



Photo Frank Bennet

Inset: Shop Manageress Mrs Avril Gilbert at the bacon slicer. More words in the Co-op's title than there are houses in the village — a view of Ogden from above, with the pub next door to the co-op.

Small is Beautiful

STEVE BERRY visits a tiny Co-op where old traditions and new methods have kept it flourishing for more than 120 years.

There are probably more words in the title of the Lanebottom Industrial Equitable Pioneers Society Limited than there are houses in the hamlet where it's to be found.

By rights the tiny co-op in the village of Ogden, tucked away in the hills above Newhey near Milnrow, should have shut up shop donkey's years ago.

But the Lanebottom, one of the few thoroughly independent co-ops left in the country, has not only shrugged off the pressures to merge to which most others have succumbed over the last 30 years. Against the massive "Think Big" trend in retailing it has also shown

that it's more than possible to go it alone.

Turnover increased by a massive 30% last year, although admittedly, at under £1½ million the Lanebottom can hardly be considered among the giants of the co-operative movement.

But any increase in business has to be reckoned astonishing when you consider the little co-op's locality. It is most unlikely that you've ever been through Ogden, since the road is a dead end and there aren't any signs to it. Indeed, even if by some chance you've passed through the village the likelihood is that you won't have favoured the co-op with more than a glance.

To all intents and purposes the Lanebottom looks like a thousand-and-one other grocer's shops — although you may have pondered how it managed to stay open with no passing trade and with just a pub, a couple of houses and otherwise just fields and cows for company.

Its isolation accounts for the fact that it can only boast 200 members — probably the lowest membership of any co-op by quite some margin. (Don't all rush however when I tell you that at the time of writing those members are enjoying a 15p in the £ dividend on their shares). On most days — unless it's the day of the annual general meeting, in which case pretty well all of

those members will be crammed into the village — there's little sign of the hive of activity behind the sleepy facade.

But go up the steps at the back of the shop and you'll see your mistake. You find yourself among desks littered with documents, files, in-trays and out-trays and above all, telephones — in short, the signs of a thriving business. The feverish chatter of selling — quotes, quality, delivery dates and discounts — fairly make the office hum. The office proudly boasts that it can get hold of just about anything a customer might ask for: and if it can't it'll have a damn good try.

For the grocery downstairs is only a fraction of the Lanebottom's business. Across the road is an ordinary-looking terraced house, staff have built, on the lower floor, a furniture showroom and on the upper a carpet emporium. A converted slaughterhouse nearby has had an extra floor added to cope with its new-found function as a warehouse, and an innocent-looking garage has been brought into service as yet another storage depot.

Vaunting a free delivery service, the Lanebottom's two vans are on the road all day taking goods to the suburbs of Manchester, into Cheshire and often much further afield. People come from as far away as Harrogate to look at diamonds; the co-op's fitters were just finishing carpeting an old folks' home in Lancaster, and were about to fly out to Saudi Arabia to fit "a very big order" of carpets won there. While I was talking to the staff a huge Co-op juggernaut backed gingerly down the lane to pick up a consignment for delivery in Wigtown, Scotland.

While many co-ops used to base much of their business on mobile vans and a delivery service, few can have built up a trade which is conducted almost solely over the telephone, and with such success. The Lanebottom has earned itself at least a small place in the history of the co-op movement since it started looking for business beyond its immediate boundaries after the war.

Present-day general manager Geoff Hargreaves was just 19 then, and he told me how the Lanebottom branched out. He said: "I was standing in Corporation Street, Manchester and just looking at all the buildings. Inside were thousands of Co-op employees — what an opportunity for business! I produced account cards for each employee; I was just a middle man, I never saw the goods.

"I was on 2.5% commission, and in six months I'd built up a business worth

£500 a week. After 12 months I'd built it up full-time to £1,200 a week.

"The trouble was that as it developed it got so big that it was interfering with the smooth flow of goods through the Co-op's central wholesale department. They got quite annoyed about it eventually — you see, not only were Co-op employees taking advantage of the discounts...they were passing them on to their friends too. I think the Co-op felt it was hitting their retail stores."

In 1953 the Co-op pulled the rug out from under the business Geoff had so painstakingly built up. They stopped his system of discounting to Co-op employees in its tracks, and with only the grocery business in Ogden to fall back on, the Lanebottom co-op might have folded up then and there.

Said Geoff: "A lot of people would probably have given up. We lost everything we'd built up — £½ million of employees' business. But fortunately we'd a hell of a good staff. When we started again they had no holidays and worked all through Christmas and the festivities and didn't stop. We laugh about those days now and wonder how we got away with it. We'd just a horse and cart to start with."

By good fortune, while the Lanebottom had been selling Co-op goods to its employees, Geoff had acquired some agencies of his own from other manufacturers: his first agency was with a firm that made washers, his second was with Hoover.

That's how the Lanebottom still operates today. Their business is kept entirely separate from the rest of the co-operative movement — except when they make use of the Co-op Wholesale Service's buying power to get hold of manufacturers' goods cheaper. And they still sell to Co-op employees up and down the country...although nowadays they supply direct!

"There are so many places now that have been turned into hypermarkets," said Geoff. "Everybody shouts 'big is best'. But there are always people who want a service and quality, and that's what we give. If people come to us we work hellish hard to make them feel we really, really care. The emphasis must be on price, but even there it has been known for us to be beaten on price yet still get the order.

"We've never turned anybody away. We once went all the way to Wigan to deliver a carton of tomatoes! We find that people tend to identify with Lanebottom, like they're part of it," he added. "You come to a general meeting and you'll find it's packed out —

you won't be able to find a seat in the place." Afterwards members are invited into the pub next door for a drink.

He's very proud of his sales staff: there's "No slacking" he said. Two years ago when the firm was going through a sticky patch they decided off their own bat, to keep the shop open late on Thursday evenings — which brought the little co-op an extra £200,000 in business.

At the year end all the staff have to come in on a Saturday to do the stock-taking and accounts. "By 9 p.m. we're usually around to the profits," said Geoff. "Every member of staff has a profit and loss account. Then they stand in a circle while I shout out figures so they know if they've reached their targets. I've known young chaps so delighted that they've tossed all their papers in the air!"

The firm hasn't got into computers yet, though it does keep an extensive system of files, but as Geoff explained: "We've got a winning system and we've no plans to change it while it's still working."

Rochdale Council, of course, isn't too keen on what's happening in the village of Ogden. "They don't want expansion in the villages," according to Lanebottom's manager. The result is that the co-op is running out of storage space fast. "All we can do, if they won't let us put up another warehouse, is to keep the turnaround of goods moving," he said philosophically.

On what may just have been a bad day for discussing Rochdale's institutions in general, not even the mention of Toad Lane — the father of the co-operative movement though by no means the first co-op — could inspire a reverential tone in the Lanebottom HQ.

"That's just a conservation area now," said Geoff in defiant mood. "We're still going — and in the original building in which we started in 1860." And he went on: "There's been a lot of talk over the years about which society is going to gobble us up, but if we were to merge this office would probably be closed.

"Rochdale Pioneers were the last in the picture and now look at them — they've been gobbled up themselves by the Norwest group."

As I was leaving, the general manager couldn't resist throwing out, by way of a farewell: "And remember, if there's anything you're wanting, just give us a ring..." I wouldn't say there's much chance of the Lanebottom being "gobbled" in the near future: their cheek alone takes a bit of swallowing ■