

THE CARRON VICTUALLING SOCIETY

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This was an early co-operative society, one of the first, organised by the workers themselves and dating from 1825. The following appeared in the Stirling Journal and General Advertiser of 22nd June 1826:

About twelve months ago, a hundred of the workmen at Carron formed themselves into a kind of Joint Stock Company, and established the Carron Victualling Society – every one depositing £5. As an evidence of the success which has rewarded this very useful undertaking, it is but justice publically to state, that at balancing the affairs last week, for one year, (including salaries of two shopmen etc.) the sum of £1 15s was declared in favour of each member, over and above the original subscription, which is sunk in a very extensive stock of goods, that furnishes numerous families at the lowest prices.

The above statement serves to confirm that the Carron Victualling Society was one of the earliest worker's co-operatives in the country. Membership was only open to married persons who were householders and in the employment of Carron Company. Later, each person wishing to join had to lodge £5 10/- with the treasurer - £5 being the capital or share held by each member. It has been said that the high cost of a share put membership outside the reach of the ordinary worker, but some made the effort due to clever household management. By 1832, John Dawson (brother of Joseph and William, manager and assistant manager of Carron Company) got involved as clerk. The organising Committee held four meetings each year, on the first Monday of February, May, August and November, at which times the books held by the treasurer were compared with the accounts paid by the shopman (shopkeeper). An inventory of the Society's effects was also taken then. Dividends in the form of goods were paid to members after the General Meetings, which were held in June and December. All meetings were advertised on the North and East Gates of Carron Works on the day of the meeting. In 1840, the members of the committee were: James Mitchell (Presses), John Carmichael (treasurer), John Dawson (clerk), William Braidwood, Thomas Anderson, Alexander Hunter, David Hotchkis, James Begg, John Begg, John Andrew, James Bacon, William Clark and James Forrest. James Forrest was the grandfather of George Forrest the explorer and botanist; John Andrew was James' brother-in-law. John Carmichael was the clerk at Carron Company's counting house responsible for exposing the dubious dealings of Joseph Dawson and Henry Stainton, whilst William Clark, a nephew of Joseph and William Dawson, was a clerk at the works who lived at Blackmill Cottage, and who later built Mount Gerald. The Society's account book takes the form of an inventory of funds and minutes of the meetings. Most of the meetings were held in the Clubroom at Carron, which belonged to the Carron Friendly Society and which had been school, dwelling houses, and meeting place for the Victualling Society; it stood near to where the Carron roundabout is today. The meeting referred to in the following Minute was held in the Barber's Shop, at Barber Row, Carron.

BS, Carron 25th May 1847.

At a Committee Meeting held here this evening a state of the Society's Affairs was read over on which there appeared a gain of £153-18-11 Stl. for the Quarter ending the 3rd May. In terms of Art[icle] 10, the following members will lose one half of their respective profits for this Quarter i.e. Mr Philip, Ploughman. In terms of the said Art[icle], the following members will lose the whole of their respective shares of the profits for this Quarter i.e. Mrs Jas. Burden, David Connachie, Mrs Higgle, Jas. McKenzie, Alex. McKenzie, L. McLaren, Wm. Smith, Andrew Young, James Henderson S Keeper [the shopkeeper?] and Arch. Waugh, Collier. In terms of Art[icle] 8, P. Allan's (moulder) Share having been taken out in the Goods of the Society, his heirs have no further claim on the society. Henry Donaldson Presses.

Those persons who lost their share of the profits did so because they had not purchased goods from the shop within the quarter. One interesting fact comes from the Minutes of 1852 which states that there had been notice from the exciseman, a Mr Perry, to D. Masterton the shopman:

"That if we did not immediately renew the name of our firm and insert that of some responsible individual, we should be liable to a fine of £100. We unanimously elected our treasurer to sign the requisite certificate in the Excise Book. The name of our firm will be Jas. Mitchell & Co., in place of Jas Easton & Co."

It would seem that these early co-operatives had to register as a firm with the Customs and Excise, using the name of a "responsible person". By then, Henry Donaldson was chairman, James Mitchell, treasurer, and John Dawson continued as clerk. The firm continued to be registered as James Mithcell & Co. for a time. On Monday the 10th of July 1854, a committee appointed by the shareholders of the Victualling Society, presented John Dawson, James Mitchell and Henry Donaldson each with a pair of valuable gold spectacles in "richly mounted tortoise-shell cases." *"to mark the high respect with which they were regarded as men, and for the strict integrity and business habits by which they were distinguished, as shown during the long period they had conducted the business of the society as clerk, treasurer and president."*

The Rules and Regulations of the Society were amended in 1832, 1839 and 1857, during which time John Dawson was clerk. By 1857 at least, Mr Dawson was assisted by his nephew, William Clark of Blackmill Cottage.

Also by then, the president was George McEwan and the treasurer was still James Mitchell, who had at one time been president. William Jack, writing in *Reminiscences of Carron 50 years ago* (1885), stated that before John Dawson took over that position i.e. pre-1832, shareholders had been given a poor return on their investment. Dawson's significance was also later confirmed by a future chairman. The Victualling Society operated at first from a small cottage (once described as a but-and-ben) opposite the works with the drapery, grocery & c. all conducted from the same room. In 1870, at a General Meeting held in the ballroom of the Carron Inn, it was decided by the members to present their late salesman Mr Alexander Milne with a small testimonial, as an attribute of respect for him and in appreciation of his services. He had left the Society to commence

business for himself at Larbert. The Carron Victualling Society was superseded by the Carron Co-operative Society in about 1871 when the Falkirk Herald carried an advertisement for assistants for "Carron Co-operative Society", and this change signified that it was then open to all, and not just to those employed at the Works. A separate grocery department was added in c1888 and a bakery in c1893 and the address was No. 2 Carronbridge.



Illus: Carron Co-operative bakery department.

However, as the Society prospered with a membership of 350, it was soon apparent that bigger and better premises were required. Ground covering 4,931 sq. yds. On the lands of Millflats, next to

Guildbutts, a few hundred yards south of the River Carron, was feued from the Trustees of the late William Dawson on the 20th October 1897 and the new premises built. The building, at 661-671 Carron Road, was of two storeys, freestone, plain in appearance but "business-like". On the ground floor was situated the grocery and drapery and there was also a substantial cellar. In the first floor were four dwelling houses, let out at a moderate figure. At the rear of the premises was the shoemaker's shop and committee room. The new building was opened in late October 1898 after the signatories had marched behind the Carron Works Brass Band from the old premises. The bakery and fleshing departments of the Carron Co-operative Society remained at the old location at Carron. The chairman in 1898 was William Baird and he stated at the opening that the Society had in the past, benefited from the interest taken in it by John Dawson of Carron Company. He also said that it had been instituted as far back as 1759, which made it one of the very oldest, if not the oldest, societies in Scotland, but they could only find records from John Dawson's time. Mr Baird had obviously confused the Carron Victualling Society with the Carron Friendly Society; the latter having been established in 1762. The bakery and fleshing departments were still in use at the original site opposite the Works in the early 1950s, but were demolished in the 1960s.

The above was first published in Appendix 8 of Brian's book "Carron; Where Iron Runs Like Water" published by the Falkirk Local History Society in 2010 and is reproduced here with his kind permission.