

## **Unicorn Pre-history – written by Griff Dines, December 1995**

Griff Dines and Adam York were introduced by Andy Hibbert (of Daily Bread, Cambridge), both having expressed an interest of establishing a similar worker co-operative enterprise in Manchester. They met a couple of times in mid 1994, together with Ian Browne.

Preliminary discussions showed that some progress could be made and that further meetings would take place once Adam had completed his move (to Chorlton).

Meetings towards a co-op began in earnest early in 1995 – the first in my diary is for Feb 28<sup>th</sup> – but I suspect we met before then – anyhow we agreed to produce a document with which to circulate interested parties, asking them to attend an open evening at which we would discuss our ideas and sketch our vision of a Daily Bread-type Co-op for Manchester.

We agreed a document which was sent to about 15 people. Adam produced the first drafts and Griff typed and printed them. Ian produced material on Market Research. People were invited to a meeting on April 2<sup>nd</sup> where we hoped to find enough interest to launch a Working Group who would develop the ideas towards fruition. We met on March 14<sup>th</sup> to facilitate matters.

April 2<sup>nd</sup> was a damp squib because we received no definite commitment from anyone! Paul Wilding indicated his support but was unable to attend daytime meetings. Others wished us well but couldn't give any other support. So the Working Group was Griff, Ian and Adam.

We asked Daily Bread Northampton if they would send us various facts and figures to help develop a Business Plan (which they eventually did). We also asked them if they would consider licensing us as a DB3 along the lines of DB Cambridge as DB2 – to this they answered quite categorically no, which was disappointing. We tried to visit Northampton but were unable to find a mutually convenient time. We were able to visit DB Cambridge, though, and some Leicester Wholefood too – on April 18<sup>th</sup>.

Around this time we settled on a working name – Sorrel York supplying the inspiration.

We developed the prototype prospectus towards a draft statement of purpose and a business plan. Adam did most of the spadework for the first draft with Ian helping with regard to the Market Information and some of the financial implications (e.g. wage rates). Griff did the collating and typing up. My diary records meetings on April 25<sup>th</sup>, May 6<sup>th</sup>, May 24<sup>th</sup>, June 14<sup>th</sup>, June 27<sup>th</sup> and July 19<sup>th</sup>.

The main work was developing the business plan. We circulated the draft to friends and interested parties for criticism and amended and developed this into a "Statement of Purpose and Business Plan" which we intended to circulate to grant makers and money lenders.

However, Adam particularly worked hard trying to make contacts which would be helpful in the short, medium and long term. He had discussions with Emerson Reed who help businesses in planning their start-up – indeed Griff and Adam met someone at Emerson Reed on August 8<sup>th</sup> and although they were sympathetic and had some ideas about where we might find grant money, they were also cautious to pessimistic about us raising any.

For the medium term, Adam contacted various possibilities for grant aid – Mental Health charities, Health Authorities, Social Services, other Local Authority agencies, sources for European money, to name a few. None of these seemed very enthusiastic or helpful.

For the long term, he had discussions about planning permission, about business start-up grants, about business rates and so on – all useful information gathering.

Another possible source of funding seemed to be training – if we could offer training to GNVQ standards then we could attract money e.g. via TEC. Ian investigated these possibilities. They were a bit vague, made vaguer by the fact that over the Summer Ian decided he had to withdraw from the Working Group in order to move to France with his son.

By the Summer of 1995 we were in a position:

- a/ to register unicorn and
- b/ to send off the Business Plan to
  - i) those who might invest in loanstock and
  - ii) those who might make a grant to us.

Unicorn Grocery Limited was registered on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1995. Founder members were Ian Browne, Griff Dines, Gary Lawson, Matt Robson, Jane McCourt, Paul Wilding and Adam York. We registered as an Industrial and Provident Society using the ICOM “white rules”. Although we had the requisite 7 founder members, Ian was en route to France, Gary, Matt, Jane and Paul were to a greater or lesser extent “sleeping” members and Adam and Griff were left to continue the initiative.

We registered the co-op and opened a Building Society account with the money chipped in by Adam and Griff (£1,000 and £2,000 respectively). This gave us a float to pay for the costs of circulating interested parties etc. prior to any formal launch of the business.

