Format development and retail change: supermarket retailing and the London Co-operative Society

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Abstract
This article argues that students of retail history need to give more attention to the idea of the retail format. Employing a conceptualisation of the format recently presented in contemporary retail studies, it reveals the importance of so-called “offering” and “know-how” components to a fuller understanding of the development of the supermarket format in post-war Britain. Supermarket development is shown to be affected by, and itself impact on, a complex interplay of factors. Arguments presented in the article are supported by a detailed examination of supermarket development at the London Co-operative Society between 1960 and 1965. The paper thus also contributes to our knowledge of the history of co-operative retailing in the post-war period.

Key Words:
Supermarket, self-service retailing, retail format, co-operative societies, retail change

Introduction
Insufficient attention is given to the concept of the retail format and to the insights that it can offer to the study of retail history. The term “format” is frequently used in a simple manner in order to identify the broad retail store type of interest. Only occasionally are definitions of particular formats contested, perhaps most notable being the case of the department store. One implication of this lack of attention is
that variations *within* broad format types are inadequately addressed. Consequently, we know insufficient detail about the development and management of formats by particular retail firms. Another is that the impact of format change for wider, inter-firm relations and processes, such as those occurring in the supply chain, are overlooked. This study provides a detailed evaluation of one retailer’s development of the supermarket format. It does so not in an attempt to identify the first or purest form of the format. Instead the paper argues that one characteristic of early supermarket retailing was its diversity. The analysis is based upon a detailed reading of the archive of the London Co-operative Society (hereafter LCS) supported by a review of the trade and popular press. The paper draws upon discussions in the literature of contemporary retail management as well as those in retail history.

In addition to highlighting the case for more attention to be given to the concept of the format, the paper also contributes more broadly to our understanding of co-operative society retailing during the post-war period (in this case roughly 1960-1965). Recent historical research has explored general trends in early supermarket adoption in the co-operative movement. The analysis of format development at the society level represents a valuable addition to this, revealing as it does key retail management issues at the local, trading level. It provides an opportunity for more meaningful firm-level comparisons. By concentrating on events during the period 1960 to 1965 the paper explores the adoption of supermarket format innovation at a time when its significance had become generally established. It provides a useful contrast to studies that concentrate on the emergence of these innovations.

The LCS was formed and developed through the amalgamation of a number of London and regional co-operative societies extending its area of influence beyond the capital into Middlesex, Essex, Hertfordshire and Surrey. It became the largest of the
UK co-operative societies with a membership of 1.25 million people. The archive, held at the Bishopsgate Institute, London, holds a large collection of material covering the range of the society’s activities, including political and educational aspects as well as those of retail trading. It is the latter that is the focus here, although care is taken to avoid artificially separating the retail business of the society from its wider organisational underpinnings as the latter also inform our understanding. That part of the LCS archive related to the retail trades is itself considerable in scope. It includes numerous minute books and papers from the management committee and subcommittees across the range of the society’s retail trade including chemists and department stores as well as the food trades that are the focus here. Management of the LCS’s retail operations was based upon a structure of an elected management committee (or board), supporting management subcommittees and a professional management executive. Of the subcommittees “Number 2” is of most interest in this study, its remit including the society’s food trades. The study focuses largely on the period 1960-1965. The starting date is broadly co-incident with the emergence of supermarket development activities at the LCS. By 1965 the LCS was trading from three purpose-developed supermarkets, and the first signs of their profitability were being recorded its financial analyses.

The remainder of the paper is structured into four sections. In the next section the notion of the retail format is discussed and related to debates surrounding the growth of supermarket retailing in Britain. Following this, the paper provides a brief review of the development of self-service retailing and the supermarket format by the LCS. The main section of the paper assesses the society’s deliberations over and engagement with key aspects of the supermarket format. Discussion is organised around so-called “offering” and “know-how” format characteristics of the
The supermarket as a retail format

Retail formats are complex combinations of visible and hidden components. This helps to explain why it can be difficult for the outside observer to identify new retail formats with precision, develop clear definitions of even the main types and gain consensus for these definitions. This is certainly the case for supermarkets which emerged in Britain during the 1950s. A basic trade definition of the supermarket was in circulation by the early 1960s that considered ‘a supermarket is a store of not less than 2,000 sq. ft. sales area, with three or more checkouts and operated mainly on self-service, whose range of merchandise comprises all food groups, including fresh meat and fresh fruit and vegetables, plus basic household requisites (i.e. soaps and cleaning materials).’ However, in the earliest post-war years of self-service retailing what constituted a supermarket was less clearly articulated even among interested parties. One reason is because much early self-service retailing and shopping took place through converted grocery outlets of varied size and make up; many being far smaller and carrying a much narrower product assortment than what eventually came to be recognised as supermarkets. Comparisons with supermarket retailing in the US also led to ambiguities. The typical supermarket of 1950s America was some 18,000 square feet (1620 m²) in size, with the largest stocking in excess of 10,000 articles. The first supermarkets developed in Britain were much smaller in size, a fact reflected in the 2,000 sq. ft. minimum sales area adopted as a benchmark in early attempts to
define the format. As late as 1967 it was suggested that the typical supermarket in Britain was only some 4000 sq. ft. in size.\textsuperscript{10}

Trade definitions such as the one presented above consider only those components of a format that are visible at the outlet, in this case store size, shopping environment and service type and product assortment. No attention is given to more hidden factors or to those which occur away from the outlet, such as the systems supporting the stores and the operating firm’s organisational structure and management culture. This is problematic because the nature of firms’ format variations, and their success or otherwise in operating formats, are also influenced by such systems, structures and cultures.

Lewison highlights the importance of the format to retail competition: ‘Competitive advantages are realized by creating a retail format that is tailored to specific needs of a carefully determined segment of the total market. Retail formats (the means) encompass the total mix of operating and merchandising tactics and practices used by the retail firm to distinguish and differentiate itself from other competing retail formats.’\textsuperscript{11} Formats can be seen as ‘combinations of technologies’ and retailing involves the bundling of these technologies in ways considered most appropriate for the marketplace.\textsuperscript{12} Viewing them in this way can help us to understand format variation. In a more detailed consideration of the nature of the format, Goldman views it as consisting of two parts: the offering (external) and the know-how (internal).\textsuperscript{13} The first includes elements such as product assortment, shopping environment, service, location and price. The second part, the know-how, he considers to determine a retailer’s operational strength and strategic direction. It consists of the retail technology dimension (the systems, methods, procedures and techniques the retailer uses) and the retail culture (including the repertoire of
concepts, norms, rules, practices and experiences). In contrast to some recent interpretations that have restricted attention to the elements visible to the consumer, this paper adopts Goldman’s fuller conceptualisation.

