

<b>Working Together: recording and preserving the heritage of the workers' co-operative movement</b>
<b>Ref no:</b>
<b>Name:</b> Jane Watts <b>Worker Co-ops involved in:</b> York Community Books, Lynx Training, ICOM, Leicester CDA
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**Interviewer's comments:** Some redaction of personal data

Related material available at the National Co-operative Archive – reference (Lynx Training Ltd LTL)

### **Summary**

During this interview Jane discusses how she first became involved in the co-op movement while at university in Durham. She then describes her work in a workers co-op called York Community Bookshop and how this led her to make nationwide connections with other radical booksellers and other worker co-ops from support networks and the Federation of Alternative Bookshops. Jane then describes working with ICOM Women's Link-up in Nottingham and briefly her three months working for ICOM in Leeds and West Yorkshire. ICOM Women's Link-up as a separately funded project ended but it continued as the women's section of ICOM and held annual conferences. Into the 1990s Jane was involved in Lynx Training in Nottingham helping small businesses which she and her colleagues decided to close in 1998. Throughout the interview Jane mentions issues of gender, equality, diversity and collectivisation which highlighted her experience of worker co-ops.

**Track 1: [00:02:21]** Description of how Jane became involved in the co-op movement starting from her experiences at university in Durham and her work with York Community Book Shops. **[00:07:37]** Description on the structure of co-op, explanation of how decisions were made in the shop, involvement and connections to other co-op businesses and how the shop was run. **[00:14:45]** Description of what was stocked in the bookshop, how decisions were made over this. Talk about books being confiscated and the reaction of customs to gay and left wing literature, anecdote on the disagreement over Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* **[00:20:34]** Description of how wages were distributed and how the group attempted to fairly distribute the income, Jane uses the example of child allowance of those who were the primary carer for their children. Some talk on co-op learning from each other. **[00:24:40]** Description of the network between co-ops and the Federation of Alternative Bookshops, outlines some of the economic issues the co-op faced and brick throwing from the public over support of contentious issues such as Irish independence. Description of closing down the

bookshop. [00:37:12] Description of involved in ICOM Women's Linkup and work in Leeds and Nottingham. Also description of Jane's work with Lynx Training [00:45:37] Description of a national Co-operative movement meeting, including discussion of differences between various groups in terms of race, gender and structure. [00:52:18] Description of why the decision was made to shut down Lynx Training in 1998

**Track 2:** [00:00:01] Discusses the decision to shut down Lynx Training in more detail, briefly outlines material deposited to the National Co-operative Archive.

**Track 3:** [00:00:02] Discusses involvement in ICOM. [00:03:50] Discusses being chair of ICOM and its funding. [00:06:19] Talks about career post Lynx including work at the Co-operative College. [00:10:13] Outlines current thoughts on the worker co-op movement. [00:11:50] Discusses development of Lynx Training over time.

**Transcript:**

**Track 1:**

*Interviewer: This is an interview with Jane Watts, hi Jane*

Jane Watts: Hi

*Could you briefly outline for me which co-ops and support agencies you've been involved in?*

Ok so, I was involved with York [United Kingdom] Community Bookshop, which was a worker co-op based in York as the same suggests and I was involved in that from the mid-70s to the mid-80s, when we decided to close it. And then I was in Nottingham [United Kingdom] I was involved in a worker co-op which grew out of ICOM Women's Link-Up where I'd worked for a year on a projects and we formed ourselves into a training co-op called ourselves Lynx Training Limited and that was a co-op which did training in the community. For long term unemployed people, mainly women and also community based training of various kinds, I'll talk more on that when we get down there to that. But also in terms of the co-op movement as a whole, while I was at Lynx Training I did a lot of work for LCCDA as it was then called Leicester and County Co-operative Development Agency, everything I've been involved in seems to have changed its name. But I was also on ICOM council and I was chair of ICOM at one point, ICOM being the federation of worker co-ops and I also worked otherwise at the Co-operative College for a while. And while I was in York we had quite a lot, we had kind of a network of all the worker co-ops, we had an enormous number of worker co-ops in York at that time. I think at one point there were ten of the new style worker co-ops at the point where it was probably early 80s at that point, so it was a very co-op, co-op minded place and a lot of people were busy setting up new co-ops and some of them are still there.

[00:02:21]

*That's great, so maybe if we start at the beginning,*

[both talking] yeah start at the beginning

Jane: You mean how I even know about co-ops at all? That probably relevant actually because those kind of network maps of who knows who, well there's not many degrees of separation between some of them. So I first came across worker co-ops when I was at university. Obviously I knew about retail co-ops and the big co-op type shops, but I didn't

really understand them, I understood their experience as being a child and going to our co-op but not particularly their structure. I knew it was different. But while I was at university in Durham [United Kingdom] I shared a house with some other students and also knew as part of my friendship circle some other students who were beginning to get involved with the co-op movement, and notably among those would be Toby Johnson and Harry Noyse [inaud]. So I knew them very well and we were getting involved within the students union setting up a whole foods type co-op within the students union at that time. But also simultaneously in Durham there were a lot of people who weren't students or weren't any longer students who were setting up, there was a wholefood shop and there was come co-operative housing and a few things going and people setting up sustainable activities in the old mining communities in the villages. So that was all in the early 70s and then Toby went at the end of that time to work for Suma and so did Harry and obviously I kept in touch and so was very aware of Suma who at that point were probably employing half a dozen people compared with where it is now. So, I was really aware of worker co-ops happening and so I moved to York to do a PGCE [Postgraduate Certificate in Education] and was teaching for a couple of years, but while I was still teaching doing my PGCE I got involved with, on the basis of the fact that I knew about all these co-ops, I got with a fledgling co-op called York Community Bookshop which at that point was running stalls. And there was a core group which the co-op employed straight off and I was teaching cos I'd finished my PGCE and two years into teaching I gave up on teaching to become a full time worker at York Community Bookshop. Which I did between 1979 and 1985, which is when we closed the shop, so six years but I'd been involved with it for the previous two years before that, just on the basis of helping out on weekends and doing stalls when it was still stall based. And then we moved into our premises, which again several others were helping in addition to the core group who actually came to be employed in the first case... So that was, that was how I got involved with that and of course it wasn't kind of on its own in that there was other co-ops. And also it was part of being involved politically in a more general sense on the left, more broadly feminism in particular in my case and it coming out of a logical progression from the kind of activism I was involved with to wanting to do things in a different way that challenged how things were done, including how businesses were run, and that believing we could find different ways of operating both economically and as people with each other.

