Lancaster Civic Vision

Celebrating our Heritage – Enhancing our Environment – Shaping our Future

THE CO-OPERATIVE BUILDING, LANCASTER

Lancaster Civic Vision Guide No. 113

The Lancaster and Skerton Equitable Industrial Co-operative Society was founded in 1860 on Penny Street (later a Gorrill's shop). Its principal shop then moved to the corner of Church Street and New Street (see below).



(Source: M Winstanley in A White *A History of Lancaster 1193–1993, p171*)



The Society did not achieve the retailing dominance similar societies had in some other Lancashire towns, nonetheless it was a major presence, competing strongly with independent grocers such a J R & W Bell and T D Smith. Its membership rose over fivefold between 1875 and 1914 and its turnover rose nearly fiftyfold. This growth gave the Society the confidence to build a new, much bigger shop and hall on the New Street / Church Street site – substantially the building we see there today in terms of its frontage.



The new Co-op building on the site of the previous one (see above), Church St and New St, as modified up to 2023

The building is Grade II listed. Lancaster's leading architectural practice, Austin and Paley, designed the building in 1900. A tender to build it was accepted in December

of 1900 from J. Hatch at a cost of £21,000. It opened in 1903. The line of the new building was linked to a widening of New Street (from 19 to 30 feet) that was never completed at the Market Street end.

The building brought together many of the Society's functions on one site – grocery, confectionery, tea room, butchery, drapery, clothes, fitting rooms, bank, fancy goods, dressmaking and millinery workshops, shoes, furniture, library, large meeting room, stock rooms and the Society's offices. Some of these departments and new ones later moved to separate premises in St Nicholas Arcade, King Street, Parliament Street and George Street.

The building's style has been called Northern Renaissance. It is a complex design of frontage with much strapwork in the sandstone. At the corner, high above what was the main entrance, is a Lancashire rose and the carving of a beehive that was the Society's symbol. After the Co-op closed on this site in 1988, the shopfront windows have been removed to create an arcade. The interior has been wholly reconfigured and rebuilt, first for the Co-op and then for a variety of different users and shops.





Such a large store needed a sizeable warehouse and stables, and these were built in 1900/01 on Bulk Street (now converted to flats).



Co-op warehouse on Bulk Street, now flats

The Society's expansion was not limited to its main town-centre site. Twenty branches, also designed by Austin and Paley, were opened across Lancaster, Skerton, Bare and Morecambe between 1900 and 1914, each with the beehive above its front door. Shops very near to the new housing of late Victorian and Edwardian Lancaster were needed to maximise trade, and the Society's private-sector rivals did likewise.

The former Co-op building remains a notable architectural feature of the city centre.

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