

# A (definitely not comprehensive) A to Z of England's Co-op Architecture

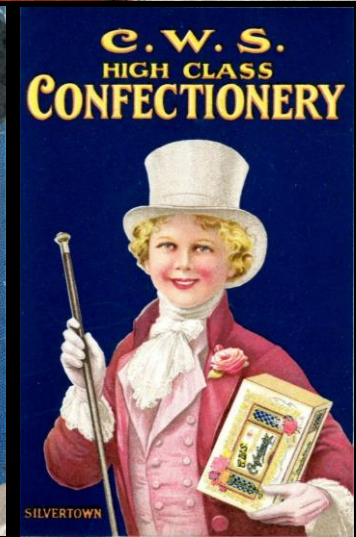
## Lynn Pearson



From small beginnings in 1844 the co-op – in fact hundreds of independently-run local co-operative societies – opened well over 10,000 stores in England by 1939. At the same time its federal body, the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) ran 150 factories and farms, and employed more than 63,000 people worldwide. And of course the co-op is still here today, with nearly 4,000 convenience stores in England alone. Read on for some interesting facts and images from co-op history.....

## A is for Advertising

In the early 20th century the CWS issued a series of postcards, often wryly humorous, advertising their own-brand goods. Many items were named after CWS factory sites, notably Pelaw industrial estate near Gateshead and the Silvertown works in east London. Pelaw Polish was one of the best known. Its metal polish adverts focussed on how quickly its brilliant shine could be obtained. Speed was expressed by running elements (sometimes tin pans with legs...), while aspirational upper class figures praised the shining results. These astronomers may not have been quite so successful in sales terms. Adverts for Silvertown sweets were more down-to-earth, tending to feature young children giving boxes of chocs as presents. Again, the 'dream' card is rather different.



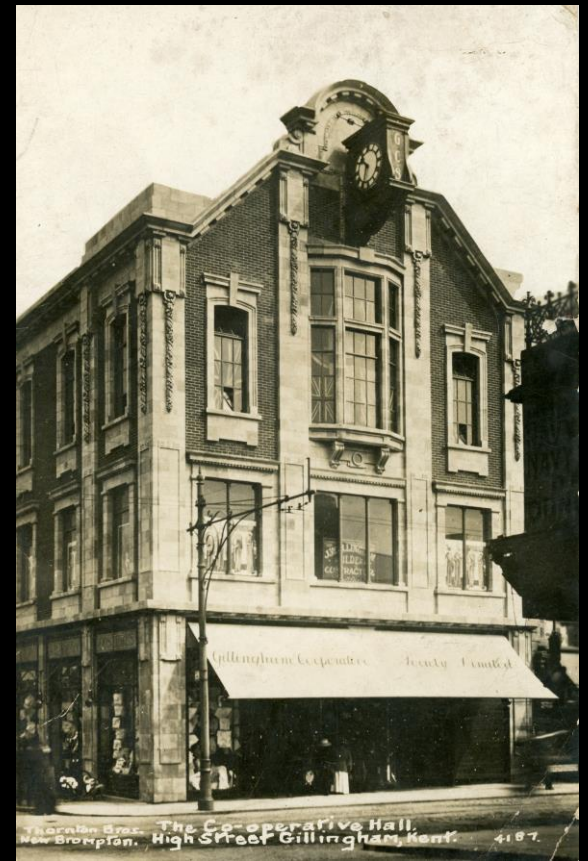
## B is for Beehives

Symbolising the strength of standing together, the beehive and the wheatsheaf were the most common architectural symbols of the co-operative movement. They appeared mainly before the First World War, and most frequently as carved stonework or terracotta on pediments; the beehive in particular was also used in doorway mosaics. The beehive was generally shown as a skep, a coiled straw hive. Transport motifs, initially galleons, symbolised the importance of trade to the co-op movement. See 'L is for Lewisham' for some 1930s trade motifs, including shipping, trucks and steam trains.