*So when you started to set up York Community Books[hop] or once you joined and then moved into the shop was the worker co-op model the only kind of way you wanted to run it?*

Absolutely, nobody ever thought about doing it another way. I think probably very early stages, they probably hadn't known whether they'd go for a worker co-op model or a community organisation model. But pretty quickly, it's my understanding, because the IPS got register[ed] quite soon after formation by the founders, so they must have had it in their minds to do that. And again, it was a group of people who'd got involved with a whole set of things, students at York, they'd been there as undergraduates and they got involved with running things a bit like we had in Durham they had set up a café that did proper food rather than university catering and so they set up a couple of nights a week thing as a wholefood café or a more global food type thing, a more sustainable thing as well. And they'd also been involved in a whole set of other projects, which had, which were, collectively run, because in addition to being structurally co-ops it was really important to us all to be collectives, so I think the collective thing was what prompted us all to be co-ops because that was the way you could achieve that lack of hierarchy and approach to equality.

[00:07.37]

*And could you outline a bit more the structure of the co-op then?*

At that point there was the only model available for worker co-op was an Industrial and Provident Society, so what happened was there were some founder members whoever you could get to sign the bit of paper at the time [interviewer laughs] in fact it's got some surprising names on, somebody who's on that list actually works in Leicester and I ran into her many, many, many years later, I think she was the girlfriend at the time of somebody who was also involved and they needed seven names to write on [laughing]. It was not quite the sum total of her involvement but it wasn't far off that [laughing]. And um... so there was, yeah they set that up and that meant we were following those particular rules how we then wanted to structure it was, so there was no hierarchy, there was no... we had equal pay we always had equal pay the whole time we were there. Maybe I'll come back to something about pay if that becomes relevant, it's complicated. But anyway yeah, we paid obviously there's not great money in book selling and I still know a lot of booksellers and there still isn't much money in book selling [laughs] and particularly not a lot in radical book selling it's not a way to make a lot of money. And so wages would typically be low and our wages were also low, so how we, decided on wages to begin with, I think we fixed them against whatever the dole was at the time. I think that was, that was how we just decided what to pay. Because obviously at the beginning we had no idea whether it was going to make enough

money or not. And I wouldn't say any of us really understood much about running a business, so we didn't really understand how you would work out margins and decide what you could afford. We had enough ideas to be able to do some of it properly, but I would say we had enough ideas to do the rest it was very much learn as you go along and learn from the other co-ops in York as well and and we discovered that between us that we were all kind of better at different things. I think ours really, despite the many long meetings, I think we as a co-op we were pretty good at collective management. Which is actually one of those things people fall over<sup>1</sup>, some of the others were much better at financial management and spreadsheets for example [laughs]. Not sure the bookish crowd that we were, that was probably best. And one of the things we did was we all shared all the jobs, so, that was seen as part of this complete equality and collective working which meant regardless of your strengths you did take over, we used to do the book keeping in rotation and we all had to get to grips with it whether we were good at it or not.

*And how did you, you spoke a bit about meetings was that the way you made most of your decisions?*

Yeah we made our decisions at weekly meetings and of course you know at the point where we'd set up when they were doing the stalls none of us had ever been trained to be a book seller so we were having to learn it all from scratch. But everyone in the trade, the book trade's fairly friendly in that sense, people were happy to generally tell you how to do it. And we learn a lot on the hoof and is still relevant today actually. None of us, I don't think work as booksellers still, although the people from the radical book trade did. As well as working with the other co-ops in York we had an association across, which was national which was called, when I first got involved with it, had the fabulous title of FAB which stood for the Federation of Alternative Booksellers<sup>2</sup> [laughing]. Which became the Federation of Radical Booksellers

*Less catchy*

Less catchy, but probably more accurate and perhaps a bit more useful in terms of what we were trying to do. And within that they was also a women's section because second wave feminism was very active and we'd meet up at the women's section with a whole bunch of

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<sup>1</sup> JW correction— fall out about

<sup>2</sup> JW correction – Federation of Alternative Bookshops

people from the rest of the book trades. So women in publishing, women in libraries, a whole set of kind of women's sections of those things and we did swap a huge amount and through, though those women's sections we, women's organisation, we did swap an enormous amount of knowledge about the trade. So it was a kind of co-learning, co-teaching sort of set up. We also learnt a lot about running co-ops and running businesses as co-ops which we did through, there was a lot of co-training as well and sort of that way of doing it. So there would be gatherings of people who were involved in this kind of thing and then you learn from each other. But also we use to get regular visits from someone who's running... a whole set of co-operatives, you know there was a group of friends of ours who were doing co-ops up in Durham and use to come down. And they were a bit further ahead than us, they'd been doing it for longer, they'd swap tips on how to you know balance your books better or just real practical stuff and taught us how to think about being a collective. So meetings were decision making vehicles, we had a meeting every week in the evening after the shop was shut. Cos people lived in our premises and we owned our premises, we had a loan from one of our parents, one of the groups parents to buy premises, to my delight when we closed, when we decided to close we paid them back, we knew it wasn't going to work out any longer and I'm very, I'm very proud of having paid them back... So we bought the premises and it had this upstairs so three of the collective members actually lived in the shop for quite a while. And then eventually we did use the whole premises of the shop, we had one floor for books and we also had an office there. We always had a kitchen in the shop, it became very important for all kinds of reasons, one because people used it as a drop in centre, but also it meant when we had our co-op meetings after the shop shut we could have something to eat there. So you'd take it in turns to make a soup or a stew, so it was a very, so the collective extended beyond the actual running of the shop it was also very much a part, integral to our lives really that you did that.

