

Unicorn Co-op Visits 2012

Unicorn members have always enjoyed strong links with other co-operative businesses, and during the International Year of Co-operatives we decided it would be nice for some of us to visit some co-ops we'd never been to, to learn about how they do things, build relationships between ourselves and others in the co-op movement, and generally have some nice trips out of Manchester! So far, five of us have visited a total of five other co-ops, with more visits to come later in the year. Here are members' descriptions of their trips:

Lawrence visited Fairtraders, Holmfirth

Pick a Co-op, any Co-op? I chose Fairtraders in Holmfirth. I'd met a couple of them when they were shopping in Unicorn. We chatted about the challenges of retail like shop keepers do. So I wanted to see for myself a shop that lives by Fairtrade. Besides, love that rail journey over the Pennines. The magic point is in Stalybridge when the red brick changes to rugged stone constructions.

Fairtraders is on a main road in a deceptively small building. But inside it opens into three floors. Appropriately the Fairtrade wine and local organic beers are in the converted cellars. At this point I got distracted by the fantastic barrel vaulted ceiling. Now Holmfirth gets its share of tourists. They come to see where "Last of the Summer Wine" was filmed. But chatting to the workers it turned out none of us had every watched an episode yet we knew all the characters. It was appropriate to buy something, you can't just talk Fairtrade you have to consume it. Purchased a replacement mouse mat recycled from an old car tyre. I was bowled out by the warm Yorkshire accents, big smiles, no illusions and a bountiful optimism.



The Fair Traders Co-operative, The Toll House, 32-34 Huddersfield Road, HD9 2JS. Holmfirth is about 30 miles north east of Manchester in a lovely green valley of the Pennines. Check their [website](#) to see all the stuff they sell.

Dan and Debbie visited Suma, Halifax

[Suma Wholefoods](#) was founded in 1975 when a group of northern wholefood shops get together and decided to set up a supply business run on similar lines to themselves. It's now the UK's largest worker co-op, and one of our key suppliers, and Dan and I were intrigued to see how a business with 150 staff could function, like we do, as a multi-tasking, flat-pay worker-owned organisation where everyone takes an active role in the management of the business.

As our train trundled over the Yorkshire border though, our thoughts weren't about co-op structure, they were about how nice it would be to live in a small Pennine town where you can go for a walk in the hills from your doorstep. We decided it was good to know that there is a workers co-op with similar principles to ours out here, to come and work for when we get sick of city life. So we showed up keen to impress!

Bob Canell was our host, which was great as he's not only been at Suma for many years, but also helped Unicorn develop its current structure as we grew past the original small group of co-op members. It was interesting to hear how Suma have had to change too over the years as the business has grown (they now have a turnover of nearly £30 million). They have experimented with various structures, and now have an elected management committee of six who are given certain powers. However the direction of the business is still steered by the membership as a whole, who meet together every two months.



After a tour of the premises we had the pleasure of a sit down meal in the Suma staff canteen. We're quite jealous of their canteen we have to say, it's something we've talked about having for years at Unicorn but never quite got round to it. Curry, a range of salads, and cake (with custard!!). Mmmm, maybe one day, through sadly we can't recreate their dining room's view of the hills.

After lunch we had a look at the warehouse, which looks kind of like a hugely scaled-up version of ours with lots of familiar products on the shelves. We watched from a mezzanine floor as forklifts zoomed around picking up orders, one of them probably ours. Like us, co-op members at Suma do lots of different roles so no-one's in the warehouse all day long, they'll switch between warehouse, desk jobs and delivering.



We finished the day learning about pay and conditions. Interestingly, since the 80s, the hourly pay has been pegged to the local average wage, currently £12/hr. It was great visit, & provided lots of food for thought for how we do things here. We're especially inspired by that cake and custard.

Lawrence dropped in on the Co-op Smile tour



The Co-operative Group are sending a restored VW Camper in shiny blue livery all over the country. It is to promote the International Year of Co-Operatives - it's called the Smile Tour. I wasn't going to pass up the indulgence of nostalgia by sitting in one of those old vans. So when it arrived in Manchester I was there. By chance it was being staffed by workers from the Co-Op Membership whom I knew from previous meetings. The usual gossip, collecting leaflets and photo opportunities followed.

Nikki visted Beanies, Sheffield

"The best thing about working in a Co-Op?" answered Heather, ".....working in a Co-Op" she nodded.

And the worst thing? "Working in a Co-Op."