In doing so it is possible to differentiate better and to account for variations within as well as between broad format types. Hence the various supermarket type formats appearing can be better understood, avoiding their development being too simply characterised as that of one homogenous form. This is important as a close reading of the history of self-service retailing in post-war Britain reveals the very different offers put before the consumer.

The LCS and the “modernization” of retailing

Recent studies have contributed to our understanding of the development of self-service retailing and supermarket outlets in post-war Britain and their impact on consumer practices. The innovative role of the co-operative movement is revealed, with the LCS’s experimental conversion of its Romford grocery branch to self-service in 1942 widely remarked upon. By 1950 there were some 50 or so supermarkets operating in Britain, and the co-operative movement was at the vanguard of their development. Yet by 1961, when the number of supermarkets had swollen to an estimated 572, the dominance of the co-operative movement was being eroded by the private multiples. Less attention has been given to the co-operative’s place in this latter phase of supermarket development.

Between 1957 and 1961 the co-operative movement suffered a 1 per cent decline in its share of total retail trade. The private multiples had increased their share
of the food trades market in particular. At a time of reduced margins the need for co-operative societies to more rapidly adopt the supermarket was very clear. Supermarket development could help to lower labour costs and to increase profits by means of higher turnover. They could also provide the superior outputs that consumers were quickly becoming accustomed to. The complexities and challenges such adoption posed were also clear. These included obtaining the finance necessary to acquire appropriate sites and develop the new larger stores, finding and training appropriate staff at both the management and operational levels at a time of general labour shortage and employing the retail management approaches required for successful supermarket trading. In a letter to co-operative societies from the Co-operative Union, the National Executive of the Co-operative Grocery Trade Association and Development Committee made clear their advice that, wherever practicable, societies should adopt the new low cost techniques of food retailing. It stressed ‘A supermarket is not only a building, but a machine for selling goods. It must be properly operated if the best results are to be obtained. Price structures and practices based on smaller shops are often wrong for supermarkets.’

Despite its considerable size, the LCS was a society in trading difficulties by the late 1950s and was portrayed as epitomising an increasing malaise in co-operative retailing as a whole. When the newspaper The People launched its wide-ranging attack on co-operative retailing entitled “The Dying Giant in Your High Street” it paid particular attention to the performance of the LCS. It reported that the society had suffered a decline in food sales despite British consumers’ food expenditure rising by 10 per cent overall between 1957 and 1960. Furthering its attack, the paper used the society’s West Ealing grocery branch to undertake a basket price comparison with a nearby private multiple. Claiming a significant saving available at the latter it
suggested that the co-operative lacked the variety of bargains that the multiple could offer. The co-operatives response to *The People* article rehearsed arguments of propagandist attacks on democratic socialists and sought to rebut many of the claims made. However the movement knew that overall there was much to be done. After all, less than four years previously the Co-operative Independent Commission had voiced concern that ‘if we ask what is the “image” of a Co-operative shop in the public mind, the answer will not be a supermarket or a new department store.’ In the case of the LCS the stiff retail competition provided by the grocery multiples’ supermarkets in London and the need for rapid modernisation across its food retail store network was beyond denial. It became one focus of an increasingly bitter struggle for the overall control of the LCS. One protagonist in the struggle, future society President John Stonehouse remarked on the need to modernise the society’s food store network in 1961, ‘We have lost time and we have lost the dynamic… If we are content to merely allow our organisation to tick over as it has been doing, we shall find ourselves well and truly outstripped within the next decade.’

The fall in the LCS’s food trades market share during the last years of the 1950s and the early years of the 1960s mirrored in trend, if surpassed in extent, a general decline in the co-operative movement’s share of the retail food trades. Turnover in the LCS’s grocery department had declined sharply from £16m in 1957 to 14.7m by 1960 and further to 13.5m by 1962. Falling LCS turnover came at a time when typical grocery margins were under increased pressure from new high turnover, low margin ways of selling employed by the supermarket operators. A large network of counter-service grocery outlets meant that the LCS endured higher labour costs than many of its competitors. Raised margins set by the society to meet these costs were increasingly untenable. The advertising agency giant Batten, Barton, Durstine &
Osborn (hereafter BBDO), hired by the LCS during the early 1960s, produced a controversial report on the society’s progress in 1961 concluding that the society was facing labour costs that would prove ruinous unless it set out on a development strategy based upon larger retail units and their benefits of new self-service techniques and improved productivity. Net profit in the LCS’s grocery department fell from £661,292 in 1960 to £27,065 in 1962. The society’s dividend, which had been 9d in 1957, fell to 4d during 1961.

Despite its early experimentation with self-service, the LCS faced clear challenges in converting its large counter-service grocery outlet infrastructure to self-service methods. Far more considerable difficulties came in attempts to adopt supermarket retailing. By 1960 there were only 62 self-service stores and 19 food halls from a total of 409 grocery stores across the society. By 1961 the number of self-service stores in the society’s portfolio had grown to 120 with an additional 24 of the larger self-service food halls. These store numbers meant that the LCS had more self-service stores than many other large co-operative societies, such as the Royal Arsenal and Birmingham societies, yet they represented a much lower proportion of the overall store network. Similarly, the LCS was not too dissimilar in terms of total number of stores operating on self-service basis to its private multiple rivals Victor Value (191) and Tesco (211), but again these competitors had far fewer counter-service stores. It was somewhat belatedly in 1961 that the society set down a more comprehensive programme for self-service retailing. Importantly this included discussions of plans for nine proposed supermarket development schemes. By this date rivals such as Premier (Express Dairy), Fine Fare and Victor Value among others had already established supermarkets in the LCS trading area.
Supermarket development was one focus of each of the main groups of protagonists for election to the LCS management executive in 1962. The election statement of the controlling London Co-operative Members’ Organisation (hereafter LCMO) group announced that they sought to double overall retail trade within ten years, whilst also stressing the need to improve working conditions for the society’s employees. Key to the revitalisation of the grocery trade was plans to convert all remaining grocery shops to self-service and to re-group existing food outlets into more comprehensive food halls wherever possible. Most significantly, there was to be an accelerated supermarket development plan with existing supermarket developments to be completed and complemented by a further fifty such stores.38