[00:14.45]

*And could you tell me a bit more about the kind of material that you actually sold in the shop?*

Ok, well we sold, it was a bookseller that specialised in selling radical books. By which we meant feminist, gay, left wing so Marxist, socialist, anarchist and the absolute broad left, alternative and alternative ecological, environmental and then we also had a very good general fiction section. It was kind of a broad brush shop that specialised in radical literature

and we had huge debates during the meetings about things we would and wouldn't stock. So, I know that my partner now who's also called Jane, a bit confusing, she also ran a radical book shop and she's gone back into that field having come from it originally and they still have a lot of debates about what they will and won't stock, but not in the same way it's a much more kind of business model in a sense but also not, you do really anguish over whether you should or shouldn't stock something. And the confidence of some of the young staff we had at the time, I think we were fairly firm about things we would and wouldn't have that perhaps I would feel so strongly about maybe now. Just because I think we should have access to literature as much as anything. But there were still things we wouldn't stock and there's still things radical book shop wouldn't stock now. One of the things we did that was different was we sold a lot of ephemera postcards, badges and all that kind of stuff, which bookshops wouldn't have done back then now bookshops do sell other products but they didn't then at all. It wasn't the kind of giftware you would get, we had radical products, things from other collectives and we sold quite a lot of music and the music and the gay books particularly we imported and again is unusual. It was just, it, it's very hard to imagine now, it was really hard to get books into the country, to get literature distributed, so there were lots of things that we did that were... quite difficult, quite challenging. Say for example you, if you've seen the film *Pride*, then a gay bookshop features in that and it's in London, I think they're a co-op actually.

*I think they are.*

Yeah I think they are, and they and us particularly, but all the radical book shops we use to get loads and loads of our books seized in customs. So, you'd be importing gay stuff and anything with particularly a lurid cover, those cheap mass market paper backs, but just in general just the word gay, you'd sometimes get the whole lot confiscated. And you'd have to fight and get injunctions to get them back out so it was that kind of activity as well and you were perceived as quite a threat to the authorities. But they could never quite work us out, because we didn't represent one faction, so I think they expected that we would, but actually we didn't we stocked all of it. So you'd have things that actually disagree with each other in terms of magazines and newspapers, so we would stock the whole range of left newspapers all of which which were busy arguing with each other. But our job was to make them available and let people think about them and make up their own minds. So, but, so that wasn't a threat to the authorities, but our phone was always tapped, special branch knew

about us, knew who we were. I mean obviously it wasn't the digital age so what people didn't know was very weird ... some plain clothed officers would come down every Friday and buy the whole range of left papers. I don't know why they thought we didn't know who they were, they were the only people who came into our shop in suits [laughs]. But so, it was very alternative, very radical and we were involved peace campaigning and various other things in our own right and most of the women in the shop were quite heavily involved in the women's centre and other feminist campaigning groups. So, so they saw us as this hub of information, which indeed we were, so as well as having literature we had big notice boards and groups would put things on there. So it was always a question of what did you or didn't you stock, what did you or didn't you let people put up notices about. So there would be huge agreement on what we did and didn't stock and then when it came to general stuff it was a little bit more hard to make those distinctions. I do remember us talking for about an hour and a half once about whether we would stock Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* because it was pretty misogynistic but it's a classic text so you know it's that, it was always that kind of thing that you were trying to balance up would be do that, I think we did in the end on that one.

[00:20.34]

*And when you made these sorts of decision was it consensus or..*

We tried to come to a consensus, that's sometimes why the meetings were so long. We almost never voted, very occasionally we'd take a vote on something. That was also because, we did have various attempts to harmonise pay. So... there's an in-between unfairness in the tax system, so we were paid just above dole level as I said and then we'd pay national insurance and so on, but once people's individual tax codes had gone into it or some of our members had children and some didn't. And so, we used to try to even up the pay so that it was fairer on those people who had children for example, that was a criteria we had. But it's not, you can't really do that and you can't really do it legally either, so you know it was how did you actually manage to do it, the only way you could do it legally was all of us being paid our money and then some of us basically giving money as a present to somebody else [laughs]. So you know you'd have to find ways round things and

*and did that cause some..*

That did cause some tension, we were absolutely fine and very cool with that whole thing, trying to even it out, it all seemed very fair and then sometimes something can get in the way of something. So one of our members moved in with somebody who already had a child and

we all went hang on a minute, when they tried to claim [the] childcare allowance, we went hang on a minute that's not the point of this. And so you would get these challenges, because you're trying to do something really different, radical, alternative whatever, they would... then you would always come into things when the real world kind of interrupted and got the spanner in the works really. Because you haven't anticipated that, our system worked really well because the people we were supporting a little bit more because they had children were all single parents and it was their own child, the child for which they had prime responsibility, not necessarily biologically but they were the carer. And for somebody to suddenly say well I want the childcare money now, well it wasn't their child and they'd only just moved in with them, people were going I don't think that's right, but we don't know quite what's wrong with it because actually you've now got a child but you haven't [laughs]. It was just you know it was those little things like that really. Because we were trying to do something that doesn't fit with how everybody else does something. So there were things that we had to have lots and lots of debate, we would go round in circles. And we were spending huge amounts of time coming to decisions about very minor things

*And was that a situation where you would learn from other co-ops, it was kind of what they'd done or?*

Erm yeah sometimes, or they would learn from us you know as well, not everybody tried to income share like we did, some did. I think, you know we did sometimes make a rod out of our own backs with some of those things [laughs]. But at the time that all felt very important and I think it was, I think its informed how I've lived the rest of my life as well and my attitude to thing as well were honed during that time. What I perceived to be fairnesses and unfairnesses and now kind of what I'll be prepared to go along with, in order not to waste hours and hours of my precious life on something that perhaps doesn't matter that much. But you know just trying to, because then everything mattered, because there were no blueprints, no one telling you how to do it [laughs]. We did consult books and other thing and other co-ops, but a lot of it you would just sort out for yourself.

