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Navigating stigma while balancing between the social and the commercial: An account of Clarity & Co

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on Clarity & Co., one of the UK's oldest social enterprises (SEs), and offers insights into social entrepreneurship through historically analysing its 166-year effort in de-stigmatisation (1854–2020). Specifically, the study examines social entrepreneurship as a dynamic process through which SEs manage stigma over time to pursue both their social mission and economic self-sufficiency. Our findings contribute to social entrepreneurship theory by reframing de-stigmatisation as a strategic organisational resource that fundamentally shapes how SEs navigate their dual social and commercial objectives. We also demonstrate that stigma in SEs is not merely a barrier to overcome but can also be strategically harnessed as a source of organisational strength and differentiation. Importantly, our historical perspective advances the understanding of social entrepreneurship by highlighting that SEs must confront stigma as a systemic phenomenon, requiring the co-creation of participatory architectures and the mobilisation of diverse social actors for broader and sustained transformation.

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1. Introduction

Known also as the General Welfare of the Blind (GWB), the Association for the General Welfare of the Blind and the Incorporated Association for the General Welfare of the Blind, Clarity & Co. is recognised today as one of the oldest social enterprises (SEs) in the UK (King, 2022; Post Reporters, 2020). Established in 1854, the organisation went into administration in the early months of 2020 (Crowdfunder, n.d.). Its founder, Miss Elizabeth Gilbert, was blind herself, having contracted scarlet fever at the age of three. Starting as a small workshop established in a cellar in Holborn, London, the initiative took the form of an Association in 1856 (Brunel University of London Archives and Special Collections, CCO, Box 24, 1954). The expressed aim and social mission of the Association was to teach trades to young blind people, provide them with employment in the Association's workshops and their own homes, and grant pensions to blind or partially sighted people who, due to age or other reasons, were unable to work. Throughout its life, the organisation

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strove to balance two core objectives: fulfilling its social mission and achieving economic self-sufficiency. The organisation's approach to navigate stigma related to blindness played an important role in this balancing challenge.

Despite the growing attention to how social enterprises manage stigma (e.g. Tracey & Phillips, 2016; Werner et al., 2024), the absence of a historical perspective constrains our understanding of how early forms of SEs operating under stigma evolved over time, thus restricting insights into the long-term effectiveness of their strategies. This challenge becomes especially pronounced in the presence of core stigma, that is, when stigma arises from elements that are fundamental in defining the nature of the organisation (Cowden et al., 2022; Tracey & Phillips, 2016; Zhang et al., 2021). Existing research often views stigma as a barrier to be overcome, treating de-stigmatisation as a reactive process (see Zhang et al., 2021). While SEs inherently struggle to manage the tension between social and commercial goals, the extent to which de-stigmatisation influences the challenge to balance such goals remains underexplored (Krupa et al., 2019). Moreover, much of the stigma literature has emphasised the negative consequences of being marked and marginalised (Cowden et al., 2022; Devers et al., 2009), with only recent studies beginning to explore the positive aspects of stigma (e.g. Krupa et al., 2019; Tracey & Phillips, 2016; Werner et al., 2024). Nevertheless, our understanding of this dual character of stigma within SEs remains limited. Stigmatisation is socially and historically constructed and often functions as a form of 'formal social control' (Goffman, 1963, p. 139), making de-stigmatisation inherently challenging (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022). Without historical analysis, claims of effective management of core stigma in SEs remain unconvincing. This article addresses these gaps by adopting a historical lens through an in-depth case study of Clarity & Co., one of the UK's oldest SEs with a 166-year history, to explore the main research question: *how do social enterprises employ de-stigmatisation strategies to achieve their social mission while simultaneously sustaining economic self-sufficiency*.

By addressing the underexplored historical dimension of SEs under stigma, this study advances the literature on social entrepreneurship in several important ways. First, our findings reconceptualise de-stigmatisation not simply as a matter of stigma management, but as a strategic organisational capability that shapes how SEs balance their dual social and commercial objectives. Second, we reveal and theorise the dual nature of stigma in SEs, showing that it is not only a barrier to be overcome but can also be strategically leveraged as a source of organisational strength and differentiation. Finally, our analysis contributes a historical perspective on the persistence and complexity of stigma in SEs, demonstrating that disrupting deeply entrenched forms of stigma requires sustained political, cultural, and social transformation.