## C is for Community

Communal facilities, especially meeting halls, were at the heart of the co-operative movement; shopping and the ‘divi’ (see ‘D is for Dancing’) were only one side of a typical society’s activity. Libraries and reading rooms were common, but the multi-function hall was the main focus. It was normally a double-height space situated on the upper floors of the central premises (the society’s main store). Externally, tall windows quickly identify halls, which often have their own separate entrances. Several former co-op buildings with halls survive, although the halls have often been subdivided when re-purposed. Wakefield’s (1901-4) is one of the best still in use as a commercial venue. (See ‘O is for Oldham’ for a sadly disused hall.)



## D is for Dancing

And Doncaster, and also the dividend, or 'divi'. Let's begin with the divi. The retail co-operative model was based on members subscribing to their local society, buying goods in its stores, and then regularly receiving back a percentage of their spend as a dividend, the divi. It encouraged loyalty to the store. As a system it worked well until the 1960s when people began to want more choice in their shopping. During the 1950s the hall in Doncaster's striking moderne co-op emporium (1939-49) was used for public dancing every night. In fact co-op halls had been significant dance venues between the wars, and continued to be popular into the 1960s.



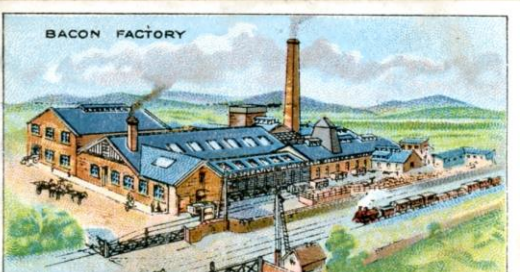
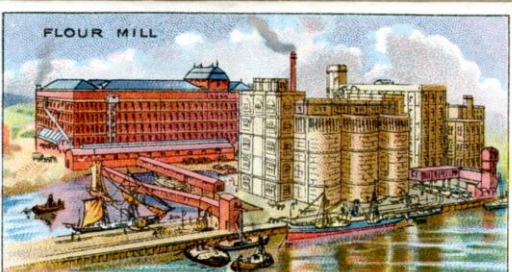
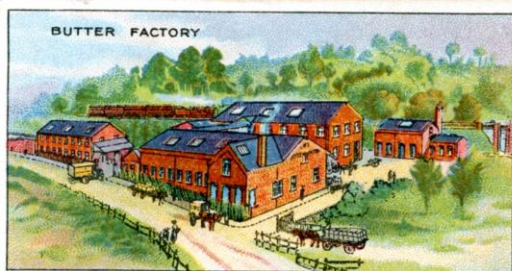
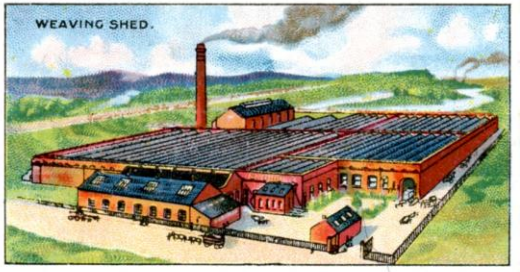
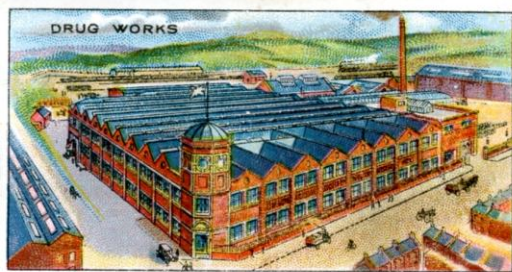
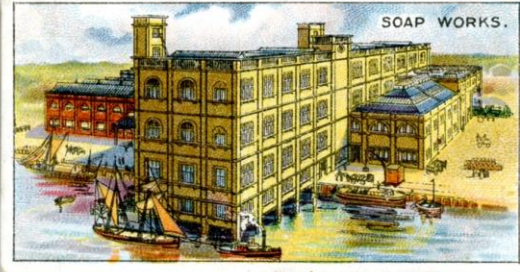
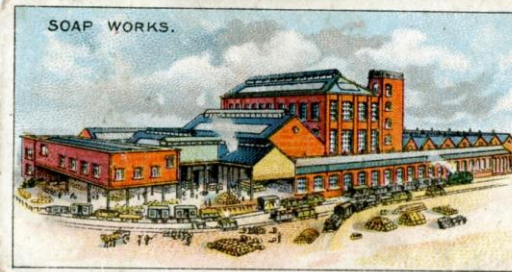
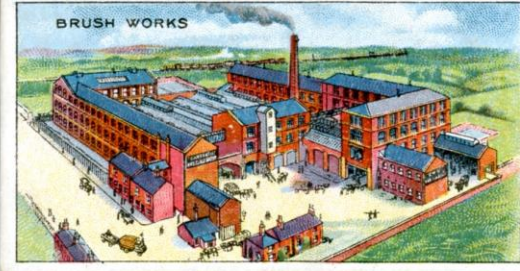
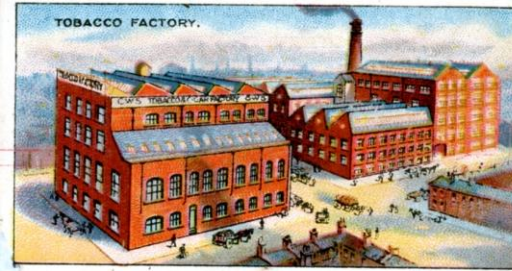
## E is for Ekins