[00:24:40]

*Do you have any relationship with your local CDA or ICOM or there wasn't at that point?*

There wasn't one. We did have, ICOM was very small back then, we did have a relationship with ICOM a little bit we had more of a relationship with this Federation of Radical

Booksellers, that was a much more important network for us. It wasn't until later when I got a job at ICOM, that I and then the next co-op had a much bigger relationship with ICOM. And we really knew it was there, we started just laterally in the early 80s we did get involved, women in the co-op got involved in something called ICOM Women's Link-Up, which I'll probably talk about in a bit [laughs] whenever we get to it.

*So York Community Books[hop] was a woman only co-op, was it set up as that or did it kind of organically become that?*

It became it organically, it was mixed roughly even numbers of men and women. Then gradually over time the guys for one reason or another left and we didn't replace them, or if we replaced them we replaced them with women and that was by accident or I mean that was just by who came to the interview you know whatever. Then we...there was one man left working with us and then he decided to leave and go and do something else. And at that point after he decided to leave, the rest of us were there and we decided not to take on any men, we would become a women's collective. And that caused quite a bit of trouble locally, various articles in the local free press which was also a collective which said oh no its only going to stock women's books and feminist books we had to write this kind of repost saying well no actually it's still going to stock the same range exactly, we've just decided since we were all women that we'd stay that way and just see how it goes. And around that time, was the time when radical book selling became under great threat across the country, and people had got to close because they just couldn't make it work, couldn't make good money, can't, couldn't support the businesses. And things happened in York around the same time, Waterstones opened [laughs] that is what happened across the country. General book selling had been very poor, indeed up until that point, there were a lot of independent, very old fashioned and university book shops had been just about selling textbooks not about anything else. So we could exist quite well in the atmosphere, there were quite a lot of book shops in York, book selling um, book buying was still quite a popular activity to do... and there was a general feeling that buying books and reading books was a good thing no matter which side of the spectrum you came from. So there was a real market there and then during the year before, we decided to close in '85 beginning the closure at the end of the year I think, maybe you know, yeah I think it was the autumn of '85 when we closed. And just around that time I think the previous October, the council in York had built a new car park and had changed the road layout and where we were had been the kind of main thoroughfare for people to walk into the city from the south side. And we became, so all the tourist traffic practically, not that

we got loads of money from tourists, but passing trade was quite useful thing to have, but also it meant people would find you easily. So they were not routed through the city by the new car park on a different road, not on the road we were on and we started to lose trade quite significantly around that time, and that coincided with things like Waterstones and Dillons coming across the whole national picture. And a few radical book clubs, I think probably the Women's Press Book Club probably opened around that time and the Gay Men's Press Book Club. So there were other means of getting books, so inconceivable now, compared with, because its pre internet so, its pre PCs (personal computer) and not even pre internet [laughing] it's just inconceivable everything we ever did was by hand [laughs]. And so because we had no passing trade really, anymore there wasn't even anyone popping in to buy a postcard or this looks interesting and popping in, or popping in on the way back to the car park. So that whole section of the street actually, went downhill every rapidly and that included our business and it wouldn't have been quite believable how much difference that really makes, but it did. And as I say there was other means of buying books then, people stopped coming in for general book they just came in for the radical stuff and that meant that, and you know cheap things like pamphlets or newspapers or magazines but not books, books were the way you ever made money. I think we probably got broken into one time too many... I, this didn't just apply to the co-ops but radical bookshops are quite out there sort of places we did use to get like bricks through the window occasionally . So have you got on your list to talk to Mandy Vere, News from Nowhere?

*Yes*

Yes ok, so Mandy's been there since then they set up their shop roughly the same time as we did and she can tell you that whole history because they got it more than we did and the people who were at, what was Grassroots in Manchester [United Kingdom] they used to get a lot more hassle. And a lot around then was to do with, sometimes to do with Irish stuff, sometimes to do with anti us being, anti-armed forces, so doing a lot of peace stuff. If we'd put in a window about Ireland then we would definitely get a brick through the window and if we had a window display about other things, oh anything that was a bit contentious like anti-apartheid stuff but not so much that, mostly people in Britain would support that or free Nelson Mandela stuff. But there was a whole set of things that were particularly contentious, and if you put window displays or showed that you had books about certain things say from Republicans in Ireland then you definitely would get trouble. It meant that you had to take

political stands and be really clear about why you were doing them, so that you could respond. And John<sup>3</sup> can tell you more about that as well, because he ran a radical bookshop in Coventry [United Kingdom] so [laughs] which is how I ever knew him and Andrew.<sup>4</sup>

*Through networks?*

Through the Federation of Radical Booksellers was how I knew all those people and Andrew was at Milton Keynes in a bookshop there and his partner Jane and various other people, some of whom I still know [laughing]. So it was a very powerful network and it still is, it gave me a kind of closeness to those people and a trust amongst those people, that I you know that you don't always encounter in other areas of work.