The ultimately successful 1960 Campaign Committee put forward its case for election of its members to the management committee based around a retail trades plan very broadly similar to the LCMO’s in that it included a two-prong strategy of improving staff conditions and modernising the retail infrastructure. Supermarket development was again central, although the 1960 Campaign Committee declined to put a precise figure on store numbers going forward. At the same time it challenged the ruling LCMO over factory closures and the closing of ‘uneconomic’ shops. Under headings such as ‘Competition must be met’, ‘New look for our Stores’ and ‘Modern methods are a “must”’ the Campaign Committee’s election pamphlet launched a strong attack on the managing LCMO, accusing it of overseeing many years of costly delay in the modernisation of the society’s shops and stores.39 Pressure was required, it argued, to ensure that the controlling group’s recently announced and ambitious development programme was carried out. The Campaign Committee stressed its credentials to manage any such modernisation by arguing the need for new stores to be supported by modern buying procedures and store operations. In short, one of the
key aims of the committee was, it stated, ‘to build up the public image of the Society as go-ahead and highly efficient.’

‘Offering’ (external) elements of the supermarket format

This section of the paper considers the offering (external) elements of the supermarket format. The next section considers the know-how (internal) elements. In combination they comprise the main components of the retail format as noted by Goldman. The path to adoption of the supermarket format by the LCS and the extensive management deliberations that accompanied this are considered with reference to this conceptualisation. So too are the particular characteristics of the society’s supermarket units and the operations employed therein. Use of this fuller conceptualisation enables us to make sense of the developments occurring and to distinguish within the broad format type of the supermarket. In particular it enables us to identify and distinguish between the society’s prototypical large format self-service retailing in the food halls and the movement to purpose-developed supermarkets. In reality the internal and external components of the format are inter-mixed of course. However, for purposes of clarity and illustration the various elements that make up the format are considered separately here.

The first offering element for consideration is “Location”. Supermarket developments during the study period were typically located in or close to town centre locations and loci of suburban shoppers. Dealing with external considerations such as town planning restrictions could slow development, as in the case of the LCS’s Loughton supermarket. Acquiring much-sought-after shop sites on or near to the
rapidly emerging municipal housing developments was also a challenge, although in the case of the London County Council area at least the co-operative was given reasonable access to new sites.\(^\text{43}\) The society’s existing infrastructure of smaller grocery, butcher’s and fruit and vegetable shops in many ways represented a hindrance to the modernisation of the food trades through supermarket operations. First, many were too small for conversion to supermarket formats containing a range of non-food as well as food items, or even to larger self-service food retailing through food halls.\(^\text{44}\) Second, as discussed below, others were in locations considered unsuitable for redevelopment with such formats.\(^\text{45}\) As a consequence the society faced potentially significant exit sunk costs in seeking to dispose of their small counter-service units and adopt new trading methods in larger supermarket outlets. Faced with market rental costs described by the society’s grocery department manager as being ‘terrificly high’,\(^\text{46}\) financing the acquisition of new sites suitable for supermarket development was difficult. So too was meeting the cost of redeveloping existing sites for supermarket trading. Thanks to its extensive property portfolio the society could point to an advantage over some of the less well capitalised rivals emerging in the market,\(^\text{47}\) but like the movement as whole it was bound by its practice of distributing capital surplus, particularly though the dividend. As Sparks notes in his review of post-war consumer co-operation, the result of this approach has been that ‘in a situation where locations have changed, and the price of developing retail outlets has … rocketed, many societies have found themselves under capitalised.’\(^\text{48}\) The LCS was no different in this regard.\(^\text{49}\) Perhaps unsurprisingly the LCS’s first supermarket was developed on a site converted from use as a small drapery store.\(^\text{50}\)

One upshot of the society’s existing infrastructure of smaller shops across the food trades was the attempt, where conditions permitted, to physically combine two or
more adjacent shops into new larger self-service food halls. Whilst not initially
carrying much in the way of non-food, these halls provided an extended array of food
goods in a larger, more attractive self-service store environment. The LCS had 24
such food halls by 1961 and placed emphasis on them in their store development
plans of the early 1960s. By 1965 it had 6 halls that it considered in size and turnover
to be essentially similar to a supermarket. Further discussion on the society’s
development of the food hall format is provided below.

When the LCS did eventually embark on developing supermarkets in the early
1960s, like other retailers it faced challenges in gaining the necessary management
expertise to ensure efficient store location research and assessment. In their review of
this aspect of LCS operations BBDO concluded that, overall, the processes of store
research and development were ‘amateur and old fashioned’ and that ‘too many of
your stores are in the wrong places, too many of your new stores and conversions are
not good enough and too much money is locked up in unproductive real estate.’
According to BBDO, what was needed was a new store research and development
unit along the lines of those run by the private multiples and utilising the services of
outside professionals such as architects, supermarket planners and property
developers.

The development of the LCS’s second supermarket at Loughton, which
opened to much fanfare in 1962, illustrates the challenges faced in opening innovative
new supermarket stores. The store was extremely large by standards of the day, with
the 28 165 sq ft site providing 15 250 sq feet of selling space. The new store, it was
reported, was expected to draw trade from a thickly populated area between
Leytonstone in the South and Harlow in the North, with the Debden housing estate
being a short bus ride away. However, within a year serious concerns were being
raised about the performance of the store. With sales reportedly below those needed for profitability, executives began to view the store as being too large for its ‘comparatively thinly surrounding population’. As a consequence plans were made for the alternative use of 40 per cent of the store’s space for heavy furnishing goods and for a pharmacy to be brought in, both elements under separate control from the supermarket. The store was reported as being profitable for the first time in the society’s balance sheet for the year ending January 1966.

“Shopping Environment and Service” is the second offering element for discussion. Remarking upon the opening of the LCS’s first self-service store in 1942, the then food trades manager recalled that the society was keen to find out four things: would the customer pick up their own goods; could the LCS get higher through put from the staff; was it possible to use less experienced assistants; and could pilfering be guarded against? By the 1960s the retail management challenges of self-service trading in supermarkets were more substantial as firms competed to offer the shopper more innovations. A research report by J. Walter Thompson noted of the “housewife” on a shopping trip ‘Inside the supermarket she is in a new and exciting, although to some people a confusing, atmosphere. She may shop to music or relayed sales messages; and she is confronted with new products, daily bargains, unusual form and colour combinations in packaging and increasingly sophisticated methods of display.’ In this environment of product and service innovation and spectacle even the newly converted self-service outlets of the LCS were the subject of some critical scrutiny.