Leonard Gray Ekins (1877-1948) was the CWS chief architect in London from 1916 until 1942. This gave him overall responsibility for all CWS building in England (south of a horizontal line drawn across from the Wash) and South Wales. The ultimate architectural all-rounder, he designed everything from huge ferro-concrete silos (for a flour mill) to elegant department stores, in styles ranging from art deco to modernist and beyond. Here are three of his works: top left Northampton CWS depot (1938-40), top right co-op central premises (1913-15) in Hartlepool, and below, 1 Prescott Street, part of the London branch headquarters (first section 1930-3, completed 1960) in Whitechapel.



# F is for Factories

Before the First World War the CWS, itself a tobacco producer, began to issue cigarette cards. One series, which came out in 1912, showed 28 of their own factory and depot buildings, including (top left) their Manchester tobacco works (mostly 1906-8). Early factories and warehouses were generally red brick and utilitarian, though London's tea warehouse (1895-7) (bottom right, above the bacon factory) was more ornate. By 1939 the CWS was operating nearly 200 industrial sites worldwide.



## G is for Groceries

The first store opened by any co-operative society almost always sold groceries. In 1844, when the very first modern co-op in Rochdale opened, the main items on offer were butter, sugar, oatmeal and flour (see 'P is for Pioneers'). If a store was initially successful, then a society might set up several branch stores, also selling groceries in the first instance.

Premises could be expanded with the addition of departments for butchery, fish, greengrocery, drapery (women's and household textiles), footwear and menswear. Smaller societies with only a single outlet would focus on grocery but have enough other articles available to act as a general store.





## H is for Horses

Horses were essential to early co-op societies, when obtaining supplies from the local CWS depot, and then delivering orders or carrying out daily rounds. Bicycles and handcarts were also used, but horses were the mainstay of the system. In 1903 the Royal Arsenal society in London owned 130 horses. An added benefit of the horse was its usefulness on display. Co-ops were always keen to mark shop openings with processions of their horses and carts dressed up for the occasion, encouraging potential new members to come along. Horses (and co-operators with their children) also featured in local carnivals and annual co-operators' day celebrations; it was all good advertising.



## I is for Ipswich

The Ipswich co-op mural (1963-4) (above) is probably the least known of the four major external co-op murals surviving from the late 1950s and early 1960s. The others are at Hull (1963) (below left), Stevenage (1957-8) (below right) and Scunthorpe (1963) (see 'S is for Scunthorpe'). Hull's glass mosaic *Three Ships*, designed by artist Alan Boyson, celebrates connections between the co-op and the local fishing industry. The Stevenage ceramic tile mural and Ipswich's mosaic were intended to symbolise the ethos and activities of the co-operative movement; many local references also appear in the Stevenage work, which overlooks the town's main square. All these murals should be treasured. Although *Three Ships* is listed grade II, its future is uncertain.



