

Working Together: recording and preserving the heritage of the workers' co-operative movement
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Name: Richard Waring Worker Co-ops involved in: Down to Earth (Sheffield)
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Summary:

[00:00:09] Richard talks about how Down To Earth was originally set up, and it's move to Sharrow Vale Road, Sheffield [00:03:11] Talks about bringing in new people and the connection with other wholefood workers co-operatives through the Federation of Northern Wholefoods Collectives. [00:05:57] Outlines reasoning for setting up as a workers co-operative. [00:07:09] Talks about visiting and learning from other workers' co-operatives, and job rotation at Down to Earth. [00:10:37] Talks about decision making at Down to Earth. [00:12:05] Discusses why some workers co-operatives failed. [00:13:00] Talks about the development of Down to Earth, the politics of Down to Earth, recounts talks given by members of Down to Earth to local Women's Guilds on workers co-operatives. [00:17:38] Talks about links with the community and other businesses on Sharrow Vale Road. [00:19:10] Talks about vegetarianism and the shop. [00:20:51] Talks about attempts at expansion in to Crookesmoor. [00:22:01] Discusses leaving Down to Earth to go to Drama School. [00:22:26] Mentions the later change of Down to Earth from a workers' co-operative to a different business model. [00:24:49] Outlines opinions on workers' co-operatives in general.

Transcript:

Interviewer: *Nope that's fine, probably better not to prepare, I never really ask people to, but, yeah if you just kind of want to go through...from the beginning?*

[00:00:09]

Richard: Do you want to know how it started and stuff like that?

Yeah

Ok, it started because I was in to things like brown rice and stuff like that, and I used to go down to London to visit my sister, and my sister used to live in a squat in Prince of Wales crescent, and next door was a guy called John Law who had a wholefood shop right, so I used to go and buy stuff from him, and bring it back up. Things like, weird things like brown rice, and brown flour, and muscovado sugar, and then one day I went down and the shop was closed! So I banged on the door, and he said 'oh Richard' he said, 'I'm really sorry' he says, 'but I've changed it all, it's all different, I don't do shop anymore I only do wholesale', I went 'oh really', [John Law] 'come up for lunch', so I came up for lunch, I said, 'well it that case I'll have a sack of oats, sack of brown rice, and a sack of, sugar!' And stuck it in the back of my van, and then took it up, and then I put a notice at the University¹, and then people started to come and buy, and someone in the house, called...can't remember his name, him and me went into business together, and what I did, was we had a little shop up the road, and as soon as my grant was in, that would go into the business, this is how we got the capital, I thought it was a very cunning plan, and then the shop would pay me, per week, they'd pay me back per week. The bank liked this so they also gave us a loan, I mean, for months we worked in the cellar in the house, and then our landlord said 'you can't carry on doing this', he was quite friendly about it, and people were queuing up at the doors, you know, and we were getting more and more stuff in, so we had this pokey little shop, and then we moved down to Sharrow Vale Road, and I had a partner called Chris [REDACTED] who I, couldn't stand [laughing] anyway...and, Chris decided to, I think it was Chris, Phil and me I

¹ University of Sheffield

think, Anni may have better memory of this. Anyway Chris decided to leave...what was? Oh it was Paul, Paul I had to buy out and that was horrible, because he wanted lots of money for me to buy him out, so I sorted all that out, that was my first partner, Chris came in, I don't think he put any money into the business, but I was really keen on this idea of workers' co-operatives, and so when Chris leaves, left, I think it must've been me and Phil decided to, turn it into, officially a workers' co-operative, and bring in more people.

[00:03:11]

That sort of made sense. I always say that the only good thing that Chris ever did, was to tell me when I interviewed Anni that I had made a mistake and that she is the one we should hire, and I think for the first time, a long time I actually believed what he said was the truth, I didn't, you may know him I don't know, but yeah, he's an interesting, he's still around, he's an interesting character. So yes, it's true I thought Anni was, I may have only looked like a hippy, but Anni really was a hippy. So it was me, Phil, Sally, Gem, and Anni, and we ran this co-operative, always looking to expand, we were looking to warehouse, I used to describe it as the first hippy shop in Sheffield, which it sort of was, and then we with, On the 8th Day, Alligator in York...we did this, and lots of others, we did a thing called the Federation of Northern Wholefood Collective, and we started having conferences, the first one I think was at Bottom Village, where we invited lots of doctors and, talking about the whole idea of care and, so we had themes, and then we decided to create a levy with all the shops, because the sort of the stated aim, was to create an environment, where one day, one day, even supermarkets will sell brown rice, I thought that was a very simple sort of statement, but when they did, we wanted to survive, so we wanted to be, have some control, we may be hippies but we weren't stupid [laughing] we wanted to have, some control, of the importing, so, you know Down to Earth started importing, and then selling on to other business, we started relationships with the Indian community in our area, good relationship where we started importing with them, because they'd be selling similar sort of items that we were, and then that just got sort of bigger, and then we'd start doing deals with shops, other shops and other businesses that were, and hire big trucks and, do this whole thing of one shop to another shop, it just got bigger and bigger and bigger, and more and more exciting really, in that way, does that, does that help you fill in a few things.

