New Stockwell House, August 2009

The lintel over the central window at New Stockwell House

requesting Leek and Moorlands to not loan at less than five per cent to aid their solvency. The only recorded collaboration except for the joint stand to repel carpetbaggers in 1999!

Strangely, considering the well-documented growth of the business under Hubert Newton in later years, between 1914 and 1916, approaches were declined from two societies looking to be taken over.

Following the Great War and Prime Minister David Lloyd George's famous speech containing the desire "to make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in", building societies not only recovered but grew and prospered. The period also coincided with the Leek and Moorlands establishing a branch and agency network.

New Stockwell House, as it was called and still is today, was completed in 1937 to house the rapidly expanding company. This building was more purpose-built with a formal boardroom and secure cellars for document storage.

Not to be overlooked, was the arrival in Leek, in 1933, of an ambitious and very astute man known then as Hubert Newton. He was appointed as Secretary whilst still only 29 years of age. The appointment marked the departure from a policy to recruit senior key positions from the local area as the Board recognised the need to bring in specialist talent.

Hubert Newton's connections and personal influence were instrumental in much of this growth and increasing the profile of the Society. He was by no means an "establishment man" and had fallen out with the Building Societies Association on several occasions. His contribution was recognised in 1968 when he was awarded a knighthood. Sir Hubert had also served as General Manager, Managing Director, Deputy Chairman and three separate stints as Chairman, a position he held until he stepped away from the Society in 1985, just over a year before his death.

To continue to survive and fulfil ambitious plans, the company needed to accelerate its growth. It started this with the takeover of the Longton Mutual Permanent Benefit Building Society in October, 1938. This was the first of many with a total of fifty-nine building societies being taken over or merged.

Particularly notable, as they resulted in name changes for the Society, were the unions with the Westbourne Park and Eastern Counties building societies in 1965 and 1974 respectively. Following this last change, it soon became apparent to Sir Hubert and the Board that a new title was required as the Leek, Westbourne and Eastern Counties Building Society was more than a little unwieldy! So how did Britannia enter the fray? A merger in July, 1974 with a much smaller institution, the Oldbury Britannia, gave Sir Hubert the idea of the name which was proud and summed up, to him, all that the company represented. And so, on 28 December, 1975, Britannia Building Society came into being.

Among these busy times was the opening of a new head office building, Newton House, in October, 1970. Ironically, the preferred site was on Barnfields Industrial Estate however the planning application was oddly declined by the local authority.

In 1975, premises on Strangman Street, Leek were purchased to house Printing and Stationery and, the following year, the Sports and Social Club was opened on the first floor of the same building, something Chris Lowe and other "long-servers" will still recall…

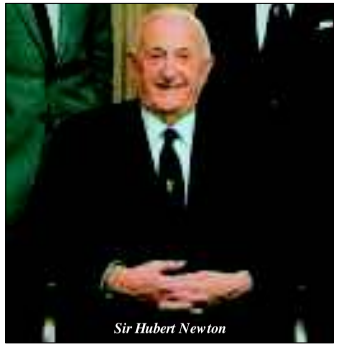
In the mid-1980's, a decision was made to close the Ipswich Head Office building, which had been kept on following the merger with the Eastern Counties

The National Garden Festival's takeover in Stoke-on-Trent of the old Shelton Bar steelworks in 1986 saw the Society open a temporary branch there – managed by the wife of future Managing Director, John Heaps, and assisted by none other than our General Secretary, John Stoddard! The same year also saw Britannia, in a consortium called FTS, become founder members of the LINK cash machine network, set up as competition for the bank networks.

Most of the head office staff shortly after Newton House opened in 1970

Thomas Shaw

The crest at New Stockwell House "suum cuique" translated as "to each his own"



Sir Hubert Newton

Newton House in early morning sunshine

Britannia House

The 1986 Building Societies Act enabled building societies to broaden their operations, if they so wished. Who can ever forget the French Franc Mortgage and Britannia Gold Coins (an initiative that brought me and my future wife together – the fickle finger of fate indeed)?! A more successful venture was the opening of Douglas Branch in the Isle of Man and the start of Britannia International.

Towards the end of the decade the old Tattons/ICI offices on Buxton Road, Leek were purchased to provide overspill accommodation with the later addition of portacabins on the same site.

Later, in 1990, Britannia Life commenced operations, an initiative which, arguably, struggled to find its identity and business model. This company was subsequently sold.

Also in 1990, work commenced on Cornhill, Leek, to provide more office space. Completion in 1992 resulted in Britannia's head office sites straddling the A520 with Newton House on one side and the new Britannia House on the other.

Perhaps prophetically, Britannia launched its own current account, React365, in 1991. This venture resulted in the utilisation of the Co-operative Bank's computer systems, the contact centre in Skelmersdale and some specialist operations in Balloon Street, Manchester. Many staff will remember that the Bank took over these accounts in January 1997. On the same day of this announcement, local press reported the Society's sponsorship of Stoke City's new stadium. Both events kept customer-facing staff occupied for some time…

The 1990's also saw Verso (merged with Platform in 2003), Simply Mortgages, the acquisition of WMS in 1997 and, of course, the birth of the Members' Loyalty Bonus Scheme (later renamed Britannia Member Reward) to help fight off the carpetbagger threat. In 1994, the familiar image of Britannia (affectionately known as "Gladys") and her trident was removed from the Society's corporate image.

Around the turn of the century, the Really Big Programme affected most staff to some extent as the plan was hatched to replace the company's mortgage and savings and branch systems. This ambitious job was completed in 2004.

More recently, Platform Home Loans was acquired and the 2Gether Programme saw the merger with the savings and retail arm of Bristol and West. Newton House, which was looking tired, was refurbished and given a fantastic "ceiling" in the quadrangle, now known as the atrium, providing staff with a pleasant breakout and meeting space.

However all these individually momentous events (and many more I failed to mention) soon became insignificant to many staff as news broke, in October, 2008, of tentative discussions surrounding Britannia and the Co-operative Group potentially joining forces. The rest, as they say, is now history both in terms of what's gone, that we cannot influence, and what is yet to come…

STAFF REPRESENTATION

In 1972, following the Industrial Relations Act, passed the previous year, staff decided to form their own staff association. In those early days, management representatives filled the key roles.

Evolution and the need for ever-greater professionalism, brought about a significant change in 1976 as Britannia Staff Association was successful in gaining its Certificate of Independence thereby becoming an independent trade union.

Formal relations and governance with Britannia were established with the Joint Consultative and Negotiating Committee (JCNC) being one manifestation. The JCNC is made up of directors and senior managers from the business and the Union's six officers.

Relations with Management have generally been very good although there have been some very testing times. Memories of cost-saving redundancy exercises in 1992 and 1998 at head office, and the branch restructure in 1994, are still alive with staff who remain, including those at the Union.

The organisation steadily grew in strength, moving several times: from an office in Endon, to rooms above a couple of shops in Leek, and finally, in 1996, to Court Lodge, in the town centre.

In 1997, Association was removed from the title to be replaced by Union and, coincidentally, BSU affili-

Court Lodge, BSU headquarters

React 365, Britannia's current account

To some, the equivalent of Mecca, to others a marketing coup