SUDBERLANDIA
by
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Co-operatives Research
Case Study No. 3

Co-operatives Research Unit
The Open University
This publication is one of a series from the Open University's Co-operatives Research Unit. Formed in 1978, the Unit aims to develop research into co-operatives as well as providing advice, information and training aids. It is based in the Systems Group of the Open University which has been researching into Co-operatives since 1975, particularly, producer co-operatives and common ownership enterprises.

The Co-operatives Research Unit includes both teaching and research staff as well as research students, both full and part-time. Members of the Unit have been involved with the design of simulation games for Systems teaching and training for members of co-operatives, and helping co-operatives through action-research projects.

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PREFACE

My interest in workers co-operatives arose from a general interest in the theme of participation. As a freelance radio journalist the failure of Unit 58 offered me the possibility of a news item and a record of worker experience in a novel experiment. Tapes made at this time were submitted to the Systems Group of the Open University who had been conducting research on co-operatives. This led to a period of consultancy in which I observed Sunderlandia and Little Women.

This is one of a series of three case studies of co-operatives set up in the North East of England:

Case Study 1: Unit 58
Case Study 2: Little Women
Case Study 3: Sunderlandia

The three co-operatives are instances of businesses set up under Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM) rules. They are also linked through my friendship with Laurence Cockcroft, promoter of Unit 58 whose mentor was Robert Oakeshott, promoter of Sunderlandia who in turn encouraged Margaret Elliott to set up Little Women. They are also linked because they are all 'constructive' co-operatives: two set up by a promoter the other set up to meet the needs of a group of women.

In each case my intention has been to present a descriptive account of the events and the participants' perceptions of what was going on. Personalities introduced into the accounts are given further biographical treatment in later sections. In Little Women the workforce retains its real names, in Unit 58 and Sunderlandia the promoters keep their names but the identities of the rest of the workforce are disguised.
Although the Sunderlandia story includes some analysis and interpretation it must be stressed that the investigations were not conducted to 'test hypotheses' or elaborate a conceptual framework. My approach has been to try to tell the story from the point of view of the workforce. Members of Little Women have approved the account given of their enterprise, ex-members of Unit 58 and Sunderlandia have been consulted on the drafts of the manuscript and its interpretation.

UNIT 58
A printing firm set up to run co-operatively in Washington, then in County Durham, was visited on two occasions during 1975 when it was still in production. The main survey was, however, after closure in January 1976. The entire workforce of seven was taped recorded in interviews of one to two hours. These were semi-structured and concentrated on the theme of work satisfaction in what was a short lived experiment for the people involved.

Little information was gathered to provide a description of events in any detail. Two interviews were conducted in 1977 with a member of Unit 58 who subsequently set up a successful print business by himself in Sunderland. Laurence Cockcroft's own unpublished account of Unit 58 provided information on the business and financial organisation of the company.

LITTLE WOMEN
A food shop in Sunderland, this was observed in several ways over a period of two years from 1975 to 1977. Tape recordings with the women previous to opening concentrated on their expectations and
and their experience of activism of participation in their locality, their political and social values. Attendance at several planning meetings before the opening of the business allowed observation of the discussions which from the beginning took on the double function for the group of business and pleasure as they were held in a local pub. Renovation of the shop and stocking it previous to start-up continued this process of involvement and observation. In addition many days were spent working in the shop, once open, to relieve the women at times of sickness and crisis.

Business meetings of Little Women were attended on a regular basis during 1977 and notes taken. A full diary was kept of all visits and several social events as well.

SUNDERLANDIA

A building firm in Sunderland was observed between 1975 and 1977 with a few days of participant involvement as a plasterer's mate. Methods used again were semi-structured interviews with about 30 members of which some 12 were tape recorded. General meetings were observed from February 1976 to June 1977. I attended the Annual General Meeting of 1977 and the parties following that meeting and the AGM of the previous year.


There was no access to wage sheets for dates of employment and turnover of labour.
A diary was kept of all visits to the firm.

Two other written accounts of Sunderlandia exist, Robert Oakeshott's own account of Sunderlandia presents a regretful record of failure seen in the context of class hostility and the 'British disease' of apathy, anomie and poor productivity. There is also a brief account of the firm in David Watkins' Fabian Tract 455, prepared for ICOM. This describes the major problem of the co-operative as the opportunism of transient workers who influenced the General Meetings against the long term interests of the firm. The final solution to invest £500 from each member of the surviving workforce is described as "precluding the wrecking of the company by itinerants."

This account seeks to redress the balance by emphasizing the perceptions of the workforce and their responses to events in the firm's history.

I am grateful to my colleagues in the Co-operatives Research Unit for their assistance and advice both during the fieldwork and in preparing the three case studies for publication. I am indebted to those in the co-operatives who gave me their time and confidences.

Eirlys Tynan,
Walton Hall,
SUNDERLANDIA - ABSTRACT

The case study provides a summary of events in the history of Sunderlandia, a building co-operative set up in Sunderland in 1975 which by 1977 was introducing ideas of traditional management.

It concentrates on the perceptions and reminiscences of the workforce and gives their experience of this experiment in co-operation. Biographies of the characters are included to provide contextual information.

The study describes the ideas which informed the setting up of the co-operative, its structure and the composition of its workforce. Issues raised concern the apparent conflict between new working methods and the necessity for economic competence and effectiveness; the conflict between different expectations and rewards sought by participants from different backgrounds.

These arose against the background of general economic recession, more acutely in the building industry. A major enterprise in the purchase of land, design and sale of houses failed to establish a viable base for the company. It is seen as one instance of the poor skills and inexperience on the part of management, operating as it did in this co-operative in a tentative and defensive manner.

The author concludes that while many causes of the economic failure of the co-operative may be found in the exigencies of the building trade the 'democratic' failure of Sunderlandia lay in the lack of
skills of those involved to devise proper processes of government
and the lack of time or motivation to develop them.

The costs to the working class involved in this experiment is
assumed by the author to outweigh the benefits.

The study concludes with a discussion of the power struggles, the
stress involved in changing methods and organisational roles, the
lack of adequate channels of communication and the ideology of
coop-eration as a mechanism of control. This is seen to result
in the sacrifice of self interest on the part of the workforce
with no recompense in areas of competence and control.

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A: It's not different. It's worse.

I. ORIGINS

(i) The Promoters

The promoters of Sunderlandia were a financial journalist, Robert Oakeshott, a design architect, Michael Pearce and a technician in the petro-chemical industry, Peter Smith.

From his experience of education in Africa Oakeshott returned to the UK enthused with the idea of introducing social change through the workplace; a major emphasis would be on the training of young people in democratic values.

Pearce, who had previously been a practising architect in Zambia was primarily interested to use his training in a firm where innovation and responsiveness to social need would be encouraged. He was less committed to common ownership than was Robert Oakeshott.

While Oakeshott was a former Liberal candidate and Pearce had been involved in radical politics in Africa, Peter Smith's interest was more directly political. He had been involved in trade union politics and he saw participation in a democratically run firm as a means of raising political conciousness.

Smith was the sole promoter with a background in industry of any kind and the only one from the working class.
Although Pearce's work was related, none of the promoters had any experience of the building trade.

(ii) **Aims and Objectives**

These three promoters met during 1972 to pool their ideas and to formulate a building firm called Sunderlandia.

Results of a survey suggested that Sunderland was a suitable site. It was the fifth largest town on the North East coast with a significant youth employment problem. Recruiting from these young people would satisfy the aims of the company a) to give education in new approaches to work and b) to alleviate a social problem in the town. Youths given work and trained in democracy would learn trades and service the community. The revitalisation of old housing stock was an area in which security of employment should be possible. A good basic wage would be offered in a relaxed work atmosphere.

It was recognised that changing traditional work attitudes was a long term process of which training the apprentices formed the core. On a ratio of about 4:1 tradesmen they were to start their time with 6 weeks at Wearside College of Further Education. In the firm they would be supervised by tradesmen of 'foreman' quality who would have time put aside for this purpose. This concept had precedence in the 'apprentice master' schemes of the 1940s. Reference to Sunderland's Public Works Department noted that an apprentice could be productive after one year.
The new venture was then to emerge in an area of high un ­employment and one where apprenticeships were valued as a ticket to security; it was to operate in a trade of traditional casual labour, a 'gypsy' trade in the words of one of the promoters. It would offer new ideas of self­management and responsibility in a trade which was poorly organised even in conventional trade union terms and to a population which was culturally depressed and interpreted its political participation in terms of traditional support for the Labour Party.

(iii) Constitution

While Peter Smith favoured some kind of management structure which could be 'grown into', Oakeshott and Pearce felt it would distract from the objective of creating attitudes of self­management and motivation of the workforce if this was presented fait accompli by the promoters.

The constitution embodied in the Articles of Association was that of a single tier company in which ultimate control of the enterprise lay with all established members of the workforce voting in a General Meeting. Membership was provisional on a three month probationary period. Apprentices were eventually included in the franchise despite the opposition of most of the tradesmen.

The promoters sat on the Board of Directors by right but after
the first Annual General Meeting would find themselves in a minority and after the third would be phased out in favour of worker representatives elected by a General Meeting.