## J is for Johnson

William Albert Johnson (1885-1952) was the Manchester-based chief CWS architect from 1924 until 1950. He designed offices, warehouses and factories in the north of England, and department stores including Bradford (1933-6) (below). His additions to the Manchester headquarters site included a pair of industrial modernist offices/warehouses (1935-7 and 1937-9) faced in beautifully detailed Dutch-style brickwork. Unfortunately all Johnson's major factory buildings away from the headquarters have been lost.



## K is for Keys

A gold key was ceremonially presented by the architect to the client on the occasion of new store openings. Once speeches were made, usually in front of an expectant crowd, the key was turned and the shop was ready for business. The first few shoppers hoped to receive free gifts, often tins packed with CWS-branded goodies, or those produced by local societies in their own factories. Many of these tins have survived, with their colourful renditions of factories and stores. Society anniversaries could also be celebrated with tins of produce, which sometimes bore lists of membership figures and the society's financial details as well as depictions of stores old and new.



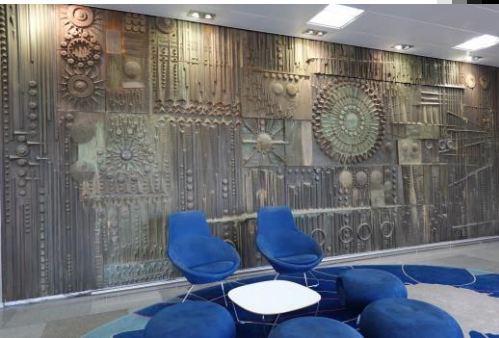
## L is for Lewisham

The Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society's flagship department store Tower House (1932-3) in Lewisham, photographed soon after its opening (above). The £100,000 store's bright white faience stood out by day and was illuminated with neon tubes by night. The tower reached 87ft (27m) above the pavement, and symbolic transport imagery abounded. Even the faience ventilation tiles made use of the RACS initials. The store lasted half a century before it closed as a co-op in 1982, and was eventually restored and converted to apartments in 2016-17. Fenestration aside, the building's facade now appears very much as it did originally, but minus its ground floor shopfronts.



# M is for Manchester

Manchester's former CWS headquarters site is notable for its tall office and warehouse buildings divided by unusually narrow streets, creating an overpowering impression. Francis E L Harris (1864-1924), the first CWS chief architect, was responsible for the ornate red brick buildings with stone dressings, put up between 1901 and 1917. For the 1930s see 'J is for Johnson'. Later came the Co-operative Insurance Society Tower (1959-62, foyer mural by William Mitchell, below), and the Co-op Group's HQ One Angel Square (2010-13) (bottom right).



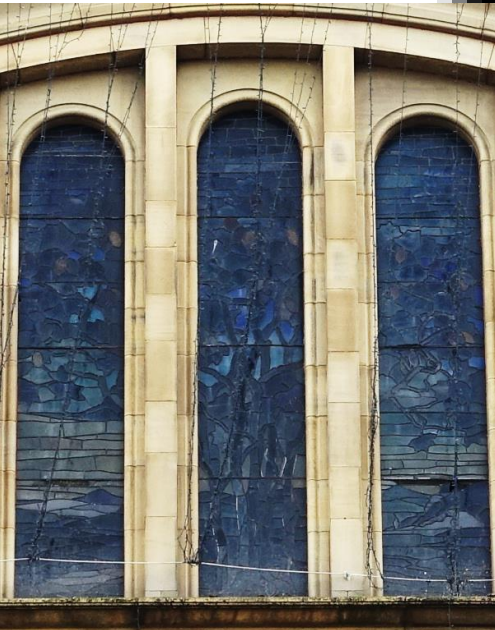
## N is for Nuneaton

Art deco was popular between the wars, and local architect H Norman Jepson made good use of it in Nuneaton with this stylish pharmacy (1938). Like almost all surviving co-op stores, the original shopfront has been lost. They are particularly vulnerable to the constant process of updating to attract customers. Indeed Jepson's store appears to be the only remnant of extensive co-op premises in central Nuneaton, torn down in 2019. This comprised buildings from 1903 and between the wars, including an elegant terrazzo-floored arcade with an ornate tiled staircase and decorative stained glass. The town's dazzling art deco co-op grocery store (Jepson, 1938-9) had already been demolished in 2008.