*How was that actually set up, was it quite organically set up or did people?*

It was pretty organic, it was already there, so people who'd been going a bit longer like Mushroom in Nottingham and a few others who'd been set up just a few years before us, probably in the very early 70s or very late 60s. So they were a couple of years ahead of us, they had already formed this Federation of Alternative Bookshops I think it was called. And then when we came along and there were lots of us and so we made it, I mean we used to have conferences with a couple of hundred people at them, so there were a lot of us. But that is where I know some of those people, but then parallel to all of that there were wholefood shops and bread making co-ops and some very familiar - it's kind of comeback round [laughs] and alternative products kind of thing, perhaps things from developing countries or fairly traded stuff. And at the same time as we were doing that, that's when the fair trade movement got going, so in York for example there's York Cycleworks and that's a co-op that's still going, and still has a co-operative structure, I mean they're still there and they'd be quite a good lot to talk to maybe. So there was a lot of activity, coming, just coming just on our coat-tails or just ahead of us. So we just formed those networks because we needed other people to talk to, who's doing what we're doing, oh right ok there's these people, so we knew about them very quickly. But then we also traded with them, as well as it being a sort of support network, or a sharing of information or whatever we did it for, campaigning network as well, it was also about sharing information on you know, so that we could operate collectively to get books out of Customs if they were being held or to, we would pull together

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<sup>3</sup> John Goodman – member of the project steering committee and involved in Wedge Bookshop.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Bibby –member of the project steering committee and involved in Oakleaf Bookshop.



three months to do piece of work. I was completely out of my comfort zone, it was to try to establish a regional CDA in West Yorkshire and I was living in York so could go to Leeds [United Kingdom] where ICOM's head offices were really easily. And it was a couple of days a week for a period of time... so I just, we had had kind of a bit of involvement in ICOM and Toby was the general secretary at that point and he knew I was looking for work and thought I'd be the kind of person he could do with. So, he had more confidence in my ability than I did but anyway there I was and it started me off in policy work actually which is what I have done a lot of ever since, so it was quite interesting. I found it incredibly frustrating, because just getting meetings, so me and a couple of other people, did some voluntary some not, were doing work around Yorkshire trying to get a regional CDA in West Yorkshire. And it was a three month project, we didn't actually do it but we did get a lot of very positive work. It was the first time ever in my life that I realised you could not achieve something and it still be a good piece of work. Because what we had done was raise awareness in all those authorities about different ways of doing things and some of them then continued to do things differently. So I think some of those local authorities did support co-operative setup as part of their regeneration, but not through the means of a regional CDA. So it was an interesting time and all along through that and slightly before we shut the shop, I'd been peripherally involved in a new project that was one of the first European funded projects in the UK [United Kingdom] which was ICOM Women's Linkup. Which was a European project to train women to set up co-ops. So I'd already been involved with ICOM Women's Linkup, in terms of going along to ICOM Women's meetings at ICOM conferences or whatever and we'd been to some co-training where ICOM Women's Linkup had done something as well. We had agreed to perhaps go and give a session on some of the training that was being done in Leeds, because they set up the Leeds ICOM Women's Linkup first. And then there were two, then they got the next, well the proper lot of funding it was kind of an advanced funding and then you got the proper lot, that started in about '84 I think. And then Nottingham and Coventry and somewhere else also had ICOM Women's Linkup projects, and the Nottingham project advertised a job and my job at ICOM was coming to an end because it was only a few months job. I applied for that job and it started in the January or the February of that following year 1986, beginning of 1986. Moved to Nottingham to take part in working an ICOM Women's Linkup project and there were four of us and at the end of that year that was the end of the funding. And our local authority and the ESF, it was still going to be possible to get more funding but it couldn't have been run through ICOM. So, we set up a co-operative called Lynx Training to run the project work we had been doing for

ICOM Women's Linkup, so ICOM Women's Linkup was going to end and around the same time ICOM was having to change what it did a bit because of money and stuff as well. But then ICOM Women's Linkup then became the three projects but also the women's section of ICOM, so ICOM Women's Linkup as the women's section of ICOM carried on for a long time. ICOM Women's Linkup as the three projects didn't carry on in that, because the funding wasn't going to go through ICOM anymore, that was largely because the local authorities were going to fund each area so we could do that, so we became [separate and] independent of ICOM. So for the first couple of years for Lynx Training we just ran the European funded projects but then after that we tried to grow the co-op so we would do other work. Also we could see we wouldn't be able to run these European funded projects forever, and indeed we couldn't. So, so we did other work like community training, business start-up training and I worked quite a lot at Leicester CDA and so did my colleges and we used to do local work for Leicester CDA and Nottingham CDA We used to do training for Nottingham CDA and we more and more did a lot of training in setting up community organisations and running voluntary organisations, management training for people new to it, people in communities who'd never done anything like that before, community enterprises, you name it we did it. Mainly there was three of us in the co-op, at one point there was four but one person left and we didn't get a replacement.

*So it started off focusing more on the women's co-operatives and then*

To start with it was entirely women's co-ops but then, and we still got funded to train women's co-ops, then there were two things going on at the same time one was the interpretation of the Equalities Act meant that people wouldn't do women only things anymore. So you had to have real justification for why you were doing something and that was ok until there was a bit of a change in government at one point and they decided that now given that women were, given that we, I think we had hit something like twenty three percent of start-ups were women. So it was no longer considered a disadvantaged group [laughing] an interesting concept of parity there but you know. So it was going to become more and more tricky, that would have been about '91 I think. So we started this co-op in '87 and we closed it um., 1986 1987 it had been ICOM Women's Linkup which had run from 1984, but in Nottingham hadn't really got going until 1985, just at the point they hired me and others was the point where they were ready to do their proper courses for the first time. So yeah in '87 we registered Lynx and now this time was a company limited by guarantee, because that

legal option hadn't been available when we'd done the bookshop. But by now it was and for a small co-op of our kind it was a much much better structure, much [inaud] much easier to manage, you just ran it like any other company. So it was sort of a safer structure for us, but an easier structure for us as well. And I became much more involved in ICOM through having been in ICOM Women's Linkup and having worked there and so I stood for the council at some point after we'd registered Lynx. I got onto ICOM council and somewhere in the early 90s I was chair of ICOM for a year and all through that time, ICOM Women's Linkup as a section of ICOM carried on.

