

# Of Whole Heart Cometh Hope



CENTENARY MEMORIES OF  
THE CO-OPERATIVE WOMEN'S GUILD

Stratford New Town  
Women's  
Co-operative Guild



Of Whole Heart  
Cometh Hope

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## CENTENARY MEMORIES OF THE CO-OPERATIVE WOMEN'S GUILD

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This book of memories, compiled from transcribed and edited interviews with long-standing members of the Co-operative Women's Guild, celebrates the achievements of these campaigning women. We are proud to be associated with the Guild in its Centenary Year, and wish to thank all those who have so generously contributed their stories and their time.

## INTRODUCTION

### Kathleen Kempton's speech at Woolwich Town Hall on September 4th 1983 on the occasion of the Women's Co-operative Guild Centenary

Madam President, your worships, distinguished guests and fellow members — I am asked to cram one hundred years into fifteen minutes. — I want to say first of all how proud I am to stand on this platform today, here in Woolwich in the presence of members of the Woolwich branch, bearing in mind it is more than likely that Mary Lawrenson, who was one of the founders of the Guild organisation, has probably stood on this platform and addressed audiences, whether Guild audiences or Co-operative audiences, and it is a matter of great pride therefore for me to stand here with the members of the Southern Section, National Presidents and so on, who must have come to this hall very many times. I don't want to mention any names because I am quite certain that if I do, I shall have left out somebody. Nevertheless, it is important I think to remember these members on this particular day. And I want to emphasise in speaking of the history of the Guild that what we are celebrating here today is the foundation of the first branches, and I emphasise particularly the word branches and the word members because it's the members and branches who are the bedrock — the foundation of any organisation. Officials and leaders may have ideas, they may make revolutionary suggestions, but it's the branches and the members who decide the policy of an organisation and it's the branches and the members who have to carry out the decisions that they've made.

I think it's important for us to remember, although we talk about the Guild having been founded as a result of correspondence in the Womens' Corner of the Co-operative News — that that correspondence came about because women were talking amongst themselves. Women went to the Co-operative Union Congress in the early 1880's — not as delegates of course, but as the appendages of their husbands — either wives or daughters taken along by the men who were the only people in Co-operative Societies then who had the right to be members, the right to be Co-operators. They used to take along their wives and daughters to the Co-op Union Congress and these women naturally got together and talked to one another and it was they who originated that phrase "men have their meetings — why not women!" And it was out of that talk of those early Congresses that the idea began to take root of a women's organisation.

When Mrs. Acland wrote her letter in the Womens' Corner, it was picked up by Co-operators like Mary Lawrenson of Woolwich who thought what a splendid idea it would be if women were to get together and work to found an organisation. And so in 1883 the Women's

League for the Spread of Co-operation came into being and amongst its original ideas it was stressed that it would be very ladylike — it would conduct its affairs in a womanly way and the members would not speak in public and they would not oppose men. Well we all know it didn't take very long for those ideas to disappear and it wasn't very long before Mary Lawrenson herself was elected to the education committee of the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society and there's no doubt that women meeting together in Guild branch meetings gained confidence — that's why the change came about. They started off saying "we won't oppose men and we'll be very womanly and gentle" and all the rest, because they didn't have confidence. But meeting together and discussing things gave them the confidence that they needed to step forward, and meetings that gave them that confidence, also showed them that they had common problems that they all suffered from the problems of low wages or irregular employment of poor housing — minimal or non-existent health care — of poor education, of the exploitation of women under the law and in employment and so on. They discovered that they all had these same problems and so this women's league, which by then had changed its name to Women's Co-operative Guild, became a great campaigning organisation; the first women's organisation to be formed as a democratic organisation, founded by the people who became the members — not founded by do-gooders who thought it would be a good idea if the poor dear working class women got together, but women themselves coming together and founding an organisation. And we can justly and rightly claim to be the forerunners of all the Women's Lib. organisations that are functioning today. It was the Co-operative Women's Guild who sowed the seeds, and amongst our early campaigns — and I've only time really just to mention them — you can think of women's suffrage — the women who were fighting for the right of the women to vote — the right of women to be equal citizens. The minimum wage campaign grew out of the discussion and problems of low wages and the right to Trade Union membership came out of the same discussion.