BBDO, for example, reported that among co-operative members and non-members alike more thought the society’s stores ‘less up to date’ than competitors’ stores than those considering ‘them more up to date’. This, it was suggested, may
have reflected the view that the co-operative movement as a whole had an old fashioned ‘cloth cap’ look to it.\textsuperscript{61} Whatever the cause this perception was problematic because shopping environment and service were obviously important to shoppers in their choice of store. The society’s newer self service stores were generally considered an improvement over its more traditional counter service outlets, but some shoppers thought they compared poorly to the competitors’ large supermarkets, being less roomy and less well organised. As one non LCS member is reported as saying of their self-service stores ‘As they’re not as big as the supermarkets they don’t seem to carry much stock – or they give that impression as they’re smaller.’ Another stated ‘supermarkets are much better because they’re more roomy.’\textsuperscript{62} Similar shopper sentiments were aired when the contest for managerial control of the LCS made the national media in 1963. In a script for the BBC’s \textit{Panorama} television programme one shopper is quoted ‘well, I don’t know in what way, they just don’t compare with other shops, with the supermarkets, they’re just not quite so attractive to go into as the supermarkets.’\textsuperscript{63} However, for some shoppers the private multiples’ supermarkets were not the pinnacle to aim for. As one occasional shopper at the LCS’s new self-service outlets reported to BBDO ‘The local one is very nice. It’s well laid out, easy to find things. It’s less garish than other supermarkets. It doesn’t push itself to the same extent. The co-op always has dignity.’\textsuperscript{64}

The LCS first supermarket proper opened on August 19\textsuperscript{th} 1962 at Becontree. Understandably the society made much of its new 3 000 square foot supermarket. But the reviewer from the trade press \textit{Grocers’ Gazette} was far from overawed by the new development. The store, it was argued, was comparatively small and it was noted that the LCS already had larger food halls in operation. Aisles were criticised as being too narrow, leading to congestion, and the departmental layout was not typical of the
latest design. Commenting on advertisement features placed in local press supplements by the society, the author for the *Gazette* could find little evidence to support claims of this development being the result of an ‘adventurous LCS…’ or representing ‘shopping revolutions’. It was the LCS’s opening of what was reported to be the capital’s largest supermarket at Loughton three months later that signalled their ambition to use the modern format to its fullest potential. Here reviews were more positive, seemingly impressed by its 150 foot covered frontage and sheer scale, and noting innovations in gondola arrangement and the attempt to present an ‘open market atmosphere’. Complimentary reports suggested that having parked the pram at the large pram park, the shopper could push her two tier trolley around the vast store to the sound of piped music, observing the deep price cuts that abound and all the while confident that the store has a commissionaire to ‘keep an eye on junior’.

We now turn to the issue of “Product Assortment”; the third of Goldman’s offering components. As the *Financial Times* remarked, ‘While the supermarkets are busily working to acquire the knowledge [of how to sell non-food items], the Co-ops individually possess long experience over the whole range of consumer goods’. This was certainly true. Societies also enjoyed the supply chain infrastructure provided by the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS). While the full potential of the relationship between the movement’s production, wholesale and retail parts was far from realised, co-operatives were notionally in a strong position to meet the increasingly wide assortment of products being offered in the newest and largest of its rivals’ supermarkets.

The reality was a mixed affair. In a review of supermarket retailing across the movement in 1962 the *Co-operative News* remarked on the continued heavy reliance on trade in grocery, cigarettes and tobacco, noting that about one third of its
supermarkets did not yet sell non-food. Stores with an average of 4 000 sq feet typically had about 60 per cent of their floor area devoted to grocery goods alone. In smaller self-service outlets the figure rose to 70 per cent.\textsuperscript{70} The absence of non-food in many “supermarkets” sat uncomfortably with much modern practice and with the CWS’s view of what a modern supermarket should look like. In a letter sent to societies in early 1961 it had explained that ‘In light of contemporary trends the CWS Board feels that typical co-operative supermarket should have a minimum sales area of 4000 sq ft and sell groceries, provisions, fresh fruit, vegetables fresh meats, a selected range of household requisites and other dry goods.’\textsuperscript{71}

The LCS’s purpose-designed supermarkets seemingly met many of the criteria. The opening of the Becontree store revealed a selection of towels, toasters, electric fires, toys, china and glass for sale. Its manager was keen to boast that as a result of the society’s dry goods department he could get some non-food goods he wanted into store within 24 hours.\textsuperscript{72} The society’s third supermarket, opened in Walthamstow in September 1963, was arranged on an approximately 90/10 spilt (food to non-food) with non-foods being focussed around easily carried clothing items.\textsuperscript{73} The opening of the Loughton supermarket took the LCS’s attempts to combine food and non-food trading under one supermarket roof to another level. Approximately half of the 15 000 sq ft trading hall was devoted to foodstuffs and the remainder given over to non-foods.\textsuperscript{74} In addition to the food department with large deep freeze and delicatessen sections, advertisements for the store remarked on its extensive range of non-food goods including a fashion department, linen and kitchenware, soft furnishings, electrical goods, health and beauty, record bar and gifts and toys.\textsuperscript{75} Yet it is also instructive to consider the subsequent sales performance of the various supermarket departments. Grocery unsurprisingly dominated sales in all three
supermarkets, but the performance reported for “dry goods” was at best modest. In the two smaller supermarkets at Becontree and Walthamstow dry goods were typically far outsold in value by tobacco products.76

Like other co-operative societies the LCS pursued a strategy of developing larger self-service food halls, both stand alone and within its department stores.77 Combining two or more of the main food trades, the society’s food halls provided the shopper with a wider product assortment than many of its smaller self-service grocery outlets. Yet the combination of previously separate food trades units posed merchandising and other problems. During a period of accelerated conversions in 1962 a deputation of the society’s fruit and vegetable managers met with the Food Trades Manager to raise concerns over the integration of previously separate units into food halls. Included among these were what they considered the frequent lack of adequate product preparation space, shoppers’ lack of acceptance of pre-packaged products that were crucial to self-service operations and their dislike of having ‘to wander around the rest of the Food Hall’ to reach the exit, and the high sales targets placed on the newly integrated units. The deputation suggested that it was perhaps better if only the unprofitable fruit and vegetable operations be combined into food halls. Acknowledging some of the difficulties and limitations in current hall design, the society’s Food Trades Manager was nonetheless driven to remark upon the apparent “departmentalism” he perceived in some of the discussions.78