[00:05:57]

Yeah, and kind of when you said you really wanted to set up a workers' co-operative, why was that, what kind of experience had you had, that meant that, that was something you were interested in?

Oh, I'm not sure really. Yeah, I'd come, you know my Dad had a furniture factory, and when I left school I decided to take a year off and spend 6 months working at his business, and I was just curious about the boss, the incentives on the shop floor, the boss, and, you know worker relationship, which I thought was a bit bonkers really, I thought well if, you know, if they had a share in the business, they'd have much more creative input into it, and I think the business would be more successful you know, although some people really wouldn't want that, I mean they like **just** to go to work, you know, it was, screw a few screws, and go home without having any responsibility. Also inspired by John Lewis Partnership, which of course is sort of a workers' co-operative.

[00:07:09]

And what was your, can't say 'what was your experience in the worker co-op' but what do you remember really enjoying about it?

Oh I remember the major experience, was how we made decisions, which, was impossible, so I did this thing of going round, other co-operatives, I went to...or did I go? Oh! Certainly Alligator in York, I went to Infinity in Brighton, the one in Oxford, but I can't remember.

Oh is that Arjuna or, oh no that was Cambridge, Uhuru was it?

Uhuru! That's right, Uhuru in Oxford. And I'd work with them for a week, sharing ideas and thoughts, and then I'd have a little meeting and so the reason I'm really here to ask you one question, is how do you make decisions? I mean at one place they burst out crying I seem to remember, Infinity was in a terrible state, I mean I knew Peter Deadman, and Jenny, because, if you know who they were they started it, well Jenny was at school with my sister, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] quite a few co-ops that I went to see, for some businesses it's not appropriate, I wasn't this sort of bible bashing co-operative you've got to have a co-operative, I said, sometimes you know, it's just not the right business model for what you have here, and you've got to recognise that and work that through. I came back with an answer, which was, an interesting answer because what we had noticed, that decisions were being made at the lowest common denominator, in other words, the people who were 'oh, erm, umm, er, er not sure', were the ones that ended up making the decision because we'd go with their lack of clarity, so we created a system, whereby for example Sally would do the accounts for a month and I would be her assistant, and, the following month she would go onto ordering, and then I'd take over the accounts with Anni as my assistant, and so we were constantly re-learning, and then Sally would move on from ordering to something else, so we structured it, that we, sort of mentored each other in each other's roles, so we really understood the financial implications, the ordering implications, marketing etcetera etcetera so we weren't just in small cubby holes you know we were all constantly rotating our jobs and constantly rotating, because we were a small co-operative, and I felt that system really worked, yeah.

[00:10:37]

And so then for decision making, would it be whoever was, kindof, in charge of accounts for that month, would make the decision or?

No, we'd still have meetings but everybody in the room would understand what the person [laughing] who's talking about money is going on about you know, because there were some people who'd never done accounts before and they'd understand interest rates and loans and things like that because they'd been the accountant they may of had to go to the bank and started sorting stuff out, or you know let's, let's start importing a little bit more, you know they actually understood to a pretty high extent you know, what the implications of that is, because they had had that job, you know, so we started to be able to make, bigger and better decisions, and we, stopped the ummings and ahhings [laughing].

[00:11:30]

And was that something that you directly learnt then from the job rot[ation], so when you went to Alligator and to Infinity?

Yeah, no, no other co-operative was doing it, I mean basically they were crying and saying [incomp] but it gave me a lot of food for thought and I remember just thinking it through, thinking well, you know this is a major problem, for all co-operatives, and unless we find a way of cracking it we ain't going to survive, and this was my way of cracking it, I'm sure other co-operatives may have created other systems.

[00:12:05]

And you said that, when you went to some, I guess businesses, you knew that they wouldn't work as a worker co-operative, what sort of reasons were there for that, that you could?

They could be too small, they could be a small village, you know, very enthusiastic, could be a couple running it, very enthusiastic but wanted it to be a workers' co-op, I mean why bother? You know. I wasn't sure Infinity would work as a, because Infinity was very big I had no experience of quite big co-operatives they still are, do you know Infinity?