## O is for Oldham

This section of Oldham Equitable society's central premises, east of the town centre at Greengates, opened in 1900. Its ground floor is still in commercial use, but the main hall, lit by a remarkable art nouveau stained glass window, is disused and becoming derelict. The building is listed grade II, but in dire need of a new use for the whole structure.





## P is for Pioneers

The Rochdale Equitable Pioneers' Society opened its first store on 21 December 1844 in the building on the right, which is now (along with its 2010-12 extension) the Rochdale Pioneers Museum. The store occupied the ground floor of the 18th century former wool warehouse, its frontage altered to resemble a typical small shop. By 1849 the enterprise was so successful that the Pioneers could afford to lease the whole building, converting the upper floors to a library and a drapery department. Eventually the Pioneers moved to larger purpose-built central premises (1867) nearby. Although this has been lost, the stone-carved beehive from its pediment survives, now located in the garden of a pub close to the Museum.



## Q is for Quayside

Newcastle's CWS Quayside Warehouse (1900-2) was finished in creamy-white to look like Portland stone. The design was by CWS chief architect FEL Harris, with an engineer expert in the Hennebique ferro-concrete system. Its size and colour must have been a huge contrast to the mass of earlier and (mostly) smaller red brick buildings on the north bank of the Tyne. Almost certainly Britain's oldest concrete-framed building, it was converted to an hotel in 1994-7.



## R is for Rhyl

R is for Rhyl, and for other co-operative societies in Wales. The country's co-ops were able to subscribe to the federal body, the CWS, which covered all of England and Wales. Scotland had its own SCWS. This photo of Rhyl's store, taken in late September 1912, shows typical pile-it-high displays of produce, with CWS-brand biscuits to the fore. The cargo trike would have been used for local deliveries. Standing in the doorway are a number of ladies in splendid hats, which suggests this was a special occasion. But this does not appear to be a totally new store. Perhaps a redesigned interior being inspected by the committee?