Typical early food halls lacked a significant non-food component. Consequently the food hall concept seemed increasingly moribund as the full supermarket format evolved among competitors and the LCS sought to introduce an increasing range of non-foods into the halls.79 By 1963 the society was forced to
accept the far greater popular appeal of the term “supermarket”, and chose to adopt it for all stores over 2000 sq feet and to promote them to the public as such.\textsuperscript{80}

The fourth offering component “Price” represented an increasingly important element of the supermarket. Surveys of shoppers’ attitudes to the supermarket undertaken during the early 1960s stressed the advantages they offered in terms of providing a one stop shop, a hygienic shopping environment and a time saving shopping experience.\textsuperscript{81} Lower prices in supermarkets were less strongly reported as a particular advantage, perhaps in part due to interviewees wishing to provide socially desirable answers. Only 13 per cent of J. Walter Thompson’s survey of almost 1400 women shoppers reported lower prices as a particular advantage of the supermarket format.\textsuperscript{82} One woman’s response was ‘You have to watch prices, though. In the supermarket they’re not always cut-price’.\textsuperscript{83}

This was certainly true in some cases, but price competition had increasingly become a part of the supermarket’s impact. Resale Price Maintenance had virtually broken down in grocery by 1959, and its demise had started somewhat earlier in the highly competitive London market.\textsuperscript{84} In 1958 the LCS had seen the need to launch a “price-attraction” policy, selling fast moving grocery products below normal prices in response to the price cutting of the supermarkets.\textsuperscript{85} However, sustaining this price competition was problematic due to the greater costs incurred by the LCS’s food retail operations. Whilst the LCS believed that their supermarket rivals operated on costs of 2s 6d in the £ or less, comparable figures for the LCS were reported as 3s 2d (grocery), 4s 6d (butchery) and 4s 10d (fruit and vegetables).\textsuperscript{86}

BBDO’s research findings pointed to significant weaknesses in consumer’s reaction to the LCS offer on price. Surveying both members and non-members the report found that the LCS was perceived by the vast majority to be similar or higher in
price to rival multiples. Members and non members alike thought that the private multiples offered the lowest prices, with Sainsbury, Victor Value and Tesco frequently mentioned as being the cheapest for groceries.\textsuperscript{87} BBDO reported that 60 per cent of the more than 530 members questioned claimed to use another (non LCS) store most often for their groceries.\textsuperscript{88}

Following a change of management control of the LCS in 1962, the result of the bitter struggle between the 1960 Campaign Committee and the vanquished LCMO, the society set about plans to compete better against the private multiples, particularly the supermarket retailers.\textsuperscript{89} Conspicuous among these was the adoption of an aggressive and flexible pricing policy, with regional and area co-ordinators empowered to make price cuts and selected discounts to meet the competition of private multiples in their area on a shop by shop basis.\textsuperscript{90} In October 1962 the society launched an “instant dividend” at its self-service stores and a guaranteed 6d dividend at other shops.\textsuperscript{91} However, the instant dividend was restricted to larger self-service stores by 1963.\textsuperscript{92} Its reduction and ultimate demise came amid considerable acrimony between rival groups on the society’s management board, including contested allegations as to members’ commitment to the on-going modernisation of the retail trades and dispute over the society’s actual trading performance.\textsuperscript{93}

It was into this highly price competitive London market that the LCS opened its first supermarkets, competing against large private multiples able to sustain low margin trading. The society sought to heavily promote the price competitiveness of each of its supermarkets of course. Its paper \textit{Citizen} stressed that the Loughton supermarket was about providing value for shoppers and noted the deep price cuts available on a number of lines.\textsuperscript{94} Similarly, in an allusion to the street markets operating close to the Walthamstow supermarket, the supermarket’s manager stressed
to readers of the local press that shoppers at his store could enjoy hygienic food retailing together with ‘barrow boy prices’ without the discomfort of street trading. Yet this need for heavy discounting and price competition provides some explanation for the fact that all of the LCS supermarkets recorded net losses during their initial years of trading. As the society’s Chief Accountant noted in his report for the year ending 1964, despite rising sales ‘to date …the supermarket venture has been a complete failure; the trade achieved has been inadequate in view of the low gross profit rate, the wage cost and the high overheads following the heavy capital cost’. Yet the report went on to suggest that the LCS was not alone in finding difficulties with supermarket profitability in 1963 and argued that across the trade there was evidence of the impact of ‘low-price selling’ on supermarket profitability. Based on this, a somewhat brighter outlook of reduced loss-leading activities and gently upward margins was forecast for the middle years of the 1960s.

The final offering component for consideration is “Marketing and Promotion”. In an attempt to promote a new image and the aggressive pricing policies of the LCS, BBDO’s public relations firm PDA was engaged to handle a major LCS advertising and publicity campaign. Their UK head concluded ‘We’ll go out and knock spots of John Cohen and his supermarket chain.’ Television and press advertisements were designed to push the new message of the LCS under the general slogan ‘Buy better for less at the LCS’. An advertisement in the Evening Standard proclaimed ‘Check this list carefully. It shows every London housewife how much she saves … at LCS self-service shops. Our computers work it out at 10.7208%’. As we have seen, this was supported by promotion of the price competitiveness of each of the society’s supermarkets at the time of their opening.
Among other store outputs emphasis was placed on the convenience of having food and non-food items under one roof in the supermarket. This was intended to reflect emerging evidence that women food shoppers favoured the supermarket as it could offer ‘all you want in one shop’. Unsurprisingly the new, very large supermarket at Loughton was strongly promoted as a ‘shopping centre for the whole family’. The Co-operative News announced ‘It’s everything for everybody in London’s giant supermarket’. Yet, self-service shopping and the supermarket format provided challenges as well as opportunities to the food shopper during the 1960s. For housewives seeking to meet their responsibilities for proficient shopping switching to these new formats could create anxiety and required the nurturing of new skills. Retailers sought to adopt the leitmotiv “modern” to reassure consumers. The LCS was no different in this regard. For example, emphasis was placed on the theme of modernity in promotional literature for the opening of the Stratford Food Hall in spring 1962. Similarly, press supplements to advertise the new Becontree supermarket reportedly spoke of ‘[the] supermarket of the future…’ and of ‘Advanced American ideas…’ The opening of the large Loughton supermarket later in the same year was promoted with clear reference to one particular theme of the early 1960s. One advertisement announced ‘The LCS bring space-age shopping to Loughton’.

