

BLAENGARW



Katie Street, Blaengarw

A Century of Co-operative Service 1890-1990

CO-OPERATIVE
HERITAGE
WALES



BLAENGARW: 1890 – 1990



A Century of Co-operative Service.

The Boom Years: 1890 – 1914

The Blaengarw and Neighbourhood Industrial Co-operative Society was launched in April 1890 by local colliers. Located at the head of the Garw Valley, ten miles from Bridgend, the then hamlet was developing at a rapid pace. From the late 1880's to the early 1900's occurred the most dramatic change in Blaengarw. Three pits opened – New Colliery, the International and the Garw. In 1890 St. James' Church was opened and between 1891 and 1902 six chapels were constructed; in 1894 the Blaengarw Working Men's Hall and Institute was erected.

The first premises of the Co-operative Society were located at 2 & 3 David Street. By 1895 they employed their own staff under the managership of John Evans. At the start of this Century the Society had moved to its present location in Katie Street, appropriately next to the Working Men's Hall where Co-operative Members' Meetings were held every three months. Under its then manager, Caradog Davies, the Society continued to grow in terms of trade and membership.

Given the success of the business, others started their own co-operatives, notably the Pontycymmer Society in 1899 and soon after the Tymeinwr Builders Co-operative in Blaengarw.

First World War 1914-18

During the years of War problems of food supply were experienced, especially of butter, flour and sugar. Yet membership grew to 400 and sales reached £17,000 by 1916. Tragedy struck when the Katie Street stores caught fire. Despite this setback the business soon recovered. By now it had a bakery at the rear of the shop, stables at Greenfield Terrace and a number of cottages which were rented out. By the end of the War in 1918 Blaengarw Co-operative Committee and the Manager, John Hitchings looked confidently to the years of peace.

Inter War Years 1919-39

The coal disputes, depression and mass unemployment of the 1920's left a deep mark on Blaengarw. During the 1921 strike it is likely the Committee and new manager, Edward Beynon, wondered whether the business could survive. Between 1922 and 1924 the next Manager, Samuel R. Allender struggled with the problem. Moreover, the same prospect faced the next manager, Mr. D.R. Thomas during the General Strike of 1926. Whereas in 1920 annual sales for Blaengarw Co-op stood at £13,016 and paying a dividend of 1 shilling 8 pence (1/8) in the £, by 1926 sales had fallen to £3,443 with dividend at only 2d in the £.

Just as Blaengarw was recovering from the bitter disputes of the 1920's a general depression set in during 1930. The collieries were put on part-time working, money became scarcer and credit with the Co-op was looked for once again. As a result of the hardship the Society could not afford to pay a dividend from 1930 to 1932.

Under the system adopted at Blaengarw, every Co-op member had a 'Shop Book': each time they went to the stores they took the book with them, in which was printed their share number. Details of goods bought were written in the



Management & Staff, Katie Street, (c.1924)



Mr. W. Davies and Mr. D.R. Thomas (Manager): 1926

book with the amount spent; every three months the books were called in to work out how much dividend to pay each member. Dividend was only paid to those who had 'cleared' any debts owing. During the depression 'can't clear' would be the plea of many a member whose family was out of work.

In 1933 a local printer, J. Howell Davies, became Chairman of the Blaengarw Co-operative. He had joined the Society in 1913 and had been re-elected to the Management Committee since 1917. By 1937 under his Chairmanship the business secured a sounder footing with the appointment of G.O. Morgan as the Managing Secretary and Mr. W. Davies as Grocery Buyer (known as 'Will the Co-op'). One of the key assistants was Mr. B. Gough who looked after the horses and bread van. By now the Society had a Branch Store at King Edward Street and owned properties at 4, 16 and 17 Katie Street.

Still on the eve of the Second World War, the town endured short slumps as the 1938 Co-operative Report states 'Our sales have been reduced due to the unemployment of our members. Now that work has resumed, we make a special appeal for trade'; the appeal was answered.

Second World War 1939-45

The War years brought considerable changes to Blaengarw, not least to the Co-operative. In addition to the 'Shop Book' the 'Ration Book' was presented for shopping. Some of the older and Welsh speaking residents had difficulties with the rationing system. When Mrs. G. Owen was serving a lady who was over 90, the following exchange took place; 'Mrs. Lewis fach, yr y'chi wedi cael eich rations' to which the reply came, 'Diawch annwyl i'r byd rydw i wedi bwyta nhw, mae nhw wedi mynd i gyd'. Despite Mrs. Lewis having eaten all her week's rations by the mid-week, she was not sent away empty handed thanks to 'Will the Co-op'. The 'blackout' meant the draping of all shop windows and front doors with black Italian drapes. As male employees were called up for the armed services women took their places.

On the death of J. Howell Davies in December 1942, Mr. Daniel J. Davies was appointed Chairman of the Society, with Mr. M. Paynter as his Deputy Chairman. Mr. D.J. Davies was a highly regarded member of the community; an official at the Glenavon Garw Colliery, a miners representative on the hospital committee in Cardiff and on the committee of the Workmen's Institute.

During the war years and the difficulties of food supplies business progressed with dividend being paid at 1/6 in the £ with a 6d bonus being paid on top. At the end of the war in 1945 Mr. W. Davies became Managing Secretary.

Post War Years: 1945-59

Just as many expected rationing to ease with the end of war, bread was rationed for the first time. Members bought their circular and triangular metal checks from the store, to place on their doorsteps in exchange for milk and bread deliveries. However, change was coming. By 1950 deliveries were done by motor vehicles. Hire purchase and general credit trading were expanded. By the mid-1950's, the Katie Street store converted to self service to meet modern shopping trends. For many years, successive managers had taken shoppers to the C.W.S. Depot at Cardiff to select from a wide variety of goods, especially clothes and furniture. Now with growing car ownership and the development of supermarkets, especially in Bridgend, customers went further afield to shop.

The Management Committee seeing the need to have a stronger financial base to continue trading against the background of greater mobility and the decline in the coal industry, amalgamated in January 1959 with its neighbour the Pontycymmer Society.



Blaengarw Co-op Outing: 1933



Blaengarw Co-op Management Committee: 1948



Co-op Staff Social: c.1957



Co-op 'Self-Service': c.1956



1989: Launch, Christmas Party Exhibition



Mrs. L. Thomas and some of the Co-op Staff: 1990

Up to the Present: 1959-90

After twelve years as a branch of Pontycymmer Society, the latter found it necessary to merge in 1971 with Co-operative Retail Services. Today the Co-operative Store trading as 'Stop & Shop' under its Manageress, Mrs. L. Thomas, is still a centre of commercial and social activity; a special Christmas Party was held to launch the Centenary Year.

Shopping like everything else has changed greatly since 1890, yet the original spirit of service to the customer coupled with social aims continues to the present day. We wish to thank members, customers and staff for their continued support of the Co-operative in Blaengarw.

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