Yeah, I went down I actually spoke to Peter Deadman down there

Oh did you! How is he?

He's good, yeah.

I haven't seen him for a bit [laughing] great. It's fantastic that we've had this very long history, and I can't say I knew then Peter Deadman, I knew Jenny very well, so you know. It's great.

The links.

It is interesting links.

[00:13:00]

And how long were you at Down to Earth for?

[Exhales] That's interesting. Well I started it at University, so that was two years, and I stayed on for another two or three years I can't remember.

And did you see it change quite a lot in that time, in terms of structure or, how you worked?

Oh yes, you know we grew up. We stopped smoking dope during the week, and you may laugh at that but you know I remember us discussing it, seriously going, I don't find my work levels are good if I've smoked a joint the night before, so we made a commitment that we would not smoke, dope, or get drunk during the week, just, that's growing up, and that's learning, yeah, and just the idea of commercialism, we were quite political, so, you know we wouldn't I remember having long meetings about do we buy, apricots from Argentina, and there were lots of, and packaging you know, we didn't want, we had cellophane packaging and not plastic packaging and lots of scooping stuff and we constantly looked to refashion the shop, and rebuild it and change the bins, change the structure, change the look of it. The Argentinean thing was really quite exciting because, we decided, that there was no point not getting [apricots], but what we did is we produced a leaflet about what was happening in Argentina, which came with the apricots [laughing] and I remember the door being flung open by a woman going 'I don't want to know about politics when I buy my apricots!' and she threw them at us [laughing], she came back.

That's quite an extreme reaction [laughing]

It was a really extreme reaction, but you think, I thought it was really important you know, that we kept aware of, you know where our, you know, our idea was to make people aware of where the food was coming from. And me and Phil started doing talks around the local, basically Women's Guilds, which, was an eye-opener for us, you know we were dread[ful] I talked to Phil about this last year we, walking the North Downs Way, we were dreadful, this goes back to dope again [laughing], are you recording this? We were dreadful, I mean really, I mean so boring you just wouldn't be, and one day [laughing], we were in the car waiting to go in and Phil says, I'd forgotten about the joint but he reminded me about the joint 'let's have a joint', he says 'let's do this really differently Richard', I said, 'what do you mean?' he says, 'let's walk in and just say any questions, see what happens', I went 'yeah alright I'm up for that' [laughing] and it just changed, it was amazing, we walked in and said 'right, any

questions' and just stood there in silence to all these people. So I said, 'well one question you could ask for example is who are you?' They went 'who are you?' So I said, 'we're blah blah blah anymore?' and that led on to another question and that led on to another question, and we became so popular, you know, people were booking us right left and centre, because, it was novel, and also we talked about what they wanted to hear, we didn't talk at them, we talked with them. I remember one particular one [laughing] the South Anston's Women's Guild, just outside, I don't think, I even remember the name, and what we hadn't realised is that they were really in to workers' co-operatives, they'd been to Norton, do you know the Norton Motorbikes? Norton Motorbikes, there was a whole British government thing to get rid of the motorbike industry in this country, and Norton had a, workers buyout, they bought their own company, and it became quite a well know co-operative, you know South Anston Women's Guild had gone to Norton, they knew more about co-ops that me and Phil ever pretended we knew, and they [laughing] wiped the floor with us [laughing] in a very nice way, with their knowledge and understanding and their commitment and, they were very sweet with us and kind, because we were young lads really, but I just remember feeling mortally embarrassed, it just with their breadth of knowledge and passion and excitement yeah.

[00:17:38]

And did you have any, I guess that's a community link actually, but in terms of, where your shop was situated, did you kind of have, community links?

Yeah, it was exciting because, it was full of butchers, Sharrowvale Road, it's still there, if you want to drive past it, it's not a co-op anymore, because it became inappropriate, there we go, and the butchers rea[lly] didn't want us to move in when we first got there, and then spoke to me about a year later saying, we 'd like to say thank you for coming because you've really increased our business you know, more people came, and they were surprised and delighted, and yeah we had very good relationships, we had a, sponge shop next to us, and so, we commissioned the University to do a study on using natural sponge as tampons. And then we started selling this natural sponge thing, and so, and of course we could get them from , we had a deal with the sponge shop next door, and that was quite exciting, so we were constantly looking at the University, to see if we could develop projects and ideas, we did

have a, we did put money aside for community projects, and wanted to put so much money in to community projects every year.

[00:19:10]

Yeah, and this sort of reminded me because you said about the butchers shops, so, Down to Earth was vegan?