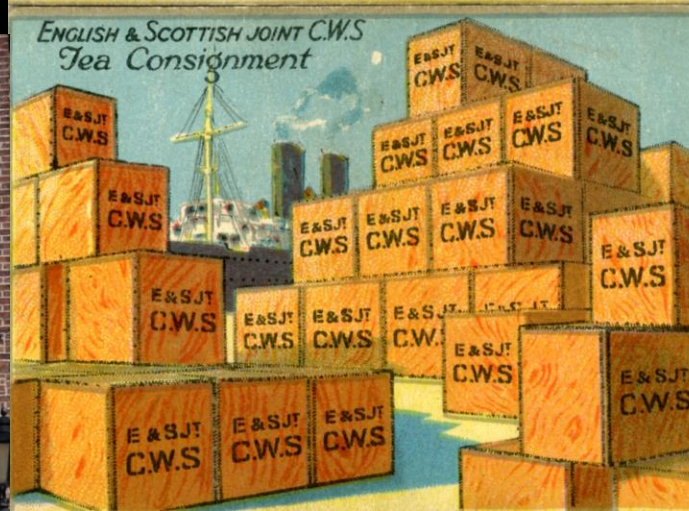
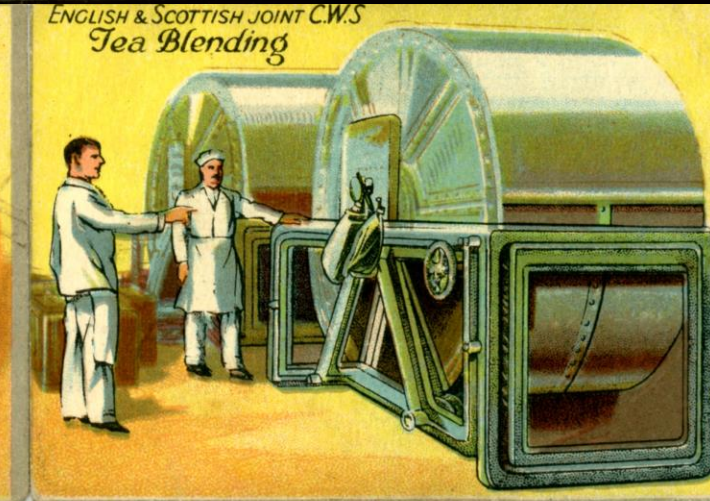
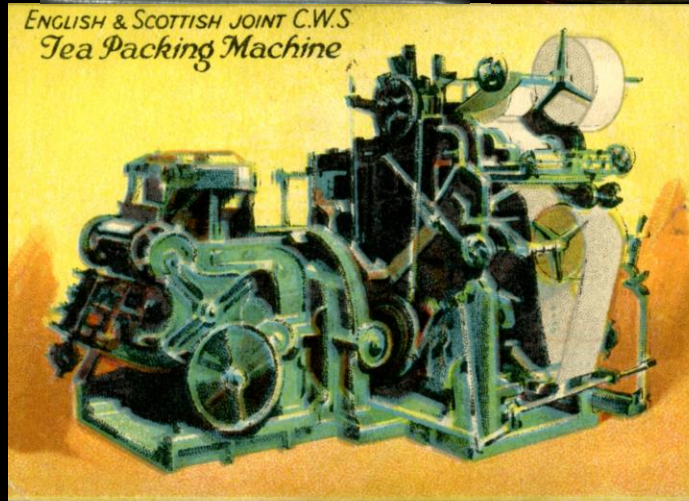
## S is for Scunthorpe

In the 1950s and 1960s Scunthorpe's local co-op was keen to support up-to-the-minute modern design. Their regular local architect, Derek W Brown, produced several exciting frontages for their stores, often including murals. He also designed an ultramodern flyaway canopy roof for the society's petrol station. When it came to their new pharmacy (1963), the biggest co-op pharmacy in Britain at the time, Brown got together with expert shopfitters Harris & Sheldon and came up with this pharmacy-themed mosaic mural. It is one of the four major external co-op murals from the fifties and sixties to survive (see 'I is for Ipswich'). Aside from the doorway, the Scunthorpe façade is almost unchanged.