(iv) Finance

Starting capital was provided by fixed interest loan stock subscribed in part by the promoters, but also by outside sympathisers and friends. Of more direct interest to the workforce was the provision in the Articles for loanstock to be contributed by the members. While the equivalent of six months salary was considered suitable, a general meeting in 1974 was able to arrange that £1.00 per week be deducted from each wage. This was regarded with some anxiety by the workforce.

Excluding apprentices, the Articles laid down that differentials should not exceed 2:1. Wage rates of a comparatively high level for tradesmen were intended to avoid the bonus system, considered by the promoters and some tradesmen to be an unfortunate aspect of conventional payments in the building trade.

Sunderlandia was a trade union firm.

Profits were to be allocated on a basis of 20% to charity, 40% reinvested in the firm and 40% divided between individual members.

In the event of liquidation, loanstock members had priority.
Business Plans

Local Government policies appeared to require the services of builders. The Sunderland Corporation's Handbook for Industrial Developers showed a Cumulative Expenditure Programme of nearly £50 million; the annual programme to the end of March 1972 was shown as £12,785,152. The preponderant expenditure was shown to be Amenity Improvement of Existing Houses: £4,690,000.

Sunderlandia's workforce expected to take part in that programme.

Sunderlandia's aspirations looked promising. Although Sunderland's direct labour force was very large in 1973/74 they were largely committed to new developments. This left the competitive field open to the small builder. As a slightly larger than average size firm, Sunderlandia spanned the gap between the one to two men outfits and the larger private building firms. Demand outstripped capacity and Sunderlandia did submit tenders locally but found it always missed the list. Peter Smith attributes this to hostility on the Executive of the local authority and in the Labour Party. Newcastle and Gateshead, however, offered work as did clients from the Institution of Landlords and Church Authorities. By 1975/76 Sunderlandia's turnover was in excess of £250,000.

Plans existed for a joinery shop in the yard to construct doors, windows and perhaps find an outlet in the market for camping equipment.
A housing association was also envisaged which would run as an agency of the firm to fund work with poor people of the locality. Neither of these schemes materialised.

Discussion between the promoters and the original tradesmen had centred primarily on the structure of the company and questions of organisation and principle. The search for work had been neglected and when with a workforce of three promoters, a dozen tradesmen and nearly 50 apprentices the company opened for trading in 1973 they had nothing on the order books.

At the outset Michael Pearce was on £65 with Robert Oakeshott and Peter Smith on £50. The tradesmen started at £45 and after some months of trading losses, that rate was introduced for everyone. By 1977 Sunderlandia's rate of £70 per week was still considered fair but relative to the rest of the building trade it had lost ground.

The intention to concentrate on revitalisation of old property anticipated government policies to fund this but also left the firm largely dominated by local government work with its attendant bureaucratic pauses. Improvement grants were actually reduced in mid 1974 from 75% to 50%.

The start-up training scheme had cost the firm about £7,000.

During the period 1973-1977 the only financial aid offered Sunderlandia was a grant from Industrial Common Ownership Finance (ICOF) of over £1,000 and a sum from the Government to
purchase machinery for a joinery shop. This latter was tied to a proviso that the lathe be in use and after failure to exploit this part of the business the firm was faced with demand to refund a percentage of the grant.

Loans had been made from Scott Bader, the East Midlands Housing Association and Rowntree. By 1977 one promoter had mortgaged his property and several friends had lent money to the firm; despite this Sunderlandia was never able to recoup the losses of the first five months.

In the opinion of an ex-member of Sunderlandia, the attitude that "the bulk of skilled workers when they know they can do a job, look on a gaffer as someone who gets in the way" would seem to indicate fruitful ground for autonomous working and democracy. But in 1977 an Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM) advisor reviewed the firm and found not even a system of simple accounting; his report recommended the introduction of a conventional hierarchy of management.

Although turnover and absenteeism were not, in that instance, noticeably worse than in other firms the workforce was down to under 20.

The 1977 Annual General Meeting heard its chairman summarise the social aspects of working at Sunderlandia. "An initial enthusiasm for the company had turned to a nightmare."
This next section will consider the progress of things to this state of affairs.

II  HISTORY OF THE COMPANY

(i)  Economic, Major Contracts, Recession in Industry

The first six months work was primarily in modernization of Sunderland's typical one storey cottages. Thirty or so cottages were completed.

A contract to modernise twenty terraced houses at Newfield, in County Durham was won before the end of 1973 as a result of negotiations with the East Midlands Housing Association and before public monies were curtailed.

Three contracts to build large, new vicarages for the Church Commissioners near Sunderland provided most of the work from early 1974 to 1975.

From mid 1975 to 1977 the firm was involved in three more contracts to modernise old property for local government at Gateshead and Benwell, both suburbs of Newcastle upon Tyne.

During its four years of trading the clients of Sunderlandia were mainly the Church Commissioners, architect friends and the local government. Architect Michael Pearce noted ruefully that the principles of the firm appeared to attract contracts
from vicars and councillors; a zone of influence that was mildly missionary and welfare in character but not the hard world of competitive market which is where a firm based on the belief in effort and self sufficiency might have expected to prove itself.

One project conceived and executed entirely by the firm was however achieved. This was the design and construction of eleven new houses at Ryope just south of Sunderland. The Laburnam scheme offered spaciousness and design at a reasonable price and householders who moved in during 1977 expressed satisfaction and pleasure with their homes. The method of financing this project was such however that the firm experienced severe cash flow problems.

While this was a bold and imaginative venture financial arrangements went awry from the beginning. An estimated profit of £45,000 would have wiped out all debts and set the firm up but was translated into a severe cash flow problem.

Initially the land was purchased with what should have been a £12,000 ICOF loan which was to be repaid pro rata on the sale of each property. The security deed which would have given ICOF interim ownership of the land was, however, never drawn up. The reasons for this concern the informal nature of contact between ICOF and the promoters of Sunderlandia.
The land was purchased actually out of cash flow and Robert Oakeshott's uncle guaranteed the civil work. Proceeds of sales then reverted to cash flow but by 1977 this was extremely tight and the firm had £70,000 tied up in the scheme.

In financial terms, the history of the firm showed that Sunderlandia failed to profit on those major revitalisation schemes which formed the bulk of its work.

When interviewed in July 1977 Pearce claimed that intractable factors such as bad weather were far more influential than democratic processes on the firm's performance. He also noted a latent hostility locally in that overtures from Sunderlandia were not welcomed; there was no generosity "there's always been an answer for me and one for a local person. I always get an official answer, never get a compromise.'

Whatever the external conditions, internal matters of the company were complicated and confused. A report 'Social Account of Sunderlandia' by Peter Smith in March 1974 looked back regretfully on the failure of one part of the firm's intentions. The apprentice population had been too large for tradesmen to deal with and their numbers had caused some imbalance in the firm. In a drive to reduce costs and make a profit, unsuitable apprentices were purged before Christmas 1973. The end of 1975 and the Summer of 1977 saw a subsequent weeding out of the trainee force.
Smith's recommendations were for training and information within the firm and for organisation and management of structure, planning and job description.

In November 1974 Robert Oakeshott and Michael Pearce went to the East Midlands Housing Association to study estimating cost accounting, stock control procedures, etc., and the company, at a Board Meeting, defined four roles for its non-producers:

1. Co-ordination of production, manpower and sites: contracts, Manager position - D. Ransom

2. Transport, materials supply, plant and equipment - Peter Smith

3. Tendering, estimating new work: technical design - Michael Pearce

4. Finance, accounts and wages - Robert Oakeshott

Attempts to learn how to manage came across many unforeseen obstacles and the firm experienced tumultuous times.

In 1974 a plumber on the Newfield site was fired. He filed a claim against the firm for unfair dismissal and Sunderlandia was ordered to pay £500 compensation.

Robert Oakshott who was increasingly unpopular with an active group of members failed to be re-elected to the Board and by March 1975 the firm was being run by its first complement of directors from the membership. They were shortlived and after
six months four of them left the company. Michael Pearce was returned to the Board with Peter Smith in 1976, but Smith himself was soon to leave the company, staying in contact as an advisor and out of interest.

In 1977 turnover of the Board was embarrassing to Michael Pearce; no sooner had one signature been approved for the bank than a resignation would cancel it. In two years the Board saw twelve directors come and go within the firm.

When in the Spring of 1977 Bun Bunnett arrived at Sunderlandia to analyse their ailments he noted there was no morning assembly point at which to itemise the events of the day. The notice board in the office that in 1973 had been covered in slogans, wherein Rousseau and Marx kept company with Eliot remained but four years later it presented a fossilised propaganda. The condition of the board in the hallway reflected a meagre and apathetic response.

Peter Smith in an interview in 1977 looked back on three years of leadership vacuum and 'almost a state of anarchy'.