‘Know-How’ (internal) elements of the supermarket format

Know-how consists of “Retail Technology” and “Retail Culture” elements. In terms of retail technology, which is discussed first, attention is focussed upon the important

23
issue of supply chain systems. The accelerated development of low margin, high turnover retailing through larger self-service stores and supermarkets placed increased pressure on supply chain systems and necessitated improvements in stock handling. The financial press drew broad comparisons between the private multiples, lauded for their ‘computer controlled stock systems and expert management’ and the systems and processes of non-modernising co-operative societies.\textsuperscript{107} However, manufacturers maintained a strong position in the distribution chain and played an increasingly important role through rising direct to store delivery. Many major retailers’ distributions systems were in need of modernization.\textsuperscript{108} J. Sainsbury was reported to openly acknowledge the dated nature of its distribution infrastructure compared to that of its shops.\textsuperscript{109} The company set about investing in new distribution centres during the early 1960s; the first opened in Basingstoke, Hampshire in 1964.

It was against this backdrop that in 1963 the Board of the CWS approached societies about the introduction of its plan for regional distribution centres aimed to introduce the “newest technologies” to the distribution system and reduce the costly duplication of co-operative society warehouse infrastructure.\textsuperscript{110} The LCS was critical of what it saw as a delay by the CWS in coming to terms with the need for revised warehouse and distribution systems. Instead it suggested that the society should proceed with its own warehouse project,\textsuperscript{111} the significance of supply chain modernisation having been highlighted in an internal grocery department enquiry of 1963. This enquiry reported that the society’s warehousing capacity was out of proportion with the demands placed upon it and set down plans to deal with this.\textsuperscript{112} Falling departmental sales and rising direct to store delivery from private manufacturers meant that the society’s warehouses handled only 50 per cent of the society’s retail trade.\textsuperscript{113} In relation to their organisation the report continued ’(the)
present warehouse arrangements are not designed as a slave to the shops’ or laid out with regard to the general need of the branches. As a consequence, the stock holding areas of many branches were reported to be congested and inadequate for the increased amount of pre-packaging occurring in store.

The poorly organised nature of the warehouses in relation to shop needs was particularly problematic as self-service retailing necessitated the pre-packaging of most foodstuffs. Whilst non-perishable foods came to the stores pre-packaged from manufacturers and wholesalers, many perishables continued to be packaged in store and in the case of fresh meat retailing this necessitated investment in specialised cutting and preparation rooms. Management of the LCS grocery department considered that the society should be mirroring sector trends toward more pre-packaging taking place in central warehouses, but special provision was made in its new supermarkets for extensive food preparation at the store. Whilst the trading area of the society’s first purpose-developed supermarket at Becontree was comparatively small at only 3 000 square feet, the store nonetheless provided an almost similar amount of above-store warehousing space and a purpose-designed ground level packaging room. Similarly, the later Walthamstow supermarket had a sales area of 4 700 square feet supported by a further 2 300 square feet of storage, preparation and refrigeration space. The much larger Loughton supermarket had far more extensive food preparation and pre-packaging areas, starting with its integrated butchery cutting room that customers of its meat department could observe directly from the trading floor. Behind this lay almost 6500 sq ft of warehousing and a 2650 sq feet loading bay providing a ‘streamlined… supply operation.’

Finally we consider “Retail Culture”, the second main know-how component of the retail format. Discussions of the distinctive characteristics of the co-operative’s
management structure and of the tensions between the movement’s commercial and ideological interests are well versed in recent literature. Such tensions came to the fore in the electoral battles for control of the LCS management committee during the early 1960s. Complicated by deep political divisions, the electoral contests resulted in serious infighting between rival management lobbies, ultimately leading to legal action. The political foundations of these contests are not the focus of this section. Nonetheless their effects should not be underestimated in terms of their ability to drawing focus away from the pressing needs for improved retail management.

Rapid growth of the private multiples’ share of the food market focussed commentator attention on the differences in structure and organisational culture between them and the co-operative societies. The issue was widely aired. Alongside inflammatory press descriptions of ‘pig-headed committees that just talk, talk, talk while the superstores steal their trade…’ came rather more considered assessments of the deficiencies of management in many co-operative societies in comparison to that of the multiples.

The LCS’s retail management structure increasingly came under attack from ‘modernisers’ from within and without. BBDO considered that to successfully rejuvenate the food trades required a change of management. Indeed it asserted that poor management was the main problem of the LCS’s food business; with new management needed that is ‘good enough to run a £30m business…’ BBDO concluded further that such management needed the input of outside management counselling. Similarly, in a notorious attack on the traditional management structure of the LCS following a society visit to the Konsum co-operative in Stockholm, LCS President Stonehouse remarked in the pages of The Grocer ‘due to historic circumstances, the LCS control structure has grown into a rather complex bureaucracy
which tends to centralise detailed trading decisions, blunt initiative in the executive ranks and delay action’. He continued, ‘In practice many officials prefer to shelter behind committees rather than taking personal responsibility. The system encourages timidity and inaction…’ ¹²³ Such comments need to be read in the context of the on-going bitter dispute and division among members of the LCS management board. Nevertheless, the challenge of combining co-operative business efficiency with the ethos of democratic control was the subject of more wide ranging enquiry at the time.¹²⁴

Planning for the development of supermarket trading itself required revisions to management structures, with the existing sub-committee organisation considered impractical for their management. Accordingly, the society’s Chief Officer and Secretary set down plans for a “Supermarket Division”. Merchandise sold in the supermarkets would be obtained through the existing buying organisation of the food, dry goods and pharmacy departments but the division would operate independent of these, recruiting its own staff and organising its own promotion and selling. It was agreed that during the early phases of supermarket development the Assistant Chief Officer and Secretary would have control and responsibility for these operations, thus avoiding the need for the various sub-committees to be continuously consulted as the business progressed.¹²⁵