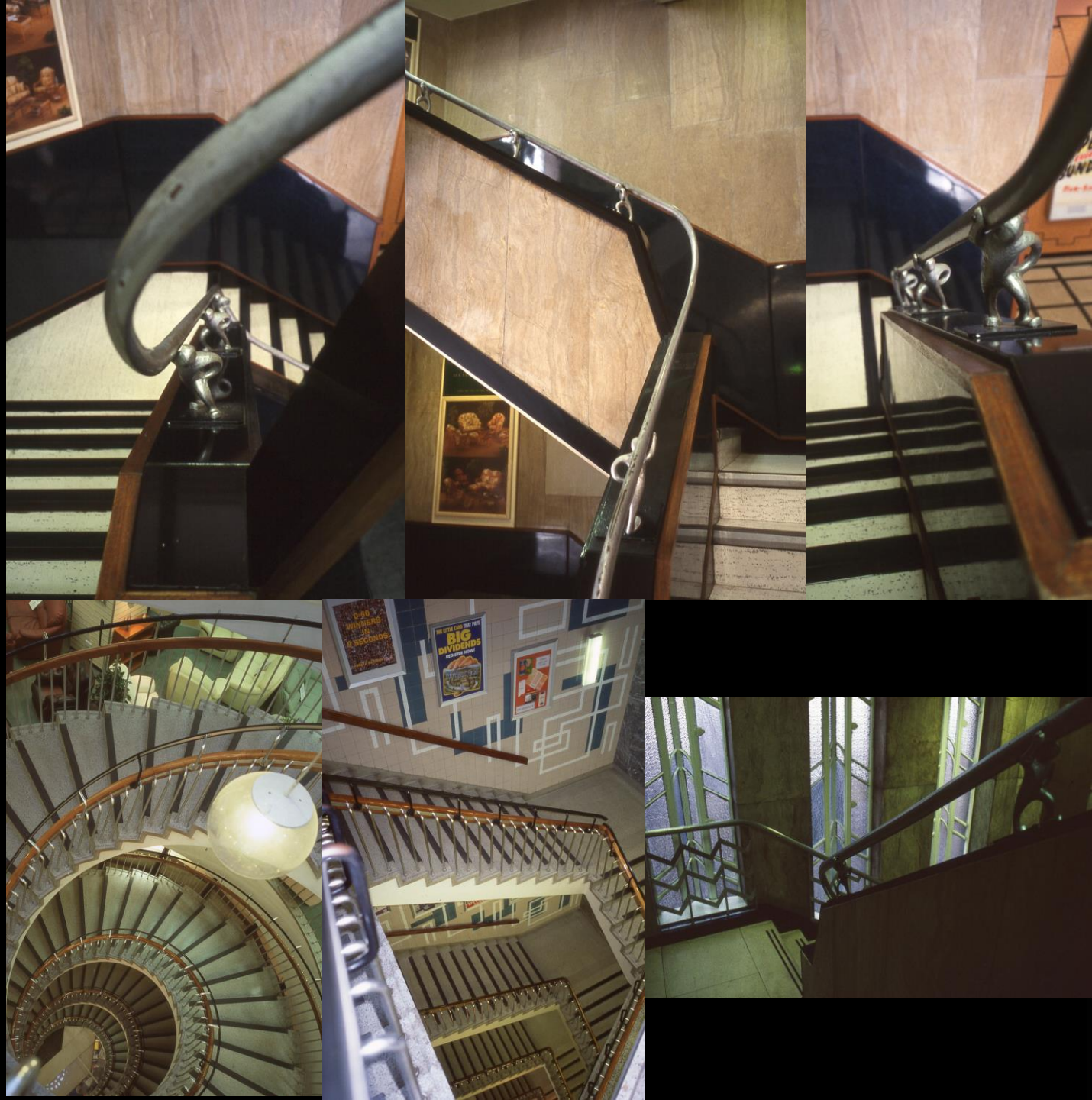
# T is for Tea

Tea was a staple of the co-op movement, and was the CWS's single most successful product. Tea cards (like cigarette cards, only larger) were issued in packet teas, some of them depicting tea production. Tea caddies often bore images of CWS tea warehouses along with the slogan 'Filling the Nation's Teapot'. Even as the CWS declined in influence during the 1970s, it still spent over £3 million on automating its Crewe tea works. Time for a cuppa...



## U is for Upstairs

Co-op department stores were notable for their exciting and original staircases. One of the best known is Newcastle's art deco store (mostly 1930-4) (all top and bottom right), with its little metal figures slowly hauling the handrail upward. These photos show the original figures, which were stolen after the store closed as a co-op in 2011; replacements were made during restoration in 2014-16. Sheffield's innovative Castle House (1960-4) (bottom left and centre), the work of the CWS architects' department, is shown here while still in action as a co-op store. It had several unusual design features including a spectacular spiral staircase.



## V is for Vehicles

Good transport was essential to the smooth functioning of local co-ops and the CWS. Although some local societies began to experiment with motorised transport in the early 1900s, it took until the early 1960s before horses were phased out completely. However, co-op garages had become common by the 1920s. They housed increasing fleets of motor trucks and eventually electric vehicles, especially milk floats. Just as horses and wagons had been used in co-op processions, so the motor vehicles became decorated floats on occasion. Here we have one of Halifax co-op's trucks and its driver all ready for the 1933 co-operators' day celebrations. Again, tea is the theme!



