were few houses but an expanding coalfield. The existing building was bought from John Watson, a local coal master in 1873 and served as a grocery store. The house on the left belonged to the Society's manager,

Andrew Murray, and behind it lay the stables and van shed for the adjacent bakery.

Slamannan still had a large agricultural community that specialised in cattle and the presence of the railway station led to cattle markets being held there. At first the Slamannan Co-operative was able to capitalize on this situation and in 1876 obtained a slaughtering licence.



**Illus: Kirkburn.** The first property in this view was built in 1875 and consisted of a killing-house and a byre, which forms the front of the photograph. It was the following year, however, before a slaughtering licence was obtained. The low building at the back of the picture is a byre, which was built around 1890. The highest building in the centre consists of stables above and a van-shed below – built in 1908.

However, there was a backlash from other traders and the co-operative faced an embargo for many years.



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**Illus: Lochriggend Branch, 1911.**

In 1877 the Slamannan Co-operative Society strayed into Lanarkshire when it acquired twelve houses and a large feu in Lochriggend and built a commodious store with plenty of storage and a bakehouse to the rear. A drapery

department were added in 1889 using two of the converted houses, which are seen on the right in this photograph.



**Illus: Limerigg Branch.**

Until 1881 the numerous colliers at Limerigg used the shop owned by the owners of the coal pits, Nimmo and Burns. They successfully petitioned for a co-operative branch in the village and it opened later that year near to the Black Loch. It was a single-storey red brick building with yellow brick margins and

a porch extending onto the footpath. Goods were stored above the shop and were hauled up a projecting wooden hoist in the gable. On the left in this photograph taken in 1911 is the grocery department with the boot department to the right. A small dwelling house was attached. In 1890 a further three double dwellings were added.



In August 1886 the bakery at Slamannan was seriously damaged by fire and thought was given to replacing it with a more productive unit.

**Illus: Slamannan Bakery.**

The large bakery was built near to the railway station at Slamannan in 1893 in order to reduce the expense of cartage.

However, it struggled to obtain a decent water supply and a shaft was sunk to

the coal workings below which had filled with water. The cost of the shaft and pumps was £400. In 1911 the public water system was inaugurated and became the source. The bakery was a two-storey brick building of nine bays with a first floor loading bay for the raw materials. The inside was lined with white enamelled brick for hygiene purposes. The extensive use of machinery reduced the number of people required to produce the ever increasing amounts of bread. The machinery was gas driven and the gas had to be brought three-quarters of a mile from the village. The plant consisted of a stirring machine, a doughing machine, a biscuit-rolling machine and a hoist on the ground floor. A loaf-weighing machine was added around 1910. The first floor held a flour-blending and mixing machine and a conveyor. At the end of the building was a bread store and loading shed. The bakery opened in March 1893 and during its first decade of use consumed around 10-13 tons of flour each week.



**Illus: Inside the bakery in the 1920s. The large dough mixer on the left supplied the base for most of the products with ingredients being added as required at the carefully scrubbed tables. Left to right – M. Stamford, G. Walker, J. Higgins, D. Smith, A. Young, R. Gardiner, J. Queen (who won a breadmaking competition in London) and M. Grubb.**

The previous bakeries at Slamannan and Longriggend were closed. The new bakery got off to a bad start when in September 1893 James Gillies lost three fingers when he placed his hand on the roller of the doughing machine. Worse was to follow. In January 1895 a rhone which conveyed the flour from the loft to the bakery broke and fell on the workmen. As a result of the accidents the gas jets exploded and Thomas McLean, foreman, Thomas Steveson, and James Gillies, bakers, were severely burned.



**Illus: Bakers at the bakery, left to right – Murdie Grubb; Alex Donaldson; Bob Gardiner; Tom McCracken; G Walker; Scot Stanford; A Christie; Archibald Young; Jean Young (later became a teacher); John Comrie; Archie Christie.**

The Avonbridge Branch was also built in 1893 in response to a request by those members of the Slamannan Co-operative living in that area. It stood on the north side of the river on the Main Street at Blackhillend adjacent to the Church of Scotland building and like most of the co-operative buildings was of red brick with yellow brick margins. The main part was one and a half stories high – with a grocery department on the ground floor and storage facilities above. The goods had to be winched up through a trapdoor. The wooden floor was kept swept with sawdust and a wooden counter extended around three sides of the room. A single storey extension provided accommodation for the main salesman. Initially boots and drapery items had to be ordered from Slamannan, but eventually a drapery department was added to Avonbridge. When the branch was first built the turnpike road here was the boundary between Stirlingshire and Linlithgowshire and so the Branch was actually in the latter.

**Illus: The Avonbridge Branch, 1911.**

For almost a decade the manager of the Slamannan Co-operative Society organised annual excursions in the first





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week of July with special trains when required. These could pick up excursionists at several of the stations in the area, such as Slamannan, Avonbridge and Blackston. Numbers attending were immense and it must have seemed as if most of the parish evacuated the place on such occasions.

- 1891 – excursion to Berwick on Tweed.
- 1895 – excursion to Ayr. 1,000 people.
- 1896 – trip to Stirling, 1,200 people.
- 1899 – excursion to Fort William, 1,000 people.
- 1901 – excursion to Berwick on Tweed.
- 1902 – excursion to Melrose.

Fire was an ever present risk and in January 1939 the Falkirk Fire Brigade had to make the treacherous six mile journey through deep snow to deal with an outbreak of fire at the Slamannan grocery department. It took the team two hours to get it under control and they were still there when notified of a fire at the Westfield Papermill. Leaving a couple of firemen in Slamannan they proceeded there, beating the Bathgate Brigade to the spot. The damage at Slamannan was put at. £1,000. Previously the Longriggend Branch caught fire in December 1892, but there had been little damage on that occasion.

Slamannan was a rural parish with widely dispersed collieries and in order to serve a larger part of the population general grocery vans were first introduced in 1892 and bread vans the following year. These horse-drawn vehicles were carefully enclosed to ensure that the food was not wasted. Meat vans started in 1897.



**Illus: The Slamannan Bakery bread van made the long trip daily to Avonbridge and back over the intervening hill. This required two horses, c1912. Tom Jack vanman.**

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Horses could be unpredictable and occasionally the vanman or a member of the public was hurt by a runaway. As motorised vehicles became more reliable and surplus vehicles were available after the First World War a slow change over began.

**Illus: Flat-bed lorry with pneumatic tyres. Martin coachbuilders, Kirkintilloch, c1923**

**Illus: Bread van, c1924. Martin coachbuilders, Kirkintilloch.**



**Illus: Martin coachbuilders, Kirkintilloch, c1937.**

New housing at the southern end of the village at Avonbridge meant that the bulk of the population now lay in that area and in 1961 a second branch was opened in a wooden hut at that end of the Main Street on the south side of the River Avon. Both the hut and the Bridgehillend branch were subsequently closed



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and replaced by a purpose-built convenience store which opened in February 1965 - one final act of the Slamannan Co-operative Society.

In 1958 the bakery at the station stopped making bread and was used as a storage area and garages. A few years later the Longriggend Branch was closed, followed in 1964 by the Limerigg branch, then the Station Branch along with the garages in 1965. In September 1966 the Slamannan Co-operative Society was absorbed into the Falkirk and District United Co-operative Society.

### Bibliography

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