We printed 80 copies of the Business Plan and sought pledges of investment in Unicorn loanstock.

We received many positive responses in general to the idea and vision of a wholefood grocery along the lines we described in the Business Plan but rather fewer specific pledges of investment. We received even fewer indications that grant applications might be successful!

Griff and Adam continued to meet over the Autumn. I have record of us meeting on Sept. 12<sup>th</sup>, Sept. 29<sup>th</sup>, Oct 25<sup>th</sup> and Nov. 3<sup>rd</sup>. The agenda of these meetings could be summarised as Finance, Premises, People.

## **Finance**

As the responses to the Business Plan trickled in it became clear that we weren't going to get grant aid easily, if at all. There seem to be 3 factors here.

First, money, especially grant money, is tight, very tight.

Second, grants to charities are much easier to come by. People wanted to know much more about a worker co-op which was in its planning stage – not surprisingly they wanted to know more clearly who they were being asked to give money to.

Thirdly, grants are much more easily applied for and received once you are up and running than beforehand when you are in embryonic stage.

Finally, it became clear that we could still carry on without grants but with support from sympathetic individuals (by way of loanstock) backed up by a loan (e.g. from Co-op Bank). We received pledges from 10 individuals, plus indications from another 6 that they would consider seriously investing in the grocery. These, together with the money from Adam and Griff gave us an indication that we could sell between £15 – 20,000 of loanstock.

We ran a “worst case scenario” through the spreadsheet for cashflow and this showed that we could hang on in there with £20,000 loanstock, £20,000 bank loan and a £10,000 overdraft – paying £24,000 p.a. rent and rates. This gave us grounds for hope. Adam suggested we try selling loanstock by circulating our Business Plan more widely – suggested to N.W. shareholders of “ethical” companies like Bodyshop, Traidcraft and Mercury Provident.

## **Premises**

We drove around S. Manchester trying to suss out what areas might be attractive to look for premises. We had heard that Levenshulme station was on the market but when we poked our noses in were told to take them out again and that it had been sold to a fireplace wholesaler. We looked from Levenshulme through Withington and Didsbury to Chorlton, Northenden and Sale. Although any of these areas would be possible sites for the Grocery, Chorlton has advantages because of its “cosmopolitan” nature (and the fact that Adam lives on its doorstep!).

The industrial units beside Safeways in Albany Road would seem to be an ideal site, and amazingly for a while it seemed as though one of these (beside the workout gym) was going to be up for lease. But Adam was never quite able to catch up with “Bob” who was the (financial) landlord. He was able to gain insight into the intricacies of business rates, of the possible rental we might be looking at, of planning conditions, so it wasn't a completely fruitless negotiation.

We continued looking in Chorlton as well as keeping our eyes open in the other areas of South Manchester which would be possible.

### **People**

The working group of two is too small. In any case it would be good to see if anyone is interested in both joining the Working Group and in working in the Grocery when it opens. To this end we advertised in various "radical" newsletters/noticeboards.

There were a few responses of which the most promising seemed to be Diane Wimbush, who has a part-time job currently but is looking to find a job in an enterprise like Unicorn and who would be prepared to help in its planning. We invited her along to a meeting – 6<sup>th</sup> November.

Lucian Conway, who worked with Adam in Ploughshares is recently returned from TEFLing in S.America. He's expressed interest in working in Unicorn, although he's currently living in the South (working for BodyShop).

So, in summary, over the past 10 months we have agreed on a vision of a "foodstore" similar to the Daily Breads – with reserved employment for those with learning difficulties, We have produced a Statement of Intent and Business Plan and convinced enough people that it is a good idea to the extent that they are prepared to invest in it.

The major obstacle remaining is to secure premises from which to trade – all the other matters (people, finance particularly) have developed satisfactorily.  
*December 1995*

*Subsequent developments are in minute books....*

*12<sup>th</sup> August 1996  
Terms of lease agreed with Town and Country*

*28<sup>th</sup> September 1996  
Unicorn Grocery open*

*4<sup>th</sup> November 1996  
Weekly sales have evened out to average £3,500 after very good opening day*

*etc.*