So the firm which began trading in 1973 with a working capital of £56,000, fixed capital of £15,000 had by June 1975 at the Annual General Meeting reported a net loss of £1,411. By December 1976 the Annual General Meeting showed a net loss for the previous 18 months of £13,887. The workforce had reduced to 30 with a dozen or so of the original apprentices remaining.
In his address of the Summer 1977 the Chairman of the Board admitted that there would appear to have been more conflict at Sunderlandia than in conventional firms. He found it inexplicable. Several reasons were offered by the workforce and are related in subsequent sections.

(ii) Recession in the Industry

The Building NEDC in 1974 predicted a slump in the construction industry of 6% in 1975.

Home improvement was seen as a means to 'beat the recession', Labour MP Frank Allaun in November 1975 was recommending the killing of two birds with one stone - namely unemployment and poor housing stock. But government monies were curtailed so the graphs of building activity recorded a peak in 1973 which fell during 1975 and 1976 by 70%.

Access to building society funds were still relatively limited to upper incomes and cash was not forthcoming there for the majority of the population in Sunderland.

A builder in Hertford reported in 'Building', cited the biggest responsibility of a local builder was to keep his workforce intact. Cash flow was more important than profitability; smaller firms were advised to diversify, price all enquiries, speculate, advertise, employ freelance estimators and price sharply for quick jobs. Failure was in his opinion always the result of bad management.
A report comparing US and UK workers productivity found the British construction worker to suffer from very low morale, strikes were more common abroad but absenteeism was prevalent in the UK. This was due often to insecurity or work which meant that workers moved elsewhere and heavy onus was put on management to improve its labour relations.

While the general outlook was gloomy home improvement still remained a possible area for survival, especially as energy saving and extension work was required by many home-owners.

"We were totally inebriated with idealism."

(iii) 'Honeymoon'

Originally, the experience of working at Sunderlandia was exhilarating for pushing and ambitious men such as Terence Wright: "You felt you were going somewhere. At least you were appreciated even though there was this conflict - the atmosphere was great on some jobs but on other jobs the atmosphere was terrible. The conflict was because his reasoning of how the firm would be run was completely different to yours."

The 'good atmosphere' was one in which men who wanted to succeed worked hard and in good humour and where "you had to think about work at home and had to justify yourself and your opinions". Mostly he regretted that Sunderlandia had never prospered and offered him an opportunity to learn how to manage a site, to prove his ability.
(iv) **Crisis and Demoralisation**

The dismissal of the apprentices brought on a pervasive despondency that the firm never shook off. The apprentices were taken originally from the Labour Exchange and in the local culture an apprenticeship was a ticket to some kind of security. One promoter is reported to have stayed the night in the office and wept after the decision to make the first group redundant.

The Newfield site on which Andy White, the plumber who filed for unfair dismissal, worked was at one point on the verge of a strike. According to a co-ordinator: "It was like walking into San Quentin, they were insulted when I asked them to work."

The Board member working on that site refused to testify publicly against White. The one who delivered the notice on White suffered a stroke soon after and has never worked since. Jones described a long period of conflict and attrition that affected people's health.

It signalled the end of a series of experiments in working practice. The morale of the workforce, in the words of a labourer: "This knocks your plug - gives you a sickness."
(i) Apprentice Training

After the initial 6 week course designed for them the apprentices were on paid day release to attend college for three years. Their attendance was increasingly reluctant and this was one criterion for establishing their suitability to be kept on. The large number had, however, in the ratio of 3.5:1 proved too difficult to deal with. The tradesmen had neither the capacity nor the inclination to take on this additional burden. Unoccupied apprentices fell more and more to labouring or being idle. At Newfield they played football, and the site took on the character of carnival.

Oakeshott's report of January 1974 following the initial purge of numbers expressed disappointment at the rate of training and suggested that perhaps taking on people at the age of 18 made them slower to adopt the proper skills. An apprentice who survived the full term and had taken considerable interest in the running of the firm was convinced that inefficiency was the main cause for failure and that the apprentices always represented an easy excuse for incompetence.

As the largest group initially, the apprentices were also the focus for different interests which will be examined in Section IV.
(ii) **Flexibility**

The concept of 'flexibility' was the one devised originally to try and eliminate the need for labourers. Clearing up would be done voluntarily by men who had their own firm's interest at heart. In practice the difficulty of supervising the large number of apprentices meant that the habit grew of using underemployed young people as labourers. This led to despondency and hostility. When labourers were finally brought into the firm they were paid rates that conflicted with those existing and a wage structure evolved that was contradictory and inconsistent.

The policy of 'flexibility' would seem to have worked well in the early days as Alex Jones would have it "before the honeymoon ended". But men were ambivalent about the policy. While they might welcome an escape from the confines of their own trades it was within these that they had recognition and identity by tradition. The young men found a kind of enrichment in labouring, but were more likely to regard 'dirty' work with distaste. For the older men especially, the prospect of doing their own labouring was intimidating. A plasterer, Geoff Princes felt he should not be expected to mix his own plaster; his sense of dignity and his health went against it.

Peter Smith's Social Report regretted the 'hierarchy' of trades where plasterers and bricklayers vied for importance. These approaches were the result often of long traditions in the trade resulting from bargaining for a wage. They were, in the case
of Sunderlandia, unlikely to be shifted without some positive reward being offered in their stead.

A July 1974 Board Meeting revealed that Peter Smith was convinced that a flexibility clause needed to be placed in the contract 'the objective being to ensure that small groups of people would not regard general labouring as abuse'.

Robert Oakeshott regularly filled skips and one architect member of the firm, a friend, left a managing position in the firm as a result of tension and distrust and laboured full-time for some months.

Unpaid voluntary work at weekends was sometimes suggested by the promoters in the early days when they still dared. It was not a successful scheme: "For nowt? You've got to be a cracker!"

Members of the firm were found, by one labourer who joined on a temporary basis in 1977 to be slightly more willing than in other firms of his experience to 'muck in', but as economic success became more and more remote the workforce increasingly resented stepping outside their own patch.
Co-ordinators

The concept of 'co-ordinator' was one devised to replace the traditional foreman figure. While the 'co-ordinator' could be an apprentice he was more likely to be a tradesman who volunteered to take on the organisation of a site. Ideally, a bricklayer would take on the early stages of co-ordinating to be succeeded by a joiner. The co-ordinator represented someone who had a sense of responsibility and wished to take an active role in company affairs. If he was a tradesman he combined this with that of training apprentices, working on site and labouring when necessary.

Towards the end of 1976 the Chairman of the Board of Directors bemoaned the lack of enthusiasm in the workforce, it was increasingly difficult to get volunteers, traditional methods of encouragement were ideologically embarrassing and discussion centred on what incentive to offer. A scheme mooted in September 1976 offering time off in lieu of payment was never taken up: "Time off is no good. It only makes it worse to come back".

However, the promise of equality, the rhetoric that potential leaders were needed and the desire of the men to prove themselves led many tradesmen and even one apprentice to take on the role of co-ordinator. It was a complex task and one in which the apprehension of the workforce found their focus. One ex-member interviewed in 1977 described the problem in this way:

He would be given responsibility for a site and this led to his being involved with plans, drawings and spending time in the
cabin doing paper work and using the phone. This relative comfort was interpreted by some of the workforce as a form of skiving, an attempt to 'get off the tools' and into the office. "Strictly it was a clerk of the works office."

His willingness to share information led to his giving people plans and drawings. These would be lost or destroyed, inadvertently, and he would be embarrassed in his meetings with clients and inspectors. Some of these meetings were of interest to the workforce who felt entitled to join in on discussions. He reported that the clients mostly were not interested to debate with the workforce.

Altogether he found the assumption of responsibility harassing enough but combined with the perpetual questioning and criticism from some men he found it intolerable.

The combination of a resentment of authority: "You canna tell me what to do" - and his own self-consciousness - "In the cabin I would be clean. The lads would come in scruffy, terrible. I was clean. I used to go and fill a skip to get dirty." - proved overwhelming and he left the company as a result of the stress he experienced which was compounded by the attitude of the workforce and the context of incompetence in which he had to perform.
(iv) **Amateurs in the Office**

Part of the ideology of the firm was that skills would be shared, men would be trained. The line between management expertise and worker manual skill would be obliterated. In the matter of estimating this was attempted by various of the middle class members for about two years. An outsider with expertise of this work was then brought into the company. One ex-member, a bricklayer, remembers with bitterness that while the promoters and their friends could have that time in which to fail there was no opportunity or time given to a member of the workforce, like himself, who would have been happy to learn the skill. Some estimating had been done on a part-time consultant basis but was found to be unsatisfactory.

The man appointed to do the estimating was later lost to the firm, as he combined the role with that of a co-ordinator and here met with hostility and criticism from the workforce who regarded his time in estimating as time spent in the office away from the sites and in comfort. In the last year or so the firm was again relying on an outside consultant.

One member of the middle class who ran the supplies section extremely well was however handicapped by his lack of knowledge of the terminology of the trade. This vocabulary and the Northern accent gave him difficulties which were probably exaggerated by members who resented his position there: "A con man. I have to work for my coppers."
Defective trusses and lack of damp course were stories circulated to prove that, even when highly qualified, some members seemed incapable of doing the job right. It led to contempt and insecurity.