No, did we sell? Yeah we sold cheese and stuff.

But it was vegetarian, or not?

Yeah...that's a really good, I think it was yeah no it was vegetarian, yeah cheese had to be vegetarian, it was vegetarian.

And was that an active decision because of, members, kind of personal vegetarianism, or?

We didn't want it to be a deli. It never occurred to me. I wasn't a vegetarian until, a couple of years in, I remember going home and having a steak...I don't think we wanted to sell, I'm not sure, we would, I think if there was a good organic supply of meat that was locally grown, I think we probably would have seriously considered it. I think there would've been issues with the butchers, next door, there were about three or four butchers, and I wouldn't want to piss them off. And one time somebody gave us some land one year, and we started growing vegetables and things like that, that was an interesting experience, and Brick Rabbit, as Anni mentioned which was a restaurant. So we were always looking to expand, and have fun.

[00:20:51]

And did you ever expand in to, other shops, it was just the one shop wasn't it?

Well we looked to buy the warehouse behind us at one time, I can't, I think partly because of Suma happening, which wasn't called Suma then, we were worried that we wouldn't, be able to pay back the money, you know, we did look, there was a health food shop in the centre of Sheffield, which was vastly more expensive than us, and I did at one time posture the idea of,

of, opening a much more upmarket shop, same products but they look nicer, for more money, [laughing] no but, we had two shops at one time! Yes, I'd forgotten, we had a shop, was it at Crookesmoore? That's right, at one time, we had two shops, it didn't do a great deal of business, I think then we shut it down after a couple of years, and then it sort of struggled on a bit, yeah.

[00:22:01]

And why did you leave the co-op?

I was into, I had a theatre company. I was into, performing and acting. I decided I wanted to go to drama school, so I went on the buses in Sheffield, to earn as much money as I could in about six months, so I can afford to go to drama school, I went to London to go to drama school.

[00:22:26]

And you mentioned that after you left, Down to Earth, changed from being a worker co-op just to, a more conventional business.

Quite, quite some years later, I didn't keep a lot of contact with it, I heard it went through a sort of Marxist stage, and you know, they struggled, personnel wise, and then this guy sort of came in, and, sort of, bullied, he saw an opportunity, my understanding the story, I heard, and then sort of took it on and got rid of people and then, changed the, legal status of it, and I think, you know maybe, it needed it, I'm not, you know. It's still going, I think it's amazing, you know.

And then yeah, those are kind of all the main questions, but is there anything else that you feel that you kind of want to, go into?

No its, I mean what, what's your, general, brief? I don't really, what do you do with this?

With interviews, oh so what we do, in the end with this. So this will, it'll be transcribed, and then the aim is for it to go online, as the full recording.

Do you edit it?

We can edit it, so I'll send a transcription through and you can ask for bits to be taken out, and also yeah I'll edit out this bit and you know at the beginning where, we're just kind of chatting before the interview starts so yeah, I edit bits out.

It was a, I know one of the things it was a very exciting time, you know, we were, children of that generation where we really were looking to do things differently, I work at a school now and I remember a friend of mine who's sort of head of the Druids and things, with did this thing with the Sixth Form talking about our journey, and, you know kids these days take drugs for entertainment etcetera, but we, were sort of, or I'm sure lots of people took drugs for entertainment, but we were taking drugs really, to look at trying to do things differently, and trying to expand our minds, and our politics, and just, creating a different world, you know, and, I still believe that, but I don't take drugs anymore [laughing].

[00:24:49]

And do you feel your experience that you had working at Down to Earth has kind of, carried on through your later career?

Without a doubt yeah, really, much so. I think I sort of have a slight regret that I didn't, I mean I'm very happy with what I did, but I did like the idea of workers' co-operatives, and, the sentence I have which is the capital controls...the workers control the capital, and not the capital controls the workers, which for me just makes 100% sense...you know, and you need structures in place so you don't get corruption, you don't get, power hungry people trying to take advantage of those people who haven't got, who don't know how to have a good voice, you know so it's all those, things are important.

That's great, thank you. Is there anything else you wanted to...

I'm sure go away from here and thing ohhhhh!| I didn't tell her about this, I didn't tell her about that.

Well you can always send me an email, if there's anything kind of burning story you think of then, you can send it through and we can stick it in the transcript.

It was a great achievement, no I mean I'm not talking about me, but I mean, my contribution was more luck than anything, you know I just happened to have this happened, and this happened, and that happened...but it was an exciting time, not always 100% easy, but we were, you know, we even looked at buying a bakery at one time, things like that and, we were constantly on the look out [laughing] you know, great!

Thank you that's great.