2. Key literature

2.1. Entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship

In this study, entrepreneurship is understood as the process of transforming social issues into business opportunities (Werner et al., 2024). Organisations that follow this approach treat the social issue as their starting point, embedding the goal of addressing it at the core of their business model. These enterprises are financially self-sustaining, aiming to recover

their full operational costs whilst prioritising social value creation and defined as SEs (Saebi et al., 2019; Yunus et al., 2010).

SEs are also described as 'hybrid' organisations because they create value for society in areas where markets and governments fail, while simultaneously engaging in commercial activities to scale up (Santos et al., 2015, p. 37). The hybrid nature of SEs with a dual mission can result in conflicting institutional logics and tensions between social and economic activities (Pache & Santos, 2013). Such tensions emerge from attempts to maximise social and financial performance, leading to conflicts over the allocation of income, organisational identity, and governance (Saebi et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2013; Tracey & Phillips, 2016). Such tensions are inherent in the nature of SEs, originating from divergent stakeholder interests, conflicting identity expectations, and internal challenges, e.g. deciding whom SEs should hire and the extent to which social and commercial missions should be separated or integrated within organisational structures (Smith et al., 2013).

SEs are categorised into four types based on two dimensions: whether the social value is created for the beneficiaries or with the beneficiaries, and the level of integration between social and commercial activities (Saebi et al., 2019). The market-oriented work model (Saebi et al., 2019) or a coupling hybrid one (Santos et al., 2015) employs beneficiaries to create products/services that are sold to regular-paying customers. This is the model followed by the organisation under examination here and is considered the most challenging and complex type to manage (Santos et al., 2015). When the payer is not the direct beneficiary, hybrid organisations become fragile, as clients can opt for competing products. Organisation theorists have argued that organisations serving multiple constituencies comply more readily with demands from key resource providers (Wry et al., 2013). This implies that SEs who serve distinct groups of beneficiaries and customers are likely to focus on their customers, whom they depend on for financial resources, and potentially neglect their beneficiaries. Such neglect, however, would jeopardise SEs' ability to achieve their social mission and calls into question their reason for being (Saebi et al., 2019). The tension between the social and commercial logics might be more challenging for SEs to manage when stigma is present (Tracey & Phillips, 2016; Werner et al., 2024). If not managed well, SEs may get stuck in the middle, and risk being squeezed out by government or commercial enterprises (De Vicq, 2024).

This tension becomes even more prominent when SEs are stigmatised - perceived as tainted or inferior in a given social context (Hudson, 2008; Kassinis et al., 2022). Historical research shows that even commercial enterprises, when seeking to engage in pro-social or philanthropic activities (Da Silva Lopes, 2016; Wong & McGovern, 2023) or addressing challenges of organisational legitimacy (Jones et al., 2024), have to pursue innovative strategies. Commercial firms have leveraged economic resources in exchange for non-economic values (e.g. social or symbolic) so indirectly creating new commercial opportunities (Wong & McGovern, 2023) or sought third party endorsements to build brand reputation (Da Silva Lopes, 2016). However, such strategies are less feasible for SEs. Already being socially marginalised due to stigma, SEs lack the economic leverage or influential networks that commercial firms can mobilise to counter negative perceptions. This reveals a critical theoretical gap: how stigmatised SEs navigate the dual tensions of social and commercial objectives when traditional mechanisms for resource acquisition and legitimacy are constrained,

particularly given their weaker positioning within societal fields. The following section reviews the relevant literature.

2.2. Social enterprises under stigma

Stigma is defined as a set of attributes (e.g. physical, tribal, moral) perceived as 'deeply discrediting' by others, as markers for abnormality and social transgression, or as tainted identities (Goffman, 1963; Werner et al., 2024). Disabled people, particularly those with visible impairment, often experience stigma and the associated disadvantages (Kašperová, 2021; Lyons et al., 2018). An ocularcentric society equates visual impairment with lack of knowledge, low ability, and deviation from sighted norms (Bulk et al., 2020). Consequently, visually impaired people experience higher rates of unemployment, social isolation, and poverty than the sighted (Lyons et al., 2018).