(v) Democratic Control

While Sunderlandia experimented in the variety of jobs to ensure production it was also attempting to devise new modes of democratic control.

The Board

The function of the Board was at once mixed and confusing. While it professed to be democratic and 'anti-management' in the conventional sense it needed those powers of action and decision that were associated with management. When the Board was accused of arbitrariness the retort was that management needed to make on the spot decisions. Latterly Pearce and Pattison were in the office, on the phone, in touch with clients and suppliers and obliged to respond quickly and on their own initiative.

The common assumption expressed in the firm was that when men aimed for white collar positions they were after power. As the information centre is in the office, the work there is usually less onerous and there exists time for politicking and the forming of 'cliques' it seems a not unreasonable assumption that this is the case. Members who had served on the board were convinced in some instances that the body was controlled by an inner group
who met beforehand to decide key issues and attitudes to adopt etc. It was known as the 'Railway Board' after the Railway Tavern.

While good news is welcome, accounts of financial loss are not. Such was the effect of months of loss that even when information was available the workforce asked not to hear it. Added to the punitive effect of these records the men were never convinced that they had been properly made up nor that they could understand them.

When it was disclosed that one contract had been priced for 1% profit, according to one co-ordinator: "People lay down. What's the good?" In this frame of mind it was perhaps unsurprising that the contract lost thousands which might have been saved had morale been better. The financial accounts and the discussions that arose from them never seemed to be able to locate the error nor remedy the situation. The men resented the assumption that they were to blame. They replied that they were doing as much as they reasonably could be expected to do so on site and the fault must lie in the office.

Gradually, pleas were made for a proper management structure. These were discussed at length but always regretted as a contradiction of the principles of the company.
Areas of Responsibility

Efforts at creating a kind of management structure had been made by the Board in the 'areas of special responsibility', these were areas in which Board members expressed an interest and willingness to assume overall direction.

One apprentice was interested to take minutes and be Information Officer. A bricklayer was interested to assume responsibility for the vehicles in the firm. Alex Jones looked after Personnel issues. This appears to have worked well.

Jones took an interest in the home conditions of apprentices who were disruptive and unhappy. Efforts to find work for one boy who did not fit in were successfully made. Several members who fell sick were treated with generosity and sympathy. The co-ordinator who suffered a stroke was paid £3.75 a week for a year by the firm. Jones' interest in this kind of 'social work' probably made Sunderlandia more generous to those less able to look after themselves.

Several members, as Transport Managers, undertook to be responsible for the firm's vehicles and overlook petrol consumption and mileage records.

In general, however, the 'areas of special responsibility' were admitted by those who took them on as having failed. People resigned or became inactive and latterly this was ascribed to Pearce's determination to have full control. His countermanding of individuals' initiatives eventually confused and frustrated them.
Meetings

When interviewed in 1976 and 1977 General Meetings were held once a month, Board Meetings twice a month. Production Meetings were every Thursday morning in the office and Site Meetings with clients once a month.

It was not discovered how agendas were composed but meetings at that time were generally attended by about half a dozen of the workforce. During the apprentice back pay issue they attended in some numbers.

According to an ex-member, the general meetings in the past had in his opinion been largely ineffective as people were only interested in the possibility of wage increases. He found the level of interest in influence or democracy descended through the trades to the labourers, who expressed little interest.

Another ex-member remembers Board of Director's Meetings as being dominated by an alliance between the promoters and a 'clique' of worker directors, and agendas so composed that by ten at night Item 1 might still be unresolved. For men who had to be in the yard early the next day this represented a late night and a frustrating one. They were also rowdy and uncontrolled. A fresh venue in the Arts Centre attempted to separate beer from business.
Records of meetings from 1975 seem to show that there was considerable apathy; a motion carried would often have as many abstentions or votes against as votes for. The election of Mick Pearce to the Board in 1976 was hung until a deciding vote was cast. That vote was Robert Oakeshott's.

**Tradesmen Meetings**

Another kind of meeting emerged briefly during the firm's history. This was the tradesmen meeting, and it evolved in response to fears by profit minded tradesmen that what they saw as the combination of the democratic bulk of the apprentice force and the inexperience of the promoters might tilt the firm into failure. These meetings were remembered by Jones as horror shows of arrogance and raised tempers. They were remembered by an unambitious and older tradesman as excellent and orderly as they were also in Smith's Social Report of 1974. The topics they discussed were working relations, flexibility, overtime, holidays and pay. Proposals were sent to the General Meeting and decisions from there went to the Board.

These meetings were an attempt by one powerful tradesman to link control of the job with control of the firm by exercising tradesman skills and they successfully challenged the Board, but when the presiding Chairman of the Tradesmen Meetings lost an election to the Board he became apathetic and meetings under him discontinued.
Latterly, Production Meetings set up by Pearce at the Benwell site to expedite the last major contract in revitalisation were found similarly to impinge on the prerogatives of the Board to manage. Pearce's position on both, however, left his influence intact.

One apprentice who took minutes at the Board Meetings for several years never successfully analysed the problems of control and communication, he tended to sympathise with Mick Pearce and regretted the rough handling he had from the workforce. A free flow of information is always problematic where business discretion is required, Sunderland was a small world and not automatically friendly to new approaches from people of 'another world'. The enterprise was regarded as spectator sport by some and the embarrassment of its problems made for sensitivity on questions of internal policy.

Nevertheless, the impression of men interviewed in the Summer of 1977 was that they had been duped, not only by the promoters but by the collaboration with them of their power and status seeking colleagues from the workforce. They interpreted the action of the Board as that of a self-interested clique.

In view of the fact that Mick Pearce was mortgaged to the firm, as was his sister, it was no surprise to the workforce that he felt entitled to protect his interests. What they regretted was the manner in which it had all been done; that the management had appeared to close the door to the sharing with the workforce of any common interests that might have developed.
At the Annual General Meeting of 1977 and ex Board member who professed to have joined the firm in the hopes of making a lot of money attended merely in order to state publicly that the name Sunderlandia be taken off the vans and that of Mick Pearce be put in its stead.

The question of money, influence and ownership is bound up with that of class, education and privilege and will be discussed in Section IV (ii).

IV POWER AND CONFLICT

(i) Suspicion and Distrust

Whatever the reason offered it is generally admitted by both observers and members of co-operatives that a high level of conflict exists in them. Robert Oakeshott's account of Sunderlandia suggests that the interpretation put on 'democracy' was a libertarian one. One member of the workforce spoke of the 'hatred' let loose. He described it as a force which would seek any focus and once deprived of that would go on to find another. Observations in this and other co-operatives suggest that the promise of a new deal seems to result in an increased competitiveness and that this jostling spirit is perhaps the result of the workforce viewing the company as a set of resources and as an arena in which to vie for power, status, goods and services.
Perks

One trivial source of conflict was the matter of perks.

The firm's vans could be used at the weekends by those interested in 'jobbing'. These were not the majority but they were active and pushing. Demands for new vehicles were made, suspicion about petrol consumption led to envy and hostility. The strict keeping of a mileage chart by the Transport Manager eventually fell into disuse when he gave up the responsibility but the episode fed antagonism between members.

Scrap metal, traditionally a compensation for dirty work done outside the confines of trade, was commandeered by the firm. Complaints about this led to the allowance that at least proceeds from sale of scrap could go to a fund which would buy meat and poultry at Christmas for the workforce. This only happened once, apparently, and then under pressure of shortage of monies the firm demanded the scrap for the firm. This was interpreted as a form of niggardliness and men surreptitiously hid the scrap and took it independently to the merchants.

When the estimator brought into the firm was paid expenses for the use of his own car it was felt to be a matter for discussion by the Board. The manner in which this was dealt with was however not a business like one. It was treated as a matter of personal malice and relayed as such by one promoter and so caused personal antagonism between the member who raised the issue and the estimator. Self-interest of this kind could
always be cited as lack of support for 'common ownership' which became a convenient way of condemning one another and creating antagonism.

Training

The opportunity to increase or change skills was one which the firm offered in its emphasis on training and education. In practice this was never done systematically. Those who applied were considered by the Board. Alex Jones' ambition to learn bookkeeping was regarded with suspicion by the workforce. They argued that as an experienced joiner he was needed on site production. He may have hoped to join the Institute of Building Managers in three or four years and the workforce resented this. "He'd like to work in a tax office" was the remark made about another aspiring member.

It was always difficult to reconcile the ambivalence expressed in common ownership ideology - that of being motivated for the group but behaving as if for the self. Ambition and preferment supposedly went against the grain and yet the activity and dynamism associated with these were also the energy that the collective appeared to need. The remarks made seldom showed any sense of how individual training might benefit the group. It was always seen as an individual struggle to get on.

While Mick Pearce and Robert Oakeshott went to East Midlands Housing Association to learn skills and there was no sense in
which they could be considered trained during the time they spent there, nevertheless it was indicative that the tradesmen were not chosen to accompany them.

Hiring and Firing

The firm was also seen as a resource in terms of jobs for the boys. In February 1975 a letter signed by the site members at Newfield asked about the hiring of one particular worker. This arose from the hiring of a joiner, felt to be a personal associate of a member of the Board. The Newfield site generated many problems, not least the question of control over hiring and firing. In April 1975 Michael Pearce saw fit to allow the joiners as a group to hire joiners and this was presumably some concession to membership feeling.