And you may not know, although I hope of course that you have all diligently read *Caring and Sharing* — the new Guild History — you won't realise perhaps that Guilds-women were active in Trade Unions, women who were working, even in those early days, and were responsible for gathering hundreds and thousands of signatures for the various petitions that were going on at the time for the right to organise and the right to be in Trade Unions. Then, of course, we had our famous maternity and child

welfare campaign which it is quite true to say laid the basis of the legislation in this country for a proper maternity and child welfare service and we ought all of us to feel especially proud that it was our forerunners — the pioneer members of the Women's Co-operative Guild, women who'd come out of ordinary working class homes, who could never express themselves in this way before, who went to the highest ministers of the land, interviewed the highest Ministers in the Government, in order to show the terrible conditions under which children were being born and new citizens were being born in this country. Then of course we fought for divorce law reform and in that instance we came to blows with the Co-operative Union and for four years they refused to give the Guild financial assistance because they couldn't support the Guild's attitude towards the rights of women as far as divorce was concerned. The Guild was the first organisation to pass a resolution on abortion and that was as long ago as 1934 — at a time when words like that were just swept under the carpet. Nobody dared to speak them.

Here we had this foremost women's organisation taking its courage in its hands and expressing its views and fighting for all women. We had the long campaign for equal pay in which we worked with many other women's organisations. The Guild campaigned for family allowances — long before the social services and the welfare state came into being. Housing standards were another issue — something that affects everybody, which the Guild took up in a very big way.

And then of course there was our famous Peace Campaign — the white poppy that we are selling again now, which we had between the wars in the 1930's. But I think it is important to have in mind that we didn't only campaign for peace — we tried to establish international understanding — international friendships. It's one thing to have peace between armed camps, when everybody's afraid of everyone else — but that's not the kind of peace we want in the world and the peace that the Guild campaigned for was a peace based on understanding and friendship. And because of that we were instrumental in 1922 in helping to found the International Co-operative Women's Guild — and that's another claim to fame which we have and we saw the delegates from overseas at our Guild Centenary Congress this year. We have the right to feel proud that the I.C.A.<sup>1</sup> Women's Committee which grew out of the International Co-operative Women's Guild owes its foundation to the work of the English Guild. Then, of course, since the second world war we've campaigned for a Health Service — during the war we

campaigning for a National Health Service and for Comprehensive Education which is something which we sometimes forget. Since the war, there has been the Cost of Living Campaign — international activities like the Botswana Caravan. The bucket of water — the various National programmes themes, and in particular I think, important to remember at this time — the two years that we spent studying and trying to press for democracy in the Co-operative movement and in local Government.

Well that's a very quick skim over the campaigns that we've conducted over the last 100 years. But I want to emphasise that a hundred years is not the end of history. We can look back with very great pride — but we have to look forward as well. These campaigns that we conducted in the past — how much we need to be conducting them again now! We've seen the National Health Service disappear in front of our very eyes through the present Tory Government. We've seen the Social Services going the same way. We see education being cut at all levels, whether it's the primary school or right up to the university. All that the Government can think of is cut, cut, cut. And the same applies to practically anything you can think of. All that's profitable in public, in nationalised industries is being privatized. The transport is going to disappear. The Metropolitan Councils like the GLC will disappear if the Government has its way. So as we set our standard today at the end of our first hundred years we have to have in mind that we've still a tremendous amount to do. We may need, and in fact we certainly do need to make changes. We need to make changes in our structure and in our methods to suit the changes in society, and above all enforce the changes in the Co-operative movement. We need to make changes and we need to have a new rallying call to all our present members and we need to say to the Co-operative movement, to Co-operative Societies and the Co-operative Union and to Education Committees, all of whom have passed resolutions this year at the Easter Convention and at the Co-operative Union Congress, pledging their full support to the Co-operative Women's Guild as it steps into its second century, "Come in now and give us your help". We want to run these campaigns all over again, we want to work for all who are working to save the National Health Service and so on. We need new branches with new members, and we need your help in setting them up. So I say to you today, let us all rally to this call, let us see that we get the support of the Co-operative Movement. And had I a glass in my hand I would say to you all "Let's drink a toast, let's say, Long Live the Co-operative Women's Guild".