[00:45:37]

*So what did that kind of become, you know you kind of had the distinction between what it originally started as [both talking]*

So European projects, European funding of the projects and then it became just a movement into

*More like a network where*

Well [both talking] exactly and a support network, and lobbying for more women's co-ops, making sure women's interests were centred in the movement. The worker co-op movement was probably more equal in terms of gender than all the rest of the movement put together, but nevertheless it still felt fairly male dominated at times. And very white and Women's Link-up never was, it was always quite a diverse movement in terms of ethnicity and ability and so on. We're much, I think we ran community based course so we had the opportunity to attract more diverse people to get involved and you were focusing on long term unemployment. So again the more disadvantaged and marginalised communities were more likely to be unemployed, so we focused particularly on attracting those on courses, they'd set up small businesses as co-ops in some cases and then they got involved in ICOM Women's Linkup as well. We had a habit of, we developed a habit of having an annual conference as part of the European funded programs, so we brought all the trainees from across the country together in one place for these huge conferences. And at the end of that there was still a desire, I think, to keep having ICOM Women's Linkup conferences, which we did for some while. So, after I'd been chair and ICOM was having a really rocky time financially, what I went on to do, I was only chair for a year but chaired after that ICOMs ESF committee. We were a European funding channel for the third sector, so there were three of them in [the UK] NSVO was one of them, somebody else I can't remember who else and ICOM. So because

we'd been early kind of pioneers, all those people, in getting the third sector in its broadest sense into delivering European projects. Then, then obviously, ICOM was then a committee in its own right within the ESF and I chaired that committee for quite a long time. So I carried on being involved with ICOM for quite a long time but then as you probably, have you got the history of ICOM, now merging into co-ops UK? But that's a bit more convoluted than that sounds, that sounds like a neat process doesn't it? [laughing]. Meanwhile, I think while I was chair of ICOM in the early 90s, the beginnings of that had started to happen, although we hadn't seen it as a potential merger at that point. The various bits of the co-op movement started to meet for the first time together. There had always been some bits of the co-op movement that did, I remember a very early meeting at the Co-op College then which was at Stanford Hall as I said earlier. That... was where I must have been chair at the time, because it was the chairs of all the different co-op bodies, that would come, did come for the meeting. So that included, what is now The Group, the bank, housing, credit unions, who else would there have been, a few others all in the same place at the same time and that was a world first. There was a lot going on then [laughs] and there was huge debate about whether some people should or shouldn't be there. And the big one that they were really wary of was worker co-ops.

*Oh ok, and what was the kind of atmosphere at that meeting?*

It was fine, you know, I mean I was a bit gobsmacked because it was nearly all men, and they were just very different to me [laughs] so it was very white, very older and I wasn't at the time... Very hierarchical and I wasn't I worked in a collective, quite wary about worker co-ops because they would be from consumer co-ops or where the beneficiary or the consumer was the member. So, it was very different to their model of staff and at that time, it was very unusual for example, for staff to be members of the co-op. it was a bit like, more like a, sort of, almost like a bit like some of the charity sector gets a bit twitchy about beneficiaries and membership, particularly then did. Because you know conflict of interests, the staff weren't necessarily well treated in a lot of co-ops, so I think things have really changed. So it was just very different, very different feel for what kind of business you were. And also, we were mainly in micro businesses and they were running these enormous business. But I think, you know, everybody gave a quite fair account of themselves, so it was fascinating I had never experienced anything quite like it in my life [laughs]. And they were talking a language I didn't really understand and as I say very hierarchical and very establishment and you know

the bit of the world I was in was very anti-establishment, so it was very, well just intriguing. But perfectly friendly, and led me to do somethings later, that you know sometimes you look back on and you think I can't believe I did that you know. I mean formal dinners, I didn't do formal dinners [laughing] those kinds of things. But it was interesting and the point to try to get, I mean the co-op movement [felt] quite under attack at the time, there was a lot of things going on in the cooperate world that were very anti-movement. So, it was quite good to try and band together, try and raise a profile, try and do things a bit more jointly, try and get a better understanding of each other, I think there were some good things about that. But that is what eventually led to the Co-op Union changing into Co-ops UK and becoming a much more inclusive umbrella organisation.

[00:52:18]

*And tell me about, a bit about, so Lynx Training ran from '87 until?*

'87 until, we closed in '97 I think, '98 maybe, '98 yeah.

*Ok, and what was the reason for clos[ure]?*

Ok well, I had partly moved on and my colleague [redacted] wanted to move to Brighton [United Kingdom] and my colleague [redacted] was had already trained and was doing it on a part time basis the practice management of her husbands practice, he's a doctor, he was a doctor, they're retired now. But and so the three of us just decided, well that it wasn't really hand-on-able [ph] because it had become associated entirely with us, and we got work because we were us not because we were Lynx Training. And so and I was already doing part time work somewhere else because I'd decided I wanted to move on and go and do something else. So really the three of us, eventually had to say, because I was half time in Coventry working with community education and half time back in Nottingham doing the work for this, and we just had all eventually to say this is just long term, the point where [redacted] said she going to work in Brighton, I think that was the point where we said well it's just time to shut down. So again, we were in the lucky position of not being insolvent so we could take a gradual approach and shut down slowly. So what I've brought for you is in here.

*Oh right*

Jane: Is this a good time to take a break because I think that might be best.

[00:53.55]

**Track 2:**

[00:00:01]

I don't think there's anything that much that needs to be explained [rustling material]<sup>5</sup>. But what you have got is all the minutes in the lead up to the wind-up process, and I don't think there's anything in here [looking through material] that we need to...it's really interesting we closed the office in 1998...