If competition for 'scarce goods' can be seen as fuelling the conflict so too can the anxiety arising from the disturbance of traditional roles and values.

Apprentices and Tradesmen

The large ratio of apprentices to tradesmen generated tension. The proposal to train people in these numbers diluted the skills of the tradesmen by implication. "Any silly person can become a joiner" recognised that, under optimum conditions and with some coherence, the skills of joinery are not mysterious but the implication at Sunderlandia was that the status and bargaining that attends length of training, admission to the fraternity, etc. was undermined.
More importantly, the extension of the franchise to the apprentices meant that they were democratically the most powerful group. When three co-ordinators from the Newfield site were elected to the Board the weight of apprentice representation was felt to be overwhelming. The co-ordinators in question were watched by active profit minded tradesmen and found to be supine and passive on the Board.

The Tradesmen Meetings described above were in part to offset the preponderance of untrained opinion which the apprentices' franchise represented.

Education
The apprentices were not only courted for their voting power but Peter Smith's intention was to educate them politically and in the facts of industrial life. In this he offended certain tradesmen who felt that the firm was becoming communist. 'Communism' was seen as sinister, undesirable and foreign. Smith's account of the firm in 1974 notes a clash between a 'provocative' tradesman and Oakeshott, the outcome of which was some questions to be answered: one, "Is Sunderlandia a communist organisation?". The notion that Oakeshott could be suspected of being a communist raised doubts as to the underlying causes of the clash as well as to the tradesmen's understanding of the term.

Oakeshott's manner was offensive to several tradesmen, he was accused of talking at length and in high-faluting terms in order to mystify the Board members.
Compatibility

A twist in the apprentices' tale was supplied by Peter Smith. As acrimony and recrimination led to accusation of inadequacy and the apprentices were the focus for weeding out processes, it was suggested by Smith that if the trainees were to be sorted into suitable and unsuitable, then the tradesmen should also take a compatibility test - compatibility with the aims of the company.

This was not felt to be appropriate by the tradesmen and the test was not devised; another circumstance where the collective burdened its members with matters for judgement which would normally be the responsibility of management.

(ii) Class, Interests, Values

Oakeshott's account of Sunderlandia regrets the hostility and class attitudes which pervaded the firm. In the absence of any recognition that the middle class might exhibit hostility this analysis leaves the working class in a somewhat ridiculous posture. Why were they hostile? It seems that the workforce came almost to a man to distrust the motives of the middle class involved in Sunderlandia. The least offensive interpretation was that they were people with money playing games.

A strongly worded criticism came from an ex-member who resented the implied paternalism of the middle class promoters approach
which he saw as: "These working people don't know...like blacks in Africa...have to be led...need to be taken by the hand...we must excuse their bad behaviour."

There maybe was laxity in discipline. It was certainly difficult for working men to step over into management roles and make their own members work harder for less or give them the sack. However, the criticism made here is that the acceptance of lower standards reflected in some subtle way the promoters' own assessment of working people and their capabilities.

This was an affront to this particular member because of his temperament which was driving and ambitious. It was felt less harshly by others but they recognised its existence, nevertheless.

Apart from Peter Smith the promoters had taken considerable steps down in income to take part in the experiment. Lucrative jobs may have been available to them but for ideological reasons they chose to earn less, they remained cushioned by other sources.

This created a real divide between them and the workforce. The personal investment of large sums, mortgaged properties, etc. enhanced this separation. Pearce's attitude to money was succinct: "I never want to make a goal of just earning money - I need a bit of money now so I'll find a way of making it."
Michael Pearce, interviewed in 1977, spoke about the danger of trying to impose middle class values on a subculture of working class. One case, which was a legend, illustrates this point. The 'values' that he espoused were to make work meaningful and fulfilling. He recognised, however, that for the working class this was not always possible. He described the working class value as regarding all work as 'shit'. While this showed some insight into working life, Pearce never ceased to be hurt and surprised when men acted according to their values and did not take on the shared and communal values of the co-operative.

Mick White: Unfair Dismissal

Mick White was a plumber who was sacked in November 1974. He was a member involved in the disputes with the Newfield squad and he had resented the deduction of £1.00 per week to loan stock: "I'm not paying £1.00 a week to work at Sunderlandia." According to various versions he was a good plumber and a conscientious worker, or he was an inveterate 'jobber' who took company time and materials to do other private work under the protection of supplying sick notes.

The Board was apparently reluctant to sack White in a way that would prevent his claiming state benefit, on the grounds of bad timekeeping for instance, and so he was summarily dismissed. What emerged was that he sued for unfair dismissal, none of the Newfield Board members would speak against his character and the firm was obliged to pay compensation.
Robert Oakeshott presented the firm's case at the Tribunal. While Sunderlandia was allowed to have had good reasons to dismiss White the manner of his dismissal had not been reasonable. The requisite number of warnings, the usual systematic procedure, had not been used even though the firm was well aware of the legislation which required them and those 'wretched sick notes'.

The tradesman who delivered the dismissal note to White suffered a stroke in the period between the dismissal and the Tribunal. He signed an affidavit from his sick bed, but other members of the firm were unwilling to testify.

An interpretation of this might be one of solidarity, one member expressed a distaste for 'snitching' in public against a former member. Peter Smith's observation is that the incompetent manner in which the firm acted made men reluctant to take a stand on an issue they sensed was already lost. They were embarrassed by association. The firm was not represented by a member of the legal profession. Oakeshott's attitude during the tribunal appeared to be contemptuous of bureaucratic processes and by inference dismissive of industrial legislation.

Peter Smith's account remarks that while class attitudes undoubtedly hampered Sunderlandia, the onus was on the middle class members to make concessions in the matter of power and get reciprocal action.
It is debatable whether the working class were more distrustful of the middle class than vice versa. Suggestions that traditional hostility to management was one likely facet of a strong working class culture is offset by the report of one member of the firm who had worked in the South. He described a more tractable and deferential worker in the North where the old style gaffer still existed and where working men had not quite developed the intransigence of their counterparts in the plusher regions of Southern England.

Certainly the tradesman who initiated the tradesmen meetings was ambitious to have the firm expand spoke of middle class distrust: "They thought we were all lumps of wood. They thought they knew all the answers but they didn't. At one time they had twenty-one brick ends all going at the same time."

Although the nature of Sunderlandia from the outset was amateurish it seems dispiriting to conclude that with at least goodwill on both sides the amateur intentions should somehow have combined with the skills of the tradesmen. In a firm which made profits and sustained the interest to succeed as a business this goodwill might have existed.

Self-Control

However benign the promoters' intentions would appear they nevertheless embodied certain concepts that were unattractive
to the workforce, namely that of an effective control, that is self-control, scrutiny by the group itself and secondly the substitution of spiritual gratification for material ones. One middle class member, having left an extremely well paid position, regretted that the working class would scramble for profits instead of just relaxing and enjoying working together.

Robert Oakeshott

The position of Robert Oakeshott in the office eventually focussed many criticisms arising from class privilege, education, etc. of this kind.

He was secretary and took on responsibility for preparing financial reports. When one tradesman attempted to learn this skill from collaboration with Oakeshott he found the task daunting: "The running of the office was in Robert's head....used to look at the books....mind....it was a sight....it was unbearable."

The manner of Oakeshott's speech was found to be obscure and offputting: "He knew how to make you feel small." A suggestion from Pearce that he and Oakeshott find ways to make the financial report more graphic, easier to understand, appeared laudable. But the lateness of the day - July 1975 - casts doubts on the promoters' intentions given that they were supposedly of a educational kind.
When Oakeshott left the company he remained an eminence grise in the background. While the company constitution allowed for 6 Directors, only 3 existed, Eric Rothschild, Michael Pearce and Robert Oakeshott. After 1976 Peter Smith attempted to persuade the then General Manager to become a Director but he declined. As a supporter of the co-operative principle he felt he would have been seriously compromised in the eyes of the workforce had he taken such a step. He preferred to wait until the development of a genuine co-operative would allow him to take a Directorship without arousing suspicion.

This maybe represented the inability of the workforce to credit management with legitimate function. As early as 1974 demands were made at the General Meeting for the 'non producers' to justify their time and explain their functions. Subsequent explanations were required when morale was low.

Peter Smith's report of 1974 mentions hostility to the Board which it was anticipated would lessen when the Board became all worker Directors. In the event of this in March 1975, Smith relates that the suspicion remained but for different reasons.

While the promoters dominated the Board the suspicions were that they were obstructing worker aspirations and possibly exploiting the firm. With the worker directors the charge was that they were "getting above themselves". While worker directors might not be dishonest in material terms the step into management was
seen as a form of dishonesty: "An opportunity to hegmonise" according to Smith.

When questioned, one tradesman asserted that the working class had nothing against letting the middle class in, provided: "they stayed in and didn't run home to Daddy when the going got rough." A general disappointment was expressed that middle class people with education and privilege could reveal themselves as incompetent. Joking about indentures that the apprentices would, or in Sunderlandia's case mostly would not get, did not seem so funny to the apprentices either.