The possibility for tension between commercial and ideological interests could also be manifest in the reactions of members and employees to the modernisation of retailing through the adoption of large self-service units and supermarkets.¹²⁶ For some members of the movement the closure of smaller, economically inefficient yet convenient society branches in local neighbourhoods in order to save costs, or to make way for a proposed supermarket, was emblematic of the dangers of ill-managed
change and sat uncomfortably with their interpretation of the movement’s purpose. The closure of the LCS branch in Walthamstow, nearby its recently opened supermarket, saw a petition of protest from the Walthamstow Women’s Guild to the Co-operative Union demanding ‘… that it is kept open as a service to the members especially the old and loyal ones’. The issue of shop closures was also raised in the bitter row among members of the management committee. Stiffened resistance to Stonehouse’s presidency reportedly led one member of the management committee to draw parallels with the impact of Beeching on the railways and to argue that the society should not continue closing branches without considering the social consequences. The retailing practices employed in the society’s supermarkets were also the subject of debate and disappointment for some members and their representatives. Eleven months after the opening of the Loughton supermarket LCS officials met with a deputation from Debden Loughton Co-operative Party to discuss their concerns over the trading methods at the store. These included worries that the range of CWS goods sold was too small, a related objection to the space given over to promotion of private manufactured products and unhappiness that non-members shopping at the store enjoyed the same benefits as members.

Unsurprisingly there were diverse opinions across the movement, as well as within societies, as to the means by which to best meet the challenges posed by the private multiples’ supermarkets. The proposals of the LCS to compete through an instant dividend drew a rather critical consideration in the official journal of the co-operative movement Co-operative News. Such a policy, it was argued, diluted the distinctive features of the co-operative and reduced its social purpose thus rendering it no different than any private multiple. As Fulop noted, the dividend had an emotional hold over co-operators at this time, its primacy remaining official co-
operative policy. The LCS’s Stonehouse argued that the co-operative movement as a whole continued to pay insufficient attention to new methods in retailing despite attempts to revise management structures of the Co-operative Union. He concluded, ‘We have not studied enough nor applied sufficiently the new techniques in retailing including supplier relations, supermarket trading, non-food trading in supermarkets and so on.’ When members of the LCS hosted a conference “The Way Forward in Retail Trading” its organiser Stonehouse claimed he had ‘no wish to interfere with anything that is being done by the Union and its committees but it is very important that societies should be able to meet and discuss problems that are with us all the time and are developing week by week without waiting for Congress to come along.’

Conclusions

The late 1950s and early 1960s were clearly a time of great challenge and difficulty for the LCS’s food retailing operations. The growing emphasis on supermarket development by the private multiples trading in the London area put considerable pressure on the society’s place as a major player in the capital’s food retail market. These supermarket retailers were working on downwardly revised margins and costs in an environment of intensified competition for trade and labour. It was into this arena that the LCS embarked upon its development of supermarket retailing operations. The study offers us an insight into a period of learning for the society about the supermarket format and its potential. Much of this learning was forced upon the LCS. From the late 1950s onwards the society launched numerous price reduction schemes designed to meet the threat posed by the multiples’ supermarkets as it
eventually hurried to develop its own such outlets. By 1963 the society made the fundamental decision to use the term “supermarket” for all of its larger stores in an attempt to attract customers desirous of the outputs they perceived such new store types could offer.

Another manifestation of this period of learning about the supermarket innovation is the diversity of large self-service stores initially operated by the society. The earliest experiences of such operations came through the society’s food halls. As non-foods were introduced into these halls the larger of these became effectively supermarkets, being very much comparable to the society’s two smaller, purpose-developed supermarkets. Turning to the supermarkets, in store size and offer the contrast between the society’s first supermarket opened at Becontree and its second at Loughton was marked. Trade press reviews portrayed Becontree as a small, unexceptional supermarket and one that failed to live up to the society’s boasts of ‘shopping revolutions’. The Loughton store opened only three months later revealed the real ambitions of the LCS to benefit from the new large format approach. The history of supermarket development was not characterised by the roll out of a homogenous store type; instead it was a “messy” process including much trial and error. Nonetheless, the significance going forward of developing larger supermarkets was clear.\(^{135}\)

The use of a detailed conceptualisation of the format incorporating offering and know-how components allows for a more comprehensive consideration of the LCS management’s engagement with the supermarket format. It can also provide some explanation for variations between the supermarket operations of private multiples, independents and co-operative societies. The main focus here has been on the co-operative society aspect. In relation to the offering components, it is clear that
the development of supermarkets provided new challenges in terms of the planning of store locations, the design of store environments and their provision of service, pricing strategy and wider marketing and promotion. In each of these domains supermarket operations required changes from the practices adopted by the LCS for both counter-service operations and more recently established smaller self-service stores.

Know-how components of the format were more hidden to the customer but were increasingly fundamental to the successful operation of supermarkets. In relation to systems and procedures, this paper has placed emphasis on the pressures on supply chain systems resulting from the development of larger, higher turnover stores. A particular requirement during the study period was for more extensive food storage and preparation areas. The paper has also revealed the significance of an appreciation of the “retail culture” of the co-operative movement as a whole, and the LCS in particular, to our understanding of the supermarket developments that occurred. The often uneasy combination of enterprise and social goals that characterise the movement was further uncovered by the challenges of retail modernisation during the study period. The desire to maintain democratic principles of control proved very problematic as practiced by the LCS during the study period. Of course the management boards of many private multiples were themselves the source of unproductive friction, but the in-fighting between rival management groups at the LCS appears singularly bitter and certainly represented a distraction from the pressing business at hand. The movement’s practices and norms in the distribution of capital, both imposed and self-imposed, meant it faced particular difficulties in financing the heavily capital intensive new store developments required. When the new stores were opened the LCS, like other societies, could face criticism and dissatisfaction from
employees and shopper members alike. Again there is no suggestion that private multiples were immune from such criticism, but the particular nature of the cooperative movement and its effective ownership by members meant that it drove further to the heart of retail societies deliberations on how to best meet the diverse demands placed upon them going forward.

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See for example Resseguie, “Alexander Turney Stewart”.

As Crossick and Jaumain argue in another context, such a search would be mistaken. Crossick and Jaumain, “World of the Department Store”.

Shaw and Alexander, “British Co-operative Societies”.


Bishopsgate Institute’s Collection Guide to the London Co-operative Society, no date.