[00:00:24]

*With this, worker co-op [Lynx training] did you have a similar kind of structure in terms of...non-hierarchical, was it flat pay as well?*

It was flat pay, yep. And, it was collectively run, and yeah there were no pay differentials we were on reasonably good wages because it was probably, you know we were running funded courses and all kinds of other work, and one of the things that we decided at, all the people who set it up had been in other co-ops in the past, so because we were training women to set up co-ops and one of the things we decided at the outset was that we would, we'd all been in low paid co-ops, mainly in, wholefoods or, [redacted] had worked abroad actually in setting up co-ops in Africa, and I'd worked in York, and [redacted] had worked in wholefoods and of course that was all very low paid and we decided that we all wanted to be paid properly and if we were going to have a co-operative business it should pay properly, and that if any, if ever it got to a point where we couldn't do that, then we were going to close it, and so we'd always had in mind that it might be finite but actually it went on for 10 years so, yeah so we gave up the offices, but the formal wind-up didn't happen until 2001, so we stopped, stopped doing very much, apart from, and I now, remember why talking about it, because we were partly funded through European funding, we had to wait, for the final payment because you get your payment in arrears for your last payment, so all three of us were owed some money at that point because we needed some back-pay [laughing] for the time we hadn't you know, at the end, so we had to wait for our final payment to come in from Europe before we could wind up, that's why it took so long, and that's why we had a formal meeting sort of 3 years after we, well 2 years after we closed, because we sort of closed the office in the end of '98, and stopped doing any work at that point, and that's why I associate it with being '98, March '98 was when we stopped doing the work, but actually didn't close it until January 2001, because

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<sup>5</sup> Material deposited at the National Co-operative Archive – catalogue reference (Lynx Training Ltd LTL)

the money came in that following, that December just before that. Sorted out the money, paid our debts, and then gave the balance to ICOF.<sup>6</sup> So it's a very nice wind-up I mean it was a very, easy wind-up, it was very, it wasn't horrible, but when we wound up the bookshop it was, tragic, because we were so passionate about it, but even though we did the right thing and wound up before we had to and, you know, so I feel very proud of closing, both co-ops at the right point and not becoming insolvent on either occasion, and just, felt like that, well we'd managed those processes well but anyway. Do please have our archive.

*Do you want to take a little break then?*

Yeah I will do, yeah thanks.

**Track 3:**

[00:00:02]

*So, that's recording now.*

Ok, great. So, to come back to ICOM then, so the Industrial Common Ownership Movement, was itself registered as an Industrial & Provident Society, so it was, we called it as it's strap-line because nobody knew what it meant, the, federation of worker co-ops, just so that, it was a bit clearer for people, and it was just a way of coming together as the movement, so, the reason for calling it the Industrial Common Ownership was because, that's how the co-operatives were registered, so the Industrial and Provident Societies were enabled by something called, the, the...so Industrial and Common Ownership Act, trying not to use the acronyms [laughing] the ICO Act, so that was how that all, was there, the reason it was there and the reason it was called ICOM, and there was a sister organisation called ICOF, which, helped, co-operatives raise the funding, to start, and made loans to co-operative worker co-ops. So, it governed itself through a council, the word council crops up quite a lot, you find that a lot of co-operatives of all kinds have councils other than other names, for, their governing bodies, so it was an elected council, elected by the membership, and I think at that time, we had, it was a general election, as in that all members voted for all the places, but there were reserved places within the, the council for certain constituencies so, in addition to

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<sup>6</sup> Industrial Common Ownership Finance

being, something like probably a 12 person member council, we had, 3 places in addition for ICOM women's link-up, we had 3 places reserved for black members and so on, and I can't remember what the total of those came to, but the core of the council then, was a finance and general purposes committee which used to meet really frequently. So the council itself met I think quarterly, but I may be wrong, I may have that wrong, and the finance and general purposes committee which is what ran it really, not week by week but month by month was, met monthly and, that was the, body to which the general secretary reported, it looked and did, as its name suggested and it's kind of old fashioned name now but people still have finance and general purposes committees, it was like, you'd probably be called an executive committee now, and the chair, chaired both of those meetings so, usually you got to be chair, and it worked like a lot of co-ops actually, a lot of co-op structures, in that the council would be elected by the membership, and then the officers were elected by the council itself, after each annual general meeting, so usually once you'd been on the commit[ee] on the council for a few years, you could get into a position where you could, stand for, or be nominated for, one of the officerships, very frequently there was not a great deal of fighting to be one of those officers, because obviously it's all done on a voluntary basis and, it's quite a lot of extra work. And the finance and general purposes committee, also looked after, staffing issues, remuneration issues, and, all the other kind of strategic direction issues, of the, the society.

[00:03:50]

So being chair was, at a relatively youngish age, in my early 30's was probably quite onerous, and certainly more than I anticipated [laughing] being, especially as we, as we were really struggling financially at that time, so it was always hard to get the money, we didn't want to make the membership fees too expensive because otherwise, the membership couldn't have afforded to join, and, it was very hard to raise money, through projects, which is how we mainly got the money in, was that, like many, an organisation like that, we got funding from grant sources to run projects, whether that was European projects or others. And the other thing we got money for, and it was the largest source of revenue was our legal services, and their helping people to register their co-ops and so on, and at the point where, local authorities stopped funding co-operative development agencies who, in a way, were the largest part of the pipeline that, that although that's not a word we'd have used then but still [laughing] that, it was their grant funding to the co-ops that were setting up in the areas that often then paid for, their legal structures to be drawn up by ICOM, and that was quite, that

was, they were becoming fewer of those so that all became a bit more tricky, so I think I, didn't have much involvement in, ICOM beyond about 1994, but I can't remember exactly, but as I said in the last little phase of what I did, as, my involvement on council was to chair the European Social Fund Committee which, fitted very well for me because by then I'd been, working on European funded projects, since about 1985, and, and I continued to work on, on European projects and actually in terms of my career that is where I then went was to continue to work on European projects which I, pretty much have done ever since, I do work on other kinds of projects as well but most of my jobs have involved running, European projects, sometimes quite big ones, and I even though I now work freelance, I'm still running, European funded projects or, being involved in European projects as, part of my work in adult education.