Authority and Deference
Allied to the question of education, privilege and power was the notion that perhaps the workforce deferred to the middle class. It was certainly the opinion of one member that Peter Smith, with a Northern accent, was less deferred to than the others.

Members expressed the idea that they would not be plumbers if they had 'brains'. One older member had never been close to the middle class: "I never thought they existed. Robert Oakeshott can fly to America and back and think nothing of it....and yet he dresses like a flippin' hippie....Power?....Power is something you very rarely acquire. It's bred in you." "We were born to be labourers" was another opinion.
This was not universal however, and while apprentices were more interested in their personal lives than in attending meetings, some felt there was opportunity to influence events at Sunderlandia but that in the nature of people and their priorities it would not be used.

For apprentices there was always the fear of losing the job. They tended to sit on the Board but not insist. They may have been more susceptible to a new style of authority than the older men who had been brought up in a more harsh discipline, and with a distinct sense of hierarchy. The opinion that all you needed was 'a little tap' to encourage you to work well was expressed by two apprentices who were considered responsible and reliable and lasted their time.

They were contemptuous of the old style 'gaffers' but still required someone with authority to take responsibility. When asked what kind of men could wield authority comfortably and easily the following characteristics emerged: he must know his trade, he must be able to do what he is supposed to do, he must know how to give orders. It is difficult to describe the aura of a workman who could survive the many tests of courage that emerge in a situation of 'equality'.

Mick Pearce claimed that managers are born, it is more likely that a man with deeply felt convictions and a grasp of technical skills would exercise a natural power and that at Sunderlandia no one of this kind existed, if anywhere at all.
Personal Intensity

If the distrust which existed at Sunderlandia was for those in authority and power it also existed among themselves. This is probably in the nature of the small, close knit community that Sunderlandia is. Many men knew one another since childhood and their families. They knew behaviour, they could read character. In this sense they had an instinctive understanding of motivation and could read behind the rhetoric but in another sense they perhaps were too personal in their assessments, and too harshly critical of their peers. They had little knowledge of the promoters on which to judge the validity of their opinions or ideas.

The accusation of power seeking was made most consistently against a joiner whose career at Sunderlandia suggests that either he was one of the more dedicated men or that he was able to use the rhetoric and common ownership to work his way into a position which might be denied him in a conventional firm.

Alex Jones was a member of the Board and its Chairman from the elections from the workforce. He remained Chairman until 1977. He had been a co-ordinator on several sites and his reputation was for bad temper and harsh measures. His original responsibility was for the joinery shop, but little of the original intentions to use the machinery installed there ever materialised. The workforce suspected him of being lazy (this accusation was an extremely common one in the firm as a whole). The suspicion
that he was intent on bettering himself was heightened when it was suggested that he take over the accounts. He chose a course of training at the local Polytechnic but this was for management skills and was considered by the General Meeting and Board Meetings to be an inflated ambition. He was allowed to attend a course on bookkeeping for one afternoon a week.

He spoke of management as a skill to be learned and avowed a pride in being working class and contempt for those from a privileged middle class who assumed that they should have power. He was an articulate and caustic man able to act in the middle ground between the workforce and board. As power here became increasingly that of Mick Pearce, the surviving promoter, Jones was well able to deal with the shopfloor as it were for Pearce.

By September 1977 the firm had undergone several crises. On a Tyne Tees documentary, Pearce was heard: "We've put industrial democracy to a really tough test....it works for the weak but not for the strong...." Bun Bunnett advocated the elimination of a 'crap' workforce and the institution of a conventional working hierarchy.

Meanwhile in a narrow street overlooking the Tyne the 'weak' write this epithet on their cabin and awaited the outcome. They were recalcitrant and demoralised. The firm was finishing off the Benwell contract but no new contract had been won. Liquidity was maintained by a process of roof repairs in Peterlee done
by men considered loyal to the firm, those who had voted for a partnership of 12 to replace the present company.

They were each to invest £500 in a new partnership.

(iii) Other Issues

Loanstock

Apart from initial starting capital, loanstock was to include contributions from the general workforce. During 1973 a working party studied the question and debated the means of commitment of the workforce to the firm by financial investments in it. A unanimous decision of the working party was put to the General Meeting towards the end of 1973. With the notable exception of Mick White this meeting accepted the proposal to have £1.00 per week deducted from wages.

The scheme ran for about a year until people began to be paid off. Accumulated loanstock was paid to those in their final pay packets. The scheme was then abandoned. Loanstock gave no profit and no extra vote but it did enjoy rent and was to be inflation proof. Pegged to the Building Society rate it should have increased. The company was never able to pay, however, and as far as the original promoters were concerned the loss had to be written off.
Trade Unions

Sunderlandia was a Trade Union firm. UCATT for the bricklayers and joiners, T.& G. for the plasterers and labourers, EEPTU for plumbers and electricians. The promoters belonged to ABT the white collar section of UCATT.

Sunderlandia may have suffered from suspicion from certain quarters of Sunderland's political life but it enjoyed support from the Trade Unions. From the beginning a UCATT official was an external Director and stayed on for four years. UCATT support persuaded the Board of Governors at the Wearside Technical College to allow the induction course for the apprentices. A first application had been turned down. When the local Director of the Federation of Builders Trades criticised Sunderlandia strongly in the local press, UCATT supported the firm against the Federation's allegations.

Although the UCATT external Director eventually felt constrained by 'wearing two hats' and left the firm, and although the policy of mobility and flexibility was an affront to Trade Union standards the Trade Union Officials turned a blind eye to many practices in the firm - a response they are obliged to take in many instances in conventional firms. Sunderlandia was, however, never taxed with close observation of the letter of Trade Union Law.
Apprentices' Back Pay

The final drama with the apprentices arose out of a mistake by Oakeshott. They were discovered to be in pay arrears of about £250 each. As they approached July 1977 and their 'time' anxiety for the payment which had been promised for a year mounted. Discussions were heated and two apprentices at least became personally abusive. As they were working at weekends for bonus it appeared to Pearce that they showed themselves capable of exertion for money rewards and he saw fit to put them into the outside world as soon as their contract expired. While some thought they deserved it, it was still: "Supposed to be our firm, these boys have been here four years and that's how they were tret."

Back pay was given in a lump sum and the discussion that resulted showed the nature of wages policy at Sunderlandia. This had been arrived at over time in an ad hoc manner. It led to differentials which were irrational and irritating.

IV CAREERS IN SUNDERLANDIA

Michael Pearce

The longest surviving promoter, architect designer now (May 1977) in charge of production supervising the Benwell site. Appointment of a General Foreman will relieve him of this and he will return to the office as Manager of Sunderlandia.
Disillusioned by experience at Sunderlandia where promise of equality has led to anarchy. Potential leaders have been forced out of the firm by their own high standards and the criticism they have got from the workforce.

He sees common ownership as a small factor where weather, the market and perennial building trade problems have been more significant. "I'm sure a co-operative building firm will not compete with a conventional firm." Lack of management skills in himself and the workforce has led him to conclude that a strict hierarchy linked to pay rewards is essential. He plans to reveal this new scheme at the Annual General Meeting on Saturday, 27th May.

Lack of time for training workers and lack of confidence to allow any or all ideas to be tried has led to despondency.

The biggest business problem has been one of cash flow and the Laburnum Farm site where there is £70,000 tied up in houses. Selling on instalment has starved the company. Generally, non-profitability has been hard to pinpoint, records and office are so chaotic that it has been impossible to tell where the money is being lost.

He prefers a situation in which people ask rather than are encouraged to take on new opportunities. He feels value for apprentices is that they have been invited to question: "They'll never stop questioning."

Feels management is something you are born with: "I wasn't, I'm a bloody good designer."
He sees failure of middle class cultural ideals when faced with traditional working class assumption that work is 'shit'. The democratic process of election to the board meant that "the biggest mouth was elected". In four years there have been about 25 members of the Board. Changing the signatories for the cheque books had been an embarrassment.

Sees unions as part of capitalist system concentrating solely on money. Some early practices at Sunderlandia of voluntary weekend work cut across union rules and were very disturbing.

Interviewed as the site supervisor at Benwell, the 'trouble spot'
"The reason I'm at Benwell is that nobody else will run a job. It's pretty obvious."

His disposition was to speak in terms of faction and struggle, local government departments were described as 'at loggerheads' as were ICOM and ICOF. He ended by talking of a co-operative as - needing to be ordered on a military basis with strong discipline.

This latter interpretation must have been influenced by the extreme stress he experienced in maintaining his place in the firm after the departure of Smith and Oakeshott and the other middle class men who started the firm up.

He worked long hours of overtime during the week and at weekends and eventually suffered from ulcers. To a member of the firm, a local man, Pearce appeared to have no relief from the interminable problems of the business.
SEEN BY WORKFORCE as the 'boss' who owns the firm, his house is mortgaged to it. As a noble trier who has to face insupportable discipline problems at Benwell. As an inefficient supervisor with erratic and unpredictable temper.