## W is for Warehouses

Warehouses at the major CWS depots were a combination of mini-factories, showrooms, office accommodation and of course warehouse space. The buildings were often physically impressive, promoting a vision of the CWS as a major player in trading. Easy access was required for wagons from local societies; Bristol's depot (FEL Harris, 1903-6) had a roadway passing directly through the building. The stained glass sunrise with wheat sheaves (below) was a 1932-3 alteration to Newcastle's CWS depot (1893-9), marking the entrance of the directors' suite.





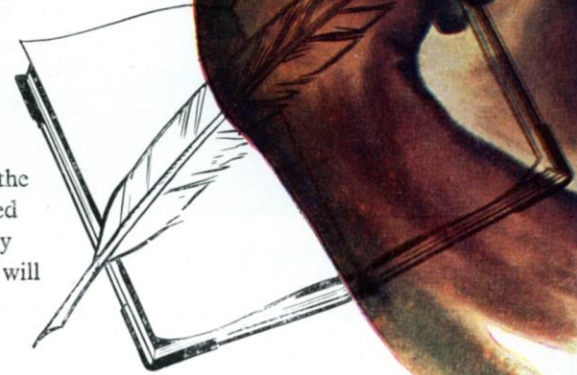
## X is for EXhibitions

And exports, the two neatly combined in a CWS advert published in the 1951 Festival of Britain (FoB) catalogue. Local co-ops and the CWS had always used exhibitions to increase membership and improve sales. Special Christmas shows were put on in stores, and they took part in major events. The CWS had 40 stands at Newcastle's 1929 North East Coast Exhibition, while the SCWS put on a huge display at Glasgow's 1938 Empire Exhibition; its restaurant was one of the event's unexpected successes. Although the CWS furnished the FoB show flat in Poplar, there was no co-op or CWS presence on the South Bank. This advert, probably seen by many of its almost 8.5 million visitors, was a significant expression of co-op ideals and CWS activities.



### THE GREAT BRITISH EXPORT YOU CANNOT SEE

It just isn't visible. It's an idea — the inspired Co-operative Idea. Born in Britain it went out to almost every civilised country in the world — to benefit millions of people regardless of race, creed or colour. In Britain itself this just, non-profit system which returns the trading surplus to the members, has made amazing progress in the last hundred years. Today it is an accepted part of the British way of life and in every community in every part of the land you will find a Co-operative Store, and a member in more than half the nation's homes.



### LED TO THOSE YOU CAN SEE

Many of the fine British exports you *can* see come from the C.W.S., wholesaling and manufacturing organisation of the Co-operative Movement. Producer, in its 200 factories, of an amazing variety of

goods from corsets to cutlery, pullovers to pianos, ties to television, it is Britain's biggest business and the world's largest Co-operative Wholesale Society.



*Manufacturers to the World and his Wife*



## Y is for Yuletide

It is Yuletide in Sheffield, and the unknown shop's staff have put on a mega-display of Christmassy CWS-branded goods, including coloured candles, cordials, penny jelly and table jelly, vanilla essence, marmalade (made by the CWS preserves works at Middleton, near Manchester), and of course Crumpsall Cream Crackers, from the eponymous biscuit works, also in Manchester. Local co-ops varied in their attitude to non-CWS goods. Some only stocked CWS merchandise, but most would also sell other brands rather than lose trade. Window dressing (sometimes for competitions), and the occasional creation of heroically large displays, were all part of a shop assistant's daily work.



## Z is for Zenith

The zenith of CWS productivity was reached in the late 1930s, although one of its factories was still operating at the dawn of the 21st century. As for the local co-operative societies, the number of stores peaked in the very early 1960s, then suffered a rapid decline. Societies merged as membership dwindled. There are still nearly 4,000 co-op stores, run by the Co-op Group and the remaining independent co-ops. To find out more, see the book! It has 300 illustrations - specially taken photos along with fascinating archive images.

<https://liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/books/id/53142/>

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# England's Co-operative Movement

An Architectural History

LYNN PEARSON