[00:06:19]

*And you, mentioned before that you, worked for the Co-operative College for a while? How was that linked into your previous work?*

I did. Ok, so, career wise, after Lynx Training, no before Lynx Training finished I was working part time on a big European project in Coventry, for Coventry Community Education, and, I was, I was there, on a half-time contract for a year or so, just to do, an internal evaluation on a project, and then I got a job, on the, successor project, which was a full time job and so, I properly, stopped working at Lynx and worked at Coventry. And, I, at the end of that project I mean the thing about working on, for whoever you work on, any kind of project work these are often fixed term contracts so, when that project came to an end, there wasn't going to be a new one, and so there was nothing new to apply for so, I was applying for jobs, and one came up at the Co-op College, and I thought it was going to be my dream job, because, I lived in Nottingham, the Co-op College at the time was based at Stanford Hall, which was, you know 20 minutes drive from home, compared with commuting to Coventry so it was a huge improvement, and also, I'd always wanted to work there I just thought you know I was involved in education and, I was involved in co-ops and, the two coming together was a great thing. But, sadly, I think I started my job, in 2000 in the September, and within about 8 weeks of my starting my job, there was an announcement that the College was going to move to Manchester and, was going to stop having a physical

presence, was going to do its courses by distance learning, or by face-to-face work but all over the country in different venues, and was going to be based, at what was then the Co-op Union headquarters at Holyoake House, although all of that actually took a little bit of time, that sounds very tidy it wasn't anything like that, there was a consultation period there were various other things going on, so I'm not sure I'd been there more than 6 weeks when that happened, and then about a year later it moved, and I had meanwhile decided not to move with it, I was offered the option to work at home, but, I quite liked the idea, particularly then, of working with other people, working with colleagues, and so I applied for a job in the voluntary sector, which involved commuting again but never mind, doing an action learning for managers project and, and then that was a 4 year project which I did, so I've continued my habit of working on projects but, that was that. So, it was a bit of a shame really because my job there was to do a lot of development projects and to apply for funding for a lot of development projects and I really hadn't got my feet under the table before it was time to move on, so I'd, run a few short day sessions and a few workshops, but I wasn't really doing much teaching, training, and nor had I really got, properly in to the swing of being able to bid for money, as the College, was very different from bidding for money that I'd done, well I'd been doing it for years and years, seeking funding and getting projects funded, but it was really different doing it for the College so, it had really taken me a while to get going so, there were a couple of small projects that I got up and running and then, time to go! It was all a bit tragic [laughing]. I think it, I mean I wouldn't have, I wouldn't have left so soon for definite had it stayed put in the Midlands, but I really didn't want to work in an isolated way from home, wasn't my idea of a good time. So, yeah.

[00:10:13]

*So those are all the questions that I kind of have set to ask you, unless there's anything else you?*

Yeah, I was just trying to think about what, what you'd want to sort of sum up with really, which is, I still think that workers' co-ops are, a really interesting way to work, and a really good way to work, and a very positive way to work, but, I think, their, the notion of enterprise and the way that, enterprise is being presented, for a lot of the time since that kind

of heyday, is been very anti that collectivist approach and very much about entrepreneurs being there to make loads of money and, and it's not that you couldn't, you could make a lot of money being a workers' co-op depending if you got your business structure right and model right and had a good product. But that's not usually why people, go into it, necessarily. There's huge scope, to work in that way, and it would put some really good challenges in the place some of the things we've seen happen in the corporate world, of late, where you know, from scandalous behaviour to, to, just, exploitation I suppose, you know that's something that we stood against and, I still think that you can run, businesses ethically in that way, and that more of us should probably do it.

[00:11:50]

*And, sorry this kind of, jogged my memory of something I wanted to ask earlier. When you were working with Lynx Training, how did you see the kind of worker co-op, develop, or change in that time, from when you were working at York Community Bookshop?*

Oh right, well it's a very different kind of co-op Lynx Training, because we were working in a field which is better paid so at least we could, you know sell our services, at a slightly higher rate which was good. We didn't grow in the sense of growing people, numbers of people, and we didn't particularly aim to, wasn't about growing it, it was about providing the service that we wanted to provide in the way that we wanted to provide it. And again it was largely about working ethically, working equally amongst ourselves, but providing a product that we thought had high quality and, was, done ethically, and, there was a lot of community training and a lot of community based training, a lot of business training that was around that was, at the time being unbelievably badly done, and was very exploitative, and later, was proved to be fraudulent, because people were being funded by government funds, which we very rarely were, we found it very hard to get that kind of money to run things. And in a way, I'm glad we didn't, now, because it became really tainted, so there was something called the Training and Enterprise Councils and most of them, it was one of those Tory attempts to, kind of give all the money to the private sector, and, there was lots of, really, really poor courses put on, for people who wanted to start a business in those times, and we worked really, really hard to make sure that, we did business training ethically, and that we saw it, as a success for example in our, training if, someone had wanted to set up a business but we

managed to persuade them not to, because it was a really, really, really risky idea, we saw that as a huge success, because they would've, because the way we taught was that they would arrive at their own decision. So we wouldn't do kind of, business advice, we would do training, so that people would learn enough about it, so they could assess it for themselves, and, then reach the conclusion for themselves that, this was not a good approach and that they would fail if they set up that business, and that seemed to us, a more ethical way of doing it, and also hopefully they would then have the skills to go and assess future business ideas, so that they wouldn't set themselves up to fail. And obviously we were often working with fairly poor people who, had perhaps a small amount of redundancy pay or something to invest in their own business and what we didn't want was for them to risk that, in a, a venture that was unlikely to work, and that, where they would go into it without really understanding what they were doing so our aim was always to help people understand what they were doing. And it was a bit the same with the community groups, training in a way, that we wanted people to be able to run their community groups well, even if it was just a small group organising a children's playground or something. And that, they would do that, ethically and that they would do that in, with knowledge, as opposed to being fleeced by people or, and that they could, empower themselves and come to their own decisions and so that was always the kind of driving factor, so, that was the way that we grew our business was to get more and different customers, but we didn't particularly want to, grow it hugely in terms of numbers of us or, in terms of, sort of changing our style I suppose so you kind of stuck to the, stuck to your values and principles very carefully. Yeah, is that [laughing] where we've got to [with the interview].

*Thank you*