**1979: Community Co-op scheme expanded into the Northern Isles**

***Intro (Gill Murray):*** *This is an extract from an oral history interview I recorded with Roy Pedersen in October 2020 over zoom. In the late 1970s Roy was a Social Developemnt Officer at the Highlands and Islands Development Board. Here he recounts, with great warmth, how the community co-op scheme expanded into the Northern Isles. As well as providing an account of the origins of the Papa Westray community co-op, known as Papay Co-op, Roy also gives a flavour of island life in the late 1970s. I’m also happy to say that over 40 years later the Papay Co-op is still going strong. Hope you enjoy the clip and thanks for listening.*

**Roy Pedersen:** In 1979 -I think it must have been 1979- I got a phone call from Papa Westray one of the most Northerly of the Orkney Islands and it was Jim Rendall. He said that he was from Papa Westray and he had been reading in the *Sunday Post* about Vatersay setting up a shop and that he ran the shop in Papa Westray, but he was wanting to give it up. I think he had the post office, the shop and post office, but it wasn’t really very viable and he wondered if this co-op idea would work. I said, “well it might, let’s think about it, at the moment the scheme is only restricted to the Western Isles, but we will have a look at it”. So as it happened sitting next to me in the open plan office was a young research fellow, whose first name was -I think- James Gowing, and he had been sort of given the job of trying to identify somewhere in the Northern Isles. In the North Isles of Orkney at that time there was nowhere to stay if you were a tourist and he was looking at the idea of setting up a youth hostel. The pair of us said, “look if the shop is not viable and the youth hostel was, put the two together, maybe it could be a viable enterprise?”

James and I flew up to Kirkwall. There meeting us was Jim Rendal in his car. No road tax. On small islands you don’t have road tax and things; there is nowhere to do an MOT. This rickety car this was his postie vehicle, because he was the postie, as well as: undertaker, shipping agent, and calor gas agent, shop keeper. So he and another man called Ronny Babbino, who was blind, met us. He said: “I’ll tak ye doon to the shop”, and he took us doon to the shop and we saw it was a pretty basic sort of shop, but it sold quite a lot of different things and [housed] the post office. He said: “I will just have to sort oot my mail, then you can come with me on my mail round.” So this we did and, of course, he introduced us to just about everybody on the island. “These boys are fae the Highlands and Islands Development Board and they are thinking about setting up, if we were interested, in setting up a co-op to run the shop and maybe build a youth hostel, what do you think of that?”. So anyway, we went round everybody. By and large people were quite well disposed to the idea. Finally, we went to John Rendall, who was the biggest farmer on the Island. By the way, 70 people on Papa as well just like Vatersay. We explained this thing to John Rendall and he said: “If it was for the good of the Isle, I would be in favour of it.” We said one of the things we were wondering about was where -because Jim had put us up to this- where could we build the shop or the hostel? He said, “there’s the new hooses”. The new hooses, was a row -a terrace- of ruinous farm servant’s cottages that had been built about 200 years ago. “So what would it cost to buy the new houses?” He said, “I’d gie ye them”. And that was that. We left a copy of the instructions, ‘the guide’, with the committee. Well, there wasn’t a committee at the time, with Jim. A week later I got a phone call from Jim Rendall saying: “we had a public meeting and we have set up a steering committee and we could raise £4,000. What do we do noo?” They were going a bit faster than the Western Isles, where it had taken over a year to get to that stage. The Orcadians, they seemed to latch onto it very, very quickly. They had a co-op on the island already, a coal co-op. Every year they got a coal boat in to deliver coal to the island and that was done as a co-op.

I went up again in due course and I acted as field officer, because we didn’t have one for Orkney, and helped them pull together the project. There was no doubt the committee were well disposed to the thing and they raised £4,000, which is a lot of money in a wee community like that. The public meeting was held. At the meeting I did the spiel about the Irish co-ops and then at the end of it I said: “Well that’s it, would you support the idea and would you be prepared to sign promissory notes to establish the co-op?” Folk were looking at their feet then Jim Rendall said: “Weel”, he said, “If we get four or five years oot o’ it, it would be a guid thing. I’ll gie it a thoosan.” That was the signal for everybody else to put in their £50 and that was it!