Alex Jones
40, joiner, strong Roman Catholic, Director of the Board since 1973. As the original tradesman in the company, for the first six months he was "completely inebriated with idealism". He attended Sunderland Polytechnic one afternoon a week learning bookkeeping, following a precedent set by Michael Pearce. Jones hoped that this would lead on to Membership of the Institute of Building Managers, something he might achieve in three or four years. "I'm opposed to the middle class elite keeping hold of managerial skills." Speaks of management as a skill to be learnt much like plumbing or joinery. When the purge of apprentices was on Terence Wright canvassed Alex Jones and found that their lists of 'deadwood' coincided and that Alex Jones favoured a reduction in apprentices. At the actual meeting, when confronted with the workforce, Jones reversed his position: "I think we should sink or swim with the lads."

Over the three years the pressure on co-ordinators has been so great that it has been difficult to get people to volunteer. Interviewed in November 1976 Jones favoured incentives of some kind but was unsure what form they could take without offending co-operative principles. He now favours a conventional hierarchy with Michael Pearce as Manager and himself in the office helped by a part-time woman typist and bookkeeper.
His history would indicate that he admired his father for his trade union activities and for his self-education. He looked back to grandparents who had been immigrants from Ireland but who had gone into business, made money and lived in their own home. He himself had never made the kind of money that traditional moonlighting and weekend work could offer. He was regarded by the workforce as less 'successful' in this than another joiner who had a bigger and better house, had always run a car, etc. Jones professed to despise material greed and aspiring working class gentility. He was a staunch Catholic, a gardener and convinced he had made a good study of human character. His outlook was probably pessimistic and Sunderlandia may have happened to him at an age (late thirties) when he needed to achieve a position in accord with his values and inclinations, this probably had more to do with status and security.

He expressed solid working class values. Despised '£100 millionaires' (those are aspiring working class who exhibit pretentions and gentility) and also the middle class who exercise control by privilege alone.

SEEN BY WORKFORCE as anxious to "escape the tools" and get into a comfortable office job. As articulate "He's got the gift of the gab and is pretty handy with the pen too." As lazy and incompetent. As fair and solidly reliable. As bad tempered and a harsh disciplinarian.
Bill Rice

30+, painter and decorator at Benwell. Recently elected to the Board he professes to represent 'the lads' and to favour open government within the company.

Has worked all over the country as his own small contractor and came to Sunderlandia on the recommendation of his brother, apprentice David Rice.

He resents the secrecy and inefficiency of the present regime (May 1977) and supports incentives, differentials and a general foreman. Ambitious to make the firm succeed. Enjoys his sense of responsibility within the firm which coincides with his more settled personal life back in his home town.

He finds his friends in conventional firms are interested especially in the 'nae gaffers' part of Sunderlandia. Enjoys a sense of personal recognition in Sunderlandia. He thinks Unions will eventually rule the country and regrets their power. Favours some measure of responsibility for buying materials by tradesmen.

SEEN BY WORKFORCE as a rogue. As a hard man. As honest and interested to make the company succeed.

Scoffs at the 'pressure' complained of by co-ordinators, puts it down to bad conscience and "they've got nae bottle."
Apprentices at Benwell:

John Jenkins and Bruce James
24 and 22, joiners, now tradesmen on £70. Interested to feel part of Sunderlandia and see the £1.00 deducted as a real commitment.

Critical of the inefficiency and lack of proper management but appreciative of the relaxed atmosphere and the opportunities to contribute to debate and to vote. Also the experience of seeing other trades working in the squad, this should be useful for advancement.

Have not attended meetings regularly because social life more attractive and they doubted that their contribution would make any difference.

Regard Alex Jones and others as having worked themselves into positions of power and relative ease and to be 'old fashioned' element, not capable of responding to the altered authority structure described in common ownership.

They favour a more traditional management structure to provide efficiency, but wish to retain the easy going pace.

Not interested in politics nor in unions except for reference on the question of back pay. Bruce James was elected onto the Board to review the wages structure.

SEEN BY THE WORKFORCE as good guys, reliable sensible lads.
Jim Dark

24, an older apprentice who worked conventionally before joining Sunderlandia. He had been in the sixth form at school and thought to train as a teacher but left school and worked in a furniture factory run by 'slave' labour or adolescents at £11 per week, then went into print and worked the continental shift until he collapsed physically. He then went on the dole for 5 months and was sent to Sunderlandia. "It was heaven coming here."

He has spent a lot of time taking a keen interest in all meetings; for years he took minutes for Michael Pearce. Now totally disillusioned with organisation and its amateurishness: "They shouldn't play games with people's jobs."

He thinks the workforce should have been trained in business administration and management skills and that schools could prepare workers for this.

He admits that a reduction in the number of apprentices became inevitable but says that the 'problem' was made the excuse for all the other failings. He had been a co-ordinator for a short, frustrating time, unable to get to grips with the task because in his instance the architect changed the drawings six times.

"I don't intend working on the gear all my life..." but he finds his teacher friends often envy his being a joiner, he finds it a satisfying job.
His ideal is a working class man who founded a successful business in Washington and shares the fun and profits with his workers, taking days off and hiring buses to go off together on joyrides.

He has been asked by Terence Wright, David Bream and Peter Smith to consider joining them in a new venture. He may refuse as he thinks they are "too capitalist minded".

SEEN BY THE WORKFORCE as the most serious of the apprentices. As one who supports the efforts however ineffective of Mick Pearce to run the site: sympathises with the difficulty of his job.

Jim Dark sees many instances in Sunderlandia of "frustrated intellectuals".

Bob Turner and Jim Saunders
22, bricklayers. Attracted to common ownership after initial ignorance. Attended meetings regularly for 2½ - 3 years: "then they started to ball us out".

Disheartened by inefficiency and irritated by being constantly asked to do the 'dirty' work, i.e. filling skips: "Ever since the firm began it's always been the bricklayers doing it - all the time. I'm fucking pig sick. Mick Pearce - we told him to fuck off, he always comes for us two."

Sensitive about differentials, quote instance of man sacked by Sunderlandia at £70 and brought back to do the same job (roofing) at £58, sense of hypocrisy and injustice.
Bob Turner had been good enough a footballer to be tried for WBA but not tall or heavy enough.

They have never voted. Asked about alternative futures Bob Turner said he would get rid of the hangers on to the Royal Family: "not massacre them, just make them live like us which would be as bad for them."

Sacked at the end of their apprenticeships.

SEEN BY THE WORKFORCE as less reliable of the apprentices. Sat in a separate cabin from the rest for their 'bait'.

Common Attitudes

1. Disillusioned with politics, apolitical apart from mild socialist ideals of Jim Dark.

2. Disillusioned with unions except in cases of reference like the back pay issue.

3. Impatient of older tradesmen who in a co-operative situation are unable to deal with open discussion and fall back on the respect demanded by authority and age.

David Bream (an ex member)

30, a bricklayer with Sunderlandia for 18 months, subsequently unemployed and ill for some months. At time of writing he was in a partnership. By report an expert tradesman and good organiser
fired by the idealism of co-operation as described to him by Mick Pearce: "Common ownership is the only way for mankind to succeed...when working men begin to realise their skills and energies." He took a £20 cut in wages to work at Sunderlandia. He was always interested to increase his wages there by jobbing at the weekends.

He saw the ratio of tradesmen and apprentices as unproductive and supported the reduction in their numbers. He would have liked to have trained as estimator for responsibility within the firm. He felt rejected when a foreman estimator was brought in from outside against the wishes of Peter Smith and himself, but invited in by Pearce. Felt vindicated in his sense of injury when the estimator proved incapable of dealing with the work situation at Sunderlandia and left.

After three attempts he was elected to the Board in 1975. He saw the struggle for power as triangular - between Oakeshott, Pearce and the Board and between the Board and the workforce. He was instrumental in removing Oakeshott from the Board and from the firm.

He found the power struggles and acrimony wearing and finally left over the issue of whether members would contribute to a bond for the road on the Laburnam site. £7,000 was needed and he felt contributions would have shown commitment to the firm's success and principles. His skills as co-ordinator had been demonstrated in the early stage of Laburnam Farm; he felt personally involved in the project which should have been profitable but was not.
He thought the original £45 wage offered generous and attracted the wrong kind of workforce, those incapable of reaching bonus levels in other firms - 'bonus hunters'. He was disappointed by what he saw as the incompetence of the promoters and their simultaneous unwillingness to share power.

SEEN BY THE WORKFORCE as an excellent co-ordinator. An abrasive and aggressive character who would never get on in Sunderlandia where bluff good humour was valued.

V THE LEARNING

Co-operatives are often cited as learning situations, while this is usually considered a positive feature it is doubtful whether all frustration of hopes can be considered a good lesson. Supporters of the venture from the middle class tend to place Sunderlandia in the context of conventional building firms and invite comparison with them. To that extent it is asserted, Sunderlandia was a haven.

What have the workforce themselves learnt from this experiment?