1. International Co-operative Alliance.

# THE CO-OPERATIVE HOUSEHOLD

## A Co-operative Childhood

Very early in my life, I can remember the Labour Party activities and the Co-operative activities. This is what home was all about. It all revolved round these two activities. Other things were incidental — holidays, schooling, even bringing up the family, was all second place to these two activities. My mother was the strongest personality in the house — she was desperately active in both organisations — as the Labour candidate for the Council, and in the various Committees of the Women's Guild. So the family had to go along with her. As the youngest member of the family I got caught up in more of her activities than any of the others.

The earliest memories are going to these meetings and sitting at the back with a pad of paper so that the Women could get on with their meeting. I was drawing. I was entertaining myself from the age of about two or three I suppose. And then as the years went by I was able to follow more what was going on and it was rather an unusual up bringing. My mother used to take me, not only to her own Town Guild in Shirley, Southampton — I think in the Recobites Hall — a Friendly Society — she used to take me to all the others that she would address, because by this time she was on some Committee or other — District Committee — and she had to do her quota of meetings. And so I was dragged around to all sorts of halls and meetings.

My earliest recollections were coming home from school at the age of about six or seven. In working class areas you had a parlour. It was only ever open on Sundays and at Christmas. You kept all the ornaments on the mantelpiece. The door was firmly closed. And I would come home from school with my usual cry..... "Mum .... I'm hungry"! Dash in, and there would be all those ladies with funny hats, in the front room, in the parlour, in the middle of the week. Never heard of such a thing!

I can remember as a child going shopping in the Co-op. My father used to wear those horrible stiff white collars and we used to have to take them and very often, we used to have to wait for them to come into the shop — the laundry hadn't delivered them and we used to hate it. And sometimes they hadn't got them and we had to go back — just to get my father's collars, because it was at the Co-op. Oh that used to rile us, and you see we didn't understand. But my mother was trying to teach us, obviously, to shop at the Co-op.

My father used to come in and say "Who bought that...?" jam or whatever it was on the table. And it wasn't Co-op see, so I said "Ooh I don't know, it must have been one of the boys, not me". He said "I want nothing on my table but Co-op". I said "Alright".

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When I went to the shop I had the number pressed on me so many times that I remember it to this day. So remembering this number I would go into the shop — I remember it so well — counters on both sides — seemed to be massive. I think the shop has now closed but I remember going back to it once years afterwards and thinking how very small the shop was, but to me it was a huge shop. Counters and in one corner I remember the huge ham — the cutter — and I was fascinated to watch the grocer turning the arm of the cutter, slicing off the ham — weighing out other things that were required. The sugar. The flour. Some were pre-packaged, but most were packed on the spot — all very fascinating to young eyes — I suppose I was going to the shop from about aged 7 or 8 on my own.

I remember my mother going to the Guild meetings. Taking me along when I was on holiday and when there were birthday parties and anything special and I used to enjoy that, but I used to think as I grew up, "Ooh fancy here going there every week, that's not for me". That's really what I thought. And one of the reasons that I felt that was because she used to send me shopping at the Co-op. My friend used to be sent shopping, but she didn't have to go to the Co-op, she was always finished her shopping first while I was still queueing up at the Co-op. That was good for Co-op business, but I used to say "I will never be a Co-op member when I grow up, I'm not shopping at the Co-op." But you begin to grow up..... think about politics.... and well.....