[Beanies](#) started trading in 1986 and has maintained its loyal customer base in the Crookesmoor area of Sheffield. Currently operating with 10 (mostly) full time members, their passion, pride and dedication to what they do shone through when I visited them in May.



All of my friends in this city shop at Beanies, as did I as a student at the University of Sheffield. It was a joy to visit with the fresh eyes of a fellow co-operative worker and appreciate this brilliant little shop on a whole new level, sharing a laugh about the challenges and rewards of working in a Co-Operatively owned and managed business.

Chatting to Heather and Matt (pictured), it was interesting to note the parallels and differences between their business and ours. With a membership a fifth of the size, a lot less time is spent in meetings and decision-making, and a lot more of it spent on the shop floor. Like Unicorn, Beanies pack down some of their own dry goods on site, share all the jobs, and have equal say in decision-making. Their mission is to provide quality groceries to customers all over the city.

And like us, they are also constantly battling issues with supplier access and customer parking, which we know a thing or two about here at Unicorn.

Something of a Sheffield institution, Beanies have managed to grow and adapt to meet the shifting demands of an ever changing market, whilst still managing to maintain a strong emphasis on

providing really good food for people with all sorts of dietary requirements at an affordable price. I came away from my visit having learned a lot, with new ideas and inspiration for our business and will hold them to their promise to arrive en masse to visit us in Manchester in the near future.

Matt's answer to my initial question was less straightforward than Heather's. Having worked in Co-operatively run businesses for so long, he struggles to remember doing it any other way. I hope I am lucky enough to be in his position in 10 years time.

Beansies can be found at 205-207 Crookes Valley Road and are open 7 Days a week.

Debbie visited Green Valley Grocers, Slaithwaite

[Green Valley Grocers](#) is another great excuse for a visit to the Pennines. And it's a community-owned co-operative shop, in the same little town as our bread suppliers Handmade Bakery. The shop was created in just 16 weeks when it became clear that the pre-existing greengrocer's business was on the verge of closure. Finance was raised via community shares and the shop has since thrived. Local food is the focus, with ambitious aspirations to purchase 50% of their produce from local producers within a 30 mile radius by 2015.



The shop is a multi-stakeholder co-operative, where staff, shoppers and suppliers all have a say in its running. It is managed by Carol, who was a shop assistant under the previous owner and now runs the day to day operation; managing staff, store layout, and ordering. It was lovely talking to her about how her role has changed since the days she just sat behind the till, bored and with no power to make much-needed improvements. Now she's the driving force behind developments in the shop, although she's supported by an able board of directors – many of whom are also customers.

As well as veg from New Smithfield Market in Manchester, the shop sells allotment produce from local people. Apparently during apple season pretty much the whole stock of apples comes from within 5 miles.

I'd thoroughly recommend a visit to Slaithwaite, it's only half an hour on the train from Victoria, and you can combine a visit to the grocery with a lovely walk in the hills, down to the canal and finish up having a sticky bun in the Handmade Bakery's very own café, right on the canalside.

Anthea and Britta visited Essential Trading, Bristol

[Essential Trading](#) is a workers' co-op that has been selling thousands of lines of lovely vegan and vegetarian foods since 1972, almost 40 years.



With more than 100 members, a huge warehouse on the outskirts of Bristol and two 'Harvest' shops (one in Bath, one in Bristol), they are bigger than Unicorn in every sense, although we are very similar in many respects. Essential open their doors to the public via a cash and carry service. So, as well as the Essential pickers whizzing up and down the massive aisles of the warehouse, preparing pallets to be distributed around the country, local shopkeepers can be found browsing for stock for their shelves.

Essential supply Unicorn with two to three pallets of mixed goods every fortnight, which makes us one of their bigger customers. Most of their customers are based in the south, but one lucky driver makes the journey up to Manchester twice a month to bring us such delights as the delicious Essential teas, peanut butter and the fantastic Om chocolate bars.

Essential also have a packing room like Unicorn, although again, the scale of their operation is much bigger. Their bespoke packing machine can pack a 25kg sack of rice in less than 2 minutes, whereas one of our humans takes about 15. The machine may well be quicker, but working in the packing room at Essential has been likened to working in the engine room of a submarine, so unlike here there is absolutely no opportunity for music or chat!

Essential are founded on similar ethics to our own and as a radical business committed to social change, support loads of great projects, for example having donating food over the years to the Sea Shepherd anti-whaling boat, striking miners in South Wales, and Greenham Common campaigners.

A big thank-you to all of the folks at Essential that took time out of their busy working day to show me and Britta the inner workings of one of our biggest suppliers.