Mick Pearce and Alex Jones have 'learnt' that to start off in the way that Sunderlandia did was bound to lead to chaos. They would insist now that traditional structures must exist initially and the move to democratise by made from these. Pearce claims to have realised that the working man in this country is too enslaved by long years of
capitalist exploitation, the African tribesman has more desire and chance for revolutionary change.

This accords in some way with Peter Smith's view that experience at Sunderlandia is a sobering one for those who believe in an actively prozelytizing approach. The facts of alienation are such that the working man in industry has little appreciation or understanding of the present system and how it works - he therefore has no base from which to form a critique. In the building trade, as well, there may be a basic problem of literacy.

Pearce will have learned that the injection of a small jab of change in an otherwise traditional work world does not meet with approval or appreciation from banks, suppliers or customers who are suspicious of change.

His analysis presented on the TV documentary was that the forceful and energetic suffer from the inhibitions placed on them by democratic processes and the lethargy of the majority. In view of doubts as to his own position in the allocation of power and influence this opinion is one which appears to tie odd ends but doesn't really accord with the impressions of those forceful and powerful ones, the ones who left Sunderlandia exhausted and frustrated. In the words of one member: "Seventy odd people have been got rid of here and nothing's happened, it's no better".

The workforce will have learnt to distrust the motives of middle class people 'who play games with peoples' jobs'. Some of them will
have experienced the elation of wielding responsibility for the first time and may have begun to articulate ideas about work and how to organise it successfully in their trades. David Bream and another member are interested to set up a common ownership firm, but one that would be initiated from the workers and from men in Sunderland.

The apprentices claimed that the policy of flexibility had at least allowed them to experience the work of other trades and given them an all round appreciation of building. Mick Pearce would claim that they had been given the opportunity to question basic assumptions and they would never lose this.

For the workforce the opportunity to play roles and take part in discussions that would be denied them in conventional firms may have led to some personal development. The failure, however, may have deepened disillusionment with life's prospects for some men.

Politically the workforce was generally conservative and suspicious of trade union power. A large number of Roman Catholics resented the assumption that Sunderlandia was socialistic. The offer of democracy was probably one which appealed to the entrepreneurial nature of some who felt their energies had been curtailed in the conventional workplace.

For those who went to Sunderlandia for security and a quiet life they must be bewildered and disappointed.
According to some of the more bitter ex-members of Sunderlandia, the firm's history has brought common ownership ideals into disrepute and ridicule. A spokesman for the Builders' Federation in Durham would only affirm, with satisfaction, that the 'experiment' would seem to have failed. In his opinion, more satisfaction could be gained in any of the small, family type conventional businesses which employ men who prefer to work at a leisurely pace for a steady rate of pay.

And it must be admitted that if Oakeshott, Pearce and Smith had not set up Sunderlandia an opportunity would never have been created and it may be that those who are prepared to act out their ideology are entitled to more regard than those who merely mouth it. The question remains whether embarking on such a project in this way can be seen as a brave new world or a place where wise men fear to tread.
VI DISCUSSION

Reasons for Failure

To convince a workforce that they own a firm is difficult and the problem of 'ownership' as a means to worker commitment is illustrated in the attempts of Sunderlandia to use loanstock as a financial stake. Failure of the business and reluctance on the part of the workers to risk their accumulated savings undermined the efficacy of this approach. A more subtle undermining was that of 'intellectual property'. In the words of a disenchanted activist: "the reason the workforce was not interested to see it work was because it was Robert Oakeshott's idea, not theirs." Communication of ideals within the co-operative never resulted in any sense of enlightenment in the workforce as to the precise nature of common ownership. Mick Pearce's late analysis of appropriate behaviour was that "the workforce must work as if in a hierarchy but behave as if in a common ownership."

While policies of 'flexibility', areas of special responsibility and new roles of 'co-ordinators' showed that Sunderlandia attempted new forms of organisation there was never the space nor time, the organisational 'slack' in which to experiment, to learn and improve. The lack of skills in conventional organisation was not substituted by skills of communication which could develop alternative patterns of work. According to one electrician: "It's not lack of incentives, it's lack of organisation." and to another man: It's more worker contempt here than worker control."

External hostility to Sunderlandia was alleged by the promoters. Probably outsiders with a strange experiment were not immediately
welcomed, especially when they came bearing an evangelical message which eschewed the petty bribes of winning friends and influencing people that are the stock in trade of many working situations. Suspicion of this kind is however usually dispersed on favourable acquaintance and Sunderlandia had the advantage of a favourable response from the Trade Unions, an eager workforce and a potentially good market entry position. Internal hostility was a much more likely source of its failure.

Power struggles generated internal hostility. A study of co-operatives by Kirkham notes two routes for aspiring members: one for career positions in a hierarchy of supervision, the other in representational positions within the democratic structure. As Sunderlandia was formed without a traditional hierarchy this former route was effectively blocked; the experimental role of co-ordinator never satisfactorily replaced the traditional roles to which the men were previously accustomed. Ambitions focussed on election to the Board of Directors as the avenue of influence and power. The rapid turnover of directors testifies to the unsatisfactory nature of this role for many men. Their experience of it was expressed as a frustrating one where the Board was dominated by those promoters who had superior financial resources and appeared to act collectively or in alliance with one or two of the workforce to determine the course of events in the firm. A lack of homogeneity, differences of age, class and values contributed to a confusion which was exacerbated rather than resolved through those democratic processes allowed. The ad hoc nature of the contingencies of the building trade itself added another dimension to the lack of control felt by most members.
Whyte notes that while it is generally assumed that conflict and co-operation are opposite poles of the same continuum he has found perceived levels of both high conflict and high co-operation in some communities and both low co-operation and low conflict in others. The salient point is the attempt at change which may increase energy for both co-operation and hostility. The co-operative undoubtedly demands and inflicts change on its members and in the short term certainly involves members in certain costs.

Costs to Members

As a failed co-operative with many disillusioned members, the concluding emphasis of this report is on the costs to the workforce of the experiment at Sunderlandia.

For those whose talents had perhaps never been given proper opportunity for expression at work the prospect of power, responsibility and self respect was a heady experience. Underlying this, for the working class members, was the more immediate need for security, maintaining and hopefully improving the standard of living.

The role of co-ordinator illustrates the several strains to which a member of the co-operative who took on responsibility was subject and confirms Etzioni's description of dual compliance. The assumption of egalitarianism tends to test and question the activist rather than support him. If authority roles are already difficult in a conventional workplace in the co-operative they require more skills of persuasion: a greater degree of 'cajoling'.
This is linked to the ambivalence of the democratic rhetoric when faced with that unseemly companion of responsibility, namely power. The activist who succeeds accumulates power from the experience of his action but the ideology demands that this power be dispensed to the community which must share in the knowledge and experience gained. A perpetual accountability weighs the activist down. For a middle class professional even, trained and susceptible to such techniques these demands to communicate are onerous. To a working man in the building trade they were often overwhelming. If the theoretician sees such problems of accountability as ones of process and worker information systems, it remains that at Sunderlandia none of these developed and the co-ordinator who insisted on communicating would be criticised for extending his lunch and tea breaks into forums for discussion.

Another form of stress which Peter Smith's Social Report of 1974 noted is that of generalised suspicion. Dore's study of agricultural co-operatives finds that when scrutiny of accounts is conducted by a member of the co-operative it lacks the necessary element of detachment. The suspicion of misappropriation of funds is not externalised but brought into the co-operative as each member watches and judges his peers. While Sunderlandia employed an accountant the 'constant vigilance' extended to questions of personal values, work commitment and so on. As the business failed so the intensity of scrutiny and suspicion grew as reasons to explain the failure were sought.

Most co-operatives examine their failure in this way and a common finding is that recent recruits were less committed than the original
band. The founding generation alone are often regarded as those who made the appropriate sacrifices. This emphasis on commitment assumes a religious fervour; it leaves aside the question of whether the mechanisms involved, and that are seen as vital to true co-operation, such as personal intensity, freedom of information, debate and self criticism, are conducive to good government. These mechanisms rely on personal elements and motivation and a clear structure for debate; in the absence of any systematic process to foster these personal qualities and accommodate these mechanisms with rational and efficient production, Sunderlandia in common with most co-operatives resembled an overheated machine.

A member of a large 'defensive' co-operative has described the main stress of the co-operative as the inability of people to face the truth about themselves. This 'truth' depends on the values, conditions and opportunities of the viewer and in a co-operative often resides in the conflict between self interest and ideology and the conflict between aspiration and actual achievement. For the middle class promoter at Sunderlandia the failure of an experiment and their part in it was stressful but other alternatives existed. These would not present themselves so easily for a working man and the 'truths' would therefore be lodged more permanently in his experience.

A major form of stress is the nature of self control which is central to the ideology of co-operation. This derives from ideas of craft skills and personal responsibility where some match exists between worker creator and object of love and labour. It also carries the useful notion of being an efficient method of compliance.
The building trade is often dirty, uncomfortable and brutalising especially for the lower grades and there is often little match between man and task except that of economic necessity and lack of alternatives.

The emphasis on self control is then a means by which managerial prerogative is apparently handed over to the workforce which is then faced with what, in many instances, are uncongenial situations involving discipline, sanction and sacrifice of self interest.
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