We had to do the shopping on a Saturday, my sister and I and we used to say — “have we got to do the shopping?” “Yes, you know I can’t do it”. So basket between us, a big one, and to the shop — the Co-op of course, we always had to go to the Co-op, and being quite small, well, 10 or 11, we didn’t understand what the Co-op meant in those days. Anyway, we had to go to the Co-op. It was a long way from our house, but mother insisted that we went to the Co-op. And then of course when I grew older and I was married and I had my little boy, I used to call him in from the garden. “Roger would you go to the shop for me?” “Oh Alright,” he’d go, he’d say “Can I take my friend?” and I’d say “Yes”. He’d go and he’d take the list and off he’d go. And Dale would come back and would say to me “Mrs Mewis you didn’t tell him which shop to go to” and I’d say, “He doesn’t need to be told which shop to go to — he goes to the Co-op”. That’s a throw back you see, — my mother made us go the Co-op, and you live, eat, and sleep Socialism, nuclear disarmament and all the other things that affect people’s lives today.

My father was unemployed for 8 years. And he was blacklisted. Probably because he was a shop steward. So after always having very poor money and then having to be unemployed, which also led to sickness, eventually we had to go on to the Parish as they called it, onto the Board of Guardians, where the men had to go and queue up asking for sustenance. And then they gave you 3s, 5s at the most in monies — that was to help you to pay the rent — the rest you had to get in groceries. Now I can remember when I was about fourteen having to have this grocery list and having to take it to the Co-op because my mother was too ashamed — because they knew her there at the Co-op. She’d never go and use this and it was always my duty to take this. And I wasn’t very happy about it either of course because you see it was a limited list of foods you could have — for example butter was only two ounces, and the rest had to be margerine. You were allowed just the minimum. There was a list of foods but so many of them were cut or carved out, that you just had a bare sustenance of sugar, flour, margerine. And we lived on that for ..... I don’t know how long.



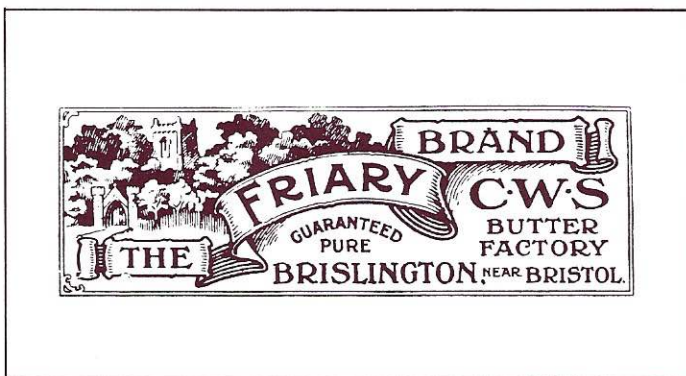
My mother was a Co-operator, and although she didn’t belong to any Guild — she used to preach Co-operation with the best. She was always talking about Co-operation and of course we wouldn’t dare go anywhere else but the Co-op shop when we were sent shopping. Ooh no! So she was a Co-operator of the old school, and we were brought up in that atmosphere.

The Co-operative movement in those days seemed to be expanding. To my young eyes it was really building. The shops were getting smarter. The goods were getting smarter; the customers were becoming smarter and it seemed to me that it was working — pushing back exploitation was actually going to work.

My earliest memory of a political event was the boycotting of Japanese goods following the invasion of Manchuria. There was a big campaign — the Guild, and other progressive organisations, thought that they should show their distaste for this vicious attack on Manchuria — I am sure most people didn’t even know where Manchuria was — but it was an issue that had been brought to their attention. and there was certainly a lot of material available to show the atrocities that were going on.

They used to have Lemn Street meetings — I must have been about 16 — it was round about 1924/25. They used to have the meetings on a Sunday. And this was a time of great poverty too. We used to go to Lemn Street for meetings but the great encouragement was.... Mother said “You can come along — they’re going to let me bring you this time” and we had a ham and salad tea, something unheard of in those days, to have ham and salad and a cake, in our household, unheard of. And it was a great treat like going to the Ritz to go to Lemn Street and have a ham and salad tea after the meeting.

