

## Case Study 1.4

### The Fenwick Weavers

On the 14th of March 1761, in the town of Fenwick, located in the East Ayrshire region of Scotland, fifteen self-employed weavers met in the local church and signed a charter establishing the world's first co-operative for which there are full records. As with almost all co-operatives created during the Industrial Revolution, the Fenwick Weavers was established out of the villagers' need to improve their living and working conditions. The charter contained a number of principles about how the society should be run:

- honesty
- faithfulness to each other
- fair pricing
- majority decisions
- contributions to a poor fund
- member contribution of 2 shillings and 6 pence

The society was created for the purpose of purchasing materials and looms for the weavers but it soon evolved into something more valuable to the members and community. 'Records show the society quickly began lending money to needy members and their families - making it...the first recorded credit union. Original records, now in the National Library of Scotland, record short-term loans of 10 and 12 shillings to members, at a flat rate of 5%.'

<sup>1</sup> On the 9th of November 1769, another document was created that enabled the society to purchase victuals (food) to sell to members and non-members, along with the provision of 4 weeks credit if a member needed it; the first recorded consumer co-operative. The Weavers also took their commitment to the local community seriously and established a library in the town in 1808.

The Fenwick Society operated successfully until 1839 when the majority of the villagers were forced to emigrate due to the poor economic conditions in the weaving trade. In 1968, one of the villagers' descendents passed the record books of the Weavers to the National Library of Scotland where it remains to this day.

The contribution of the Fenwick Weavers to co-operation and the co-operative movement is significant. They developed the first consumer co-operative, arguably operated the first credit union, and provided a set of values and principles on which to base the operations of a co-operative society. Their influence in Scotland manifested itself in the establishment of similar co-



operative societies: Govan Victualling Society (1800), Kilmarnock Equitable Society (1800) and Lennoxtown Friendly Victualling Society (1812). The society was re-established in 2008 in order to record, collect and commemorate the heritage of the Fenwick Weavers.

---

<sup>1</sup> J. McFadzean, *The Co-operators - A History of the Fenwick Weavers* (Kilmarnock: East Ayrshire North Communities Federation Ltd, 2008).