Fulop, Competition for Consumers.


For a discussion of the stages in the evolution of the supermarket format in the US see Goldman, “Stages in the Development”.

Mayo, American Grocery Store; OEEC, Economic Performance.


Lewison, Retailing: 141-42.

Davies, “Applying Evolutionary Models”; see also, Dawson and Mukoyama, “Increase in International Activity”.

Goldman, “Transfer of Retail”.

Ibid. 223.

See, for example, Au-Yeung, “International Transfer”.

See also Shaw and Alexander, “British Co-operative Societies”; Salmon “‘Real’ Retailing Revolution”.

For studies focussing on aspects of retail change see Shaw et al., “Selling Self-Service”, Alexander et al., “Promoting Retail”; Shaw and Alexander, “British Co-operative Societies”; For studies concerned with the implications for consumer practices see Bowlby, “Supermarket Futures”; Carried Away; Humphery, Shelf Life; Usherwood, “Mrs Housewife”; Du Gay, “Self-Service”; Alexander et al., “Innovation and Shopping”.

Fulop, Competition for Consumers; Shaw and Alexander, “British Co-operative Societies”.

Birchall, Co-op.

McClelland, “Economics of the Supermarket”.

See Fulop, Competition for Consumers; Dawson, “Innovation Adoption”.

38
The elections for control of the LCS in the early 1960s are among the bitterest in co-op history. The detail of the various political machinations behind these elections and their aftermath are relevant here only in so far as they offer insight into the management of the retail food trades.

Stonehouse was Labour co-operative MP for Wednesbury (1957-1974). He served on the board of the LCS 1956-1962, and as President 1962-64. Stonehouse was the successful London Co-operative Members’ Organisation (LCMO) candidate for the presidency in the 1962 election, but the majority of the board were drawn from the rival 1960 Campaign Committee.


LCSA: 1295, LCS marketing study and recommendations, Nov. 1962.


LCSA: ‘Box A-E’ Publications: LCS Always A Step Ahead, 1960. In addition the society operated more than 350 butcher’s shops and fruit and vegetable outlets.


Ibid.


The Times, 22 March 1962.


Ibid.

Goldman, “Transfer of Retail”.

22 Ostergaard and Halsey, Power in Co-operatives.


24 The People, 8 Jan. 1962.


26 Co-operative Independent Commission Report, 45.

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36 Ibid.


38 The Times, 22 March 1962.


40 Ibid.

41 Goldman, “Transfer of Retail”.
Richardson, CWS.

Jefferys (1954) considered the co-operative movement to have entered the post-war period in an advantageous position to the multiples as a result of its comparatively larger sized premises and ownership of clusters of adjoining shops. Yet many of these were inadequate for redevelopment to meet the supermarket standards of the mid-1960s. Jefferys, Retail Trading.

LCSA: 1295, LCS marketing study and recommendations, Nov. 1962.


Sparks, “Consumer Co-operation”: 42.

Hutton “Why Did London Fail?”


LCSA: 1295, LCS marketing study and recommendations, Nov. 1962.

Ibid.

Financial Times, 22 Nov. 1962; Walthamstow Post 16 Nov. 1962.

The Grocers’ Gazette 24 Nov. 1962.


J. Walter Thompson, Shopping in Suburbia: 15

LCSA: 1297, LCS research report (Vol. 2) Nov. 1962. An earlier 1950 survey of co-operative shoppers had shown “political” motives influenced only a very small proportion in their choice of store. Co-operative News, 1950, cited in Fulop, Competition for Consumers.
64 LCSA: 1297, LCS research report (Vol. 2) Nov. 1962.
65 The Grocers’ Gazette, Aug. 18th 1962.
69 Richardson, CWS.
74 West Essex Gazette, no date.
75 Walthamstow Post, 16 Nov. 1962.
76 See for example LCSA: LCS No. 2 Sub-Committee Reports (Feb. 1965- July 1965), Report no. 1, 1 Feb 1965.
77 The LCS defined a food hall as a selling unit wholly or mainly organised on a self-service basis achieving average weekly sales in excess of £3 000 and including two or more of the following main food trades in each of which average weekly sales in excess of £300 are achieved: grocery and provisions, including sweets and tobacco; butchery; fruit and vegetables; bread and flour; confectionary. LCSA132: LCS Chief Officer and Secretary’s Reports (Mar 1961- Aug 1961). Report of 28 July 1961.
The LCS also met USDAW’s call for the introduction of a five-day, 40-hour week for shop workers, matching the position of a few of the multiples. *Times*, 16 July 1962.


*Evening Standard*, 2 Oct. 1962. These were reported price reductions against manufacturers’ list prices, not savings compared to rival retailers.

J. Walter Thompson, *Shopping in Suburbia*.

*Walthamstow Post*, 16 Nov. 1962.


Usherwood, “Mrs Housewife”; Alexander et al., “Innovation and Shopping”.
104 Express, 6 Apr. 1962.
106 LCS Supplement to Express and Independent, no date.
107 Financial Times, 4 Sept. 1962.
108 McKinnon, “Distribution Systems”.
109 JS Journal, July 1967 “The self service of Sainsbury’s”.
110 Richardson, CWS: 249.
113 Ibid.
114 For a wider discussion of this see Merchandising Vision (British Cellophane Ltd.), Vol. 6 No. 5, 1961; Vol. 8 No. 5, 1963; Vol. 11 No. 1, 1966.
117 Walthamstow Post, 16 Nov. 1962.
119 Brazda and Schediwy, Consumer Co-operatives; Saxena and Craig, “Consumer Co-operatives”; Hallsworth and Bell, “Retail Change”.
120 The People, 8 Jan. 1962.
122 LCSA: 1295, LCS marketing study and recommendations, Nov. 1962.
123 The Grocer, 6 Apr. 1963.
124 Stephenson, Management in Co-operative Societies; Ostergaard and Halsey, Power in Co-operatives; see also Co-operative Independent Commission Report; Stonehouse, Death of an Idealist.
126 For a discussion in relation to co-operative employees see Du Gay, “Self-Service”.
127 Fulop, Competition for Consumers; Sparks, “Consumer Co-operation”.

43
128 LCSA: 87, LCS Chief Officer and Secretary’s Reports (Jan 1964 - Jan 1965), report submitted by Chief Officer and Secretary to Management Committee, 13 May 1964.


132 Fulop, Competition for Consumers.