My father was a shop steward and a very keen Trade Unionist in an engineering, a local engineering factory. There was a lot of short-time working in those days. In those early days, every Bank Holiday was a nightmare for my mother because it was a shut down and you had no pay from the Friday to the Monday — because you see holidays were never paid for. I'm talking about pre 1923 now — so holidays were a nightmare, bank holidays. The people had no Social Services. There was no Health Service so the poor people always had to go into the clubs. In our family, we joined the "Hearts of Oak" which was our saving grace should our father ever be ill. And of course when you are only earning say £2.00 per week, you've got to pay something like 5s per month, it used to be to, "Hearts of Oak", often it was a panic to get that money paid after say 3 months, in case you were out of benefit. So I can remember my mother having the "Hearts of Oak" card on the mantle-piece saying, "your father hasn't paid it — what are we going to do?" You see, because it always used to end up with mother paying the Hearts of Oak. That was the state of poverty.



I and two friends whose mothers were in the Guild, we got together and we made up a little play. It was the Guild's birthday and they wanted an entertainment and we made up this play and we were Guildswomen in it. I remember saying "Ooh yes, its a lovely cup of tea. 99 Tea!" and I opened up a packet of biscuits and I remember saying "Mind how you open that packet of biscuits, because there's a coupon on there and you get free gifts with that". And they loved it because we were advertising all the Co-op products. I was about 10 or 11 I suppose but you see we'd been brought up in the Co-op and that was just part of our life. It was 99 tea you know — the best tea in the world. I still use it!

There was also a very big event in my life so far as the Co-op shop was concerned when the departmental store was developed. It had a cafe attached to it and it became the highlight of our social week to actually go and have tea in the Co-op cafe. We felt we had arrived.

My mother used to take me to meetings all over the country so I had a chance to see other Co-operative cafes. It became essential, whenever we went anywhere to find the Co-operative cafe. The first priority was to find the co-op store and the cafe. We had to go to the Co-op store.

My home, at this time had a small tiny kitchen and a small room attached to it, and what I remember about this room — it had a table where we had our meals — and my mother was always so busy doing something that she never actually sat down with us to eat. She used to prepare the meals and dump them in front of us, so that she could eat while she prepared a meal, and off to a meeting. But the other memory I have, was the clock sitting on the mantelpiece — and behind the clock, was the filing of all the papers and documents that were arriving by every post — minutes, summonses to meetings — it seemed to me that mountains of stuff was arriving, propoganda material of one sort or another from the Guild or other progressive organisations. I remember stealing a look at this material as a very very young boy and seeing the mutilated bodies of people who had suffered Japanese, or some other atrocities. So there was a great deal of fervour. It was not only about changing society in Britain and having decent shops to go to. It was about world affairs too.

My earliest memories are of my mother taking me to various meetings — Labour Party meetings — Labour Party meetings galore and Co-op Guild meetings. Co-op Guild Socials. Where the ladies used to stand up and sing and entertain one another. Co-op Guild jumble sales. Co-op Guild American teas — American teas are where everybody brings something and then you all share it out — everything had to be from the Co-op of course. It had to be from the Co-op because this was part of the religion.

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From a small child I can remember we never had anything in our house, anything other than from the Co-op. Our food, our clothes, our shoes, our coal, had to come from the Co-op. My father was really most adamant about this. Because he could not understand how a Trade Unionist and a Labour Party person could shop at a capitalist shop. It was right against the grain. Father said that every trade unionist and every wife of a trade unionist should only shop at the Co-op; that it was their only defence against the capitalist shops — so we always had everything from the Co-op, to the extent that when we grew up it was marvellous to have biscuits — lovely to go to a neighbour and she'd have Peak Freans biscuits - her biscuits were so much nicer because they weren't from the Co-op.