

**THE STAVELEY COOPERATIVE BOBBIN MANUFACTURING SOCIETY LTD
1880-1900**



The former drying shed of Gatefoot Bobbin Mill converted into holiday flats c. 1970. Between 1880 and 1894 Gatefoot was the Cooperative Society's mill.

Foundation

By 1880 the Staveley bobbin industry was in decline. In 1851 there had been 192 bobbin workers but in 1881 there were only 161. There was little alternative work locally because numbers on farms fell even more drastically, from 320 to 233, and in textiles from 25 to 6. So when, some time in 1879, it became clear that the Suart brothers intended to stop running their Gatefoot Bobbin Mill, the work-force there faced a bleak future. Consider for instance Samuel Shaw, bobbin turner, who probably worked at Gatefoot (because he lived in one of the Rawes Mill cottages which were part of Suart's mill complex). He was 36 in 1881, had been born in Staveley, and had six children children aged from 3 to 13. He would not find it easy to move away, or to find another job locally.¹

We may suspect that the idea of forming a cooperative to keep the mill going came from Michael Bewsher, manager of the Kendal Coop's Staveley grocery store (now the antique shop), since he later became Chairman of the Society,² and was likely to be in touch with the organisation and the enthusiasms of the Cooperative Movement. Production Cooperatives like the Staveley Society were rather rare - there were no others in Cumberland or Westmorland in 1889³ and only 100 or so nationwide in 1911.⁴ The new Society registered in February 1880 and in 1883 it had 122 members with a share capital of £1827 in one pound shares.

Shareholders

Who were the shareholders and why did they join? Our only list comes from 1900⁵, when there

were 1723 shares held by 102 members, and clearly many of these were not the original holders, but a comparison of the names with the 1881 census returns and with other local sources enables us to identify all but 29 of them.

Some were well-wishers ready to support local employment. For instance William Chaplin, Vicar of Staveley held 5 shares, Anthony Suart, former bobbin manufacturer, but in 1881 a farmer, who presumably rented the mill to the Society, held 22, and John Braithwaite of Gill Cottage, landowner, held 20. An interesting well-wisher was James Tyson JP, manager of Chadwick's, the largest Staveley bobbin mill (later the SWTC), a leading Methodist and temperance reformer, who took 10 shares. 54 shares were held by WH Somervell of the K Shoes family.

The next group was made up of successful and ambitious bobbin-workers. The largest shareholder in 1900 was Alfred Bell, manager of the Society's mill, who had 192 shares. (Under the rules of the Society no-one could hold over 200⁶). The previous manager, Grosvenor Read, held 14 in 1900, but his brother Henry had another 47. Read describes himself simply as a bobbin turner in 1881, but was manager by 1885.⁷ Clearly he and his family had been able to invest quite heavily in the Society. Mother large holding was that of the Riggs. William Rigg, bobbin turner, from Cartmel, lived at Barley Bridge in 1881 and in 1900 his daughter Ada held no less than 109 shares and his son William, "general mechanic" in 1881, another 11. This same William was running the Gatefoot Bobbin Mill himself in 1906.⁸ Another family of Riggs, of Cragg End, held 44 shares. Numbers of shares like these represent a considerable investment - the average annual wage of employees at the mill in 1897-9 was £40.

Some quite large blocks of shares were held by people with no obvious connection with the bobbin industry. For instance Thomas Abba, landlord of the Eagle and Child held 32 - had he accepted them in lieu of unpaid scores? Katherine Sargeant, widow of a joiner and carpenter of Barley Bridge held 63. The rules allowed members to transfer their shares, provided the new member was first approved by the Committee.

Finally of 89 people who held less than 30 shares in 1900, 39 can be identified with reasonable certainty with bobbin workers of 1881 or their widows or children (transfer to heirs was automatic). The holding of Samuel Shaw (para. 1 above), seems to have been divided between two of his sons, Thomas and James, who held 7 shares each in 1900. The Society had 34 employees in the early 1890s and 24 in 1900⁹, so it is reasonable to suppose that all or most of them were members, and that they bought shares in the hope of preserving their jobs.

Trading 1880-94

The Coop Mill started trading in 1880. It was run by a manager appointed by a committee of eight members elected on the basis of one vote per member (not per share). The machinery rented with the Gatefoot Mill was probably old, and the Society would have to buy replacements as well as stocks of timber, and also to establish contact with customers, though no doubt it tried to take over Suarts' old ones. These factors may explain its dismal opening performance. For its first six years it made a series of losses totalling £911 and paid no dividend. Then things began to improve. In 1887 there was a profit of £503, in 1888 the total of trade done reached £5082, its highest ever, and in 1889 and 1890 there was a dividend of 5% per share. Alfred Bell, who took over as manager from Grosvenor Read about 1886, must have been pleased.¹⁰

The move to Fellfoot

Success was not to last. As the 1890s progressed, the decline of the bobbin industry continued. With automatic machinery and imported timber it was easy enough for the large textile mills of Yorkshire, Lanarkshire and Lancashire to set up their own bobbin shops, powered by reliable steam engines. So the Coop Mill found its sales falling - by 1894 they were less than half what they had been in 1887, and there were no dividends in the years 1891-4. Mills like Gatefoot which relied solely on water-power were at a considerable disadvantage compared with others

like Fellfoot or Chadwicks which had steam power to fall back on in times of drought or freeze-up. This may explain why, when James Philipson's lease of Fellfoot Mill came to an end and he decided to retire from business, the Society moved to Fellfoot. Another possible reason for the move is that they were able to negotiate a low rent there.

This mill was owned by James Johnson of Reston Hall, who in 1894-6 was conducting a desperate search for a new tenant. One of his problems was that the mills on the Kent had to pay a water rate to the Commissioners who had built the Kentmere Reservoir in 1846 "The mill is idle... and likely to remain so. I feel certain that a very low rent will have to be taken", he wrote to the Kent Reservoir Commission, and went on to ask them to reduce the water rate to match.¹¹ "I see no chance of letting the mill now that the bobbin trade has left the neighbourhood", he wrote in July 1894. George Dean, one of the owners of Barley Bridge Woollen Mill, tried to help. "Persons whom I have been trying to persuade [to take Fellfoot] would offer only £15 for use of the water and £35 rent to the landlord, but they inform me that they have offers of other mills better situated, both steam-driven, at less rent and without water rate. Wishing to see the village continue to prosper, it has been my endeavour to get a suitable tenant," he wrote to Charles Cropper, prime mover of the river Commission.¹² Eventually, in November 1896, Johnson signed a seven year lease to the Society at a rent of £37.10.0 pa with a water rate of under £25¹³. In 1875 the rent of Fellfoot had been £135. 18.0 and the water-rate £99.4.0¹⁴ so the concession was a considerable one. The Coop Mill began operations in its new home on Jan 1st 1897.

The mill closes down

The move was not a success. The Society made a small profit of £52 in 1897 and even managed to pay a dividend of 2.5% in each of 1898 and 99, but turn-over was still only about half its peak of 1888. At the Annual Meeting held in the Staveley Institute in March 1900, the Society decided to wind itself up.

The winding up of the Coop Mill may well be linked in some way with the formation in the same year by Deans of Barley Bridge of the Staveley Wood Turning Company, Ltd. In 1897 Chadwicks of Bolton had sold their Staveley Mill to Coates of Paisley, who in turn sold it on to Dean in 1900. These changes show the weakening of the link between the textile industry and

Staveley, though the reel and bobbin industry in Staveley had in fact a long future in the new century, especially as it began to diversify into tool handles. (There is evidence in the Coop winding-up papers that Alfred Bell the manager had some handle-turning machines at Fellfoot.) Members of Coop with large numbers of shares like Alfred Bell might well have preferred to invest in a more modern mill two miles nearer the station. Dean's new SWTC might also expect to take over such customers as the Coop Mill still retained, and it is highly probable that Fellfoot's remaining 24 employees hoped to find jobs with the new firm.

Whether they found themselves out of work or not, members at any rate got their money back. Alfred Bell the manager and Roger Blamire the Secretary acted as liquidators and arranged to sell the Society's machinery and stock for £2300 to a Manchester firm, Messrs Taberners¹⁵, who could no doubt find plenty of customers for lathes and wood in the bobbin shops of the large Lancashire mills. The assets sold for £2300 were valued at only £1660 in the final balance sheet (below), so provided the Society could recover most of the £580 owed to it, it could repay its shareholders with a handsome bonus of up to 30%! Thus Alfred Bell would receive well over £200, and a bobbin turner like John Ivinson, who held 16

shares and was aged 66 in 1900, a useful nest-egg in that age before Old Age Pensions.

If Bewsher or other cooperators hoped that the Staveley Coop Mill would spread a new form of industrial partnership, the idea failed. But if, as seems more likely, the chief purpose was to save for as long as possible the jobs of people like Samuel Shaw or John Ivinson, despite the decline of the staple local industry, then it had some modest and temporary success.

Notes

1. Data from 1851 and 1881 census returns
2. Winding up papers of the Society WD/MM Box 46 KRO
3. Cooperative Statistics. Coop Union
4. Encyclopaedia Britannica
5. WD/MM Box 46 KRO
6. Society's rule book in above
7. Bulmer's Directory
8. Bulmer
9. Jones B *Cooperative Production* Oxford 1894, and Coop Union Statistics
10. Coop Union Statistics
11. Letter Johnson to Kent Commission 28/4/1894 in WSR/1 A 19 KRO
12. Letter Dean to Cropper as above
13. Lease recited in 1900 indenture WD/MM Box 46, and letter from Cropper to Commissioners 19/6/94 WSR/1 as above
14. Fellfoot ledger of W Philipson. Courtesy Mr F Unsworth
15. WD/MM as above

Staveley Co-operative Bobbin Manufacturing Society, (LIMITED).

Balance Sheet for the Year ending December 30th, 1899.

Liabilities.				Assets.										
				£	s.	d.								
1723 Shares at £1 each	1723	0	0	Wood, &c.	...	...	...	...	1155	18	4
Bonds	500	0	0	Machinery	...	...	...	...	505	0	0
Reserve Fund	92	2	4½	Debts owing	...	...	...	...	580	8	4
Owing to Tradesmen	42	7	11	Cash in Bank	...	...	...	...	145	6	1
Undivided, 1898	4	14	11	Cash in Hand	...	...	...	...	23	17	11½
Balance Profit	48	5	6								
				£2410	10	8½					£2410	10	8½	

ROGER BLAMIRE, Secretary.

Audited and found correct,

JOSEPH A. MARTINDALE,
ROBERT ATKINSON.

Notice is hereby given that the Yearly Meeting will be held in the Institute, on Saturday, March 10th, 1900, at the hour of Four o'Clock, p.m.