The relevant historiography indicates that the organisation operated in an environment where disability was historically stigmatised. Similar to the 17th and 18th centuries, where disease was considered to be 'a [...] direct hit' from God (Porter, in Bates, 1998, p. 29), in 19th century Britain, disease and disability were associated with notions of divine punishment and similar religious beliefs, despite the emergence and gradual spread of scientific approaches and explanations (Ibid., p. 29). Regarding visual impairment, stigma was shared even amongst those aiming to assist those in need. According to Bates (1998), the support blind people received from charitable organisations in 19th century Britain was 'limited and carried its own stigmatising overtones' (p. 167); blindness was again considered a form of punishment from God, since the main cause of the disability was syphilis, a condition associated with a strong element of moral condemnation. A clear example of this was that the expressed aim of the Indigent Blind Visiting Society, a charitable organisation established 20 years before the Association, was to 'raise the sinner' (Bates, 1998, p. 167). It is also particularly telling that in 19th century Victorian literature, people with a disability were largely depicted as 'evil or cruel' (Lahaise, in Reynolds, 2019, p. 134).¹

Such attitudes gradually changed. In interwar Britain, positive views on disability emerged alongside the growing recognition of the need for state support (Bohata et al., 2020, p. 228–229), as well as advancements in assistive technologies for the blind and initiatives like the 1930s guide dog movement (Anderson & Pemberton, 2007). Nonetheless, such developments did not mean stigma towards the blind was eliminated. Scott Blackhall, the first presenter of the BBC programme 'In Touch' for visually impaired listeners, noted that blind people in 1960s Britain still faced prejudice and stigma (Bates, 1998, p. 298–299; History of the BBC, 1961). Such stigma and discrimination remain relevant in modern day Britain (Heinze et al., 2024).

SEs with stigma are more vulnerable in balancing their social and commercial missions. The stigma attached to their social cause or target beneficiaries can make it more difficult for SEs to attract investment, partnerships, and customers, thus complicating their efforts to achieve commercial objectives (Tracey & Phillips, 2016). Consequently, SEs with stigma must devote significant resources to overcoming such negative perceptions, which can divert attention and energy away from their core mission of achieving social impact (Hampel & Tracey, 2019). To ensure their continued existence, SEs with core stigma focus on managing, overcoming, or changing stigma perceptions. For instance, Krupa et al.'s (2019) work explores the ways work

integration SEs can help tackle the stigma associated with mental health disorders by positively influencing perceptions of legitimacy, value, and competence related to public assumptions about mental illness. Studies by Cowden et al. (2022), Hampel and Tracey (2019), Kašperová (2021), and Mauksch and Dey (2024) have provided similar contributions.

Whilst organisations manage stigmatisation by employing various tactics to mitigate its negative effects (Tracey & Phillips, 2016; Zhang et al., 2021), in the context of SEs, such de-stigmatisation strategies may influence how tensions between social and commercial logics are managed, a dynamic that remains underexplored in the literature. For example, boundary management, an attempt by stigmatised actors to influence the boundary between insiders (those who are stigmatised) and outsiders (those who are not), is found to be one of the most relevant strategies for managing core stigma, as it fosters a sense of 'groupness' (Clair et al., 2016). Supportive in-groups, which provide the stigmatised with social buffers, are seen as a defence against the threat of stigma (Ashforth et al., 2007), a space of resistance, a sense of belonging (through parochial networks, Perriton, 2017), and a form of protection whereby the stigmatised can reclaim pride in their work (Zhang et al., 2021). However, overusing boundary management might not be conducive to achieving commercial objectives, e.g. when employing individuals with disabilities who may not align with conventional definitions of ideal workers (Krupa et al., 2019).

Organisations can also decouple the stigmatised activities from their legitimate structures so to minimise the appearance of belonging to a stigmatised category (Zhang et al., 2021). That is, SEs can participate in non-stigmatised activities to divert attention from their more stigmatised lines of business (Lynch & Rodell, 2018). Similar to reconstruction strategies, this strategy enables the organisation to dilute the stigma, thus becoming accepted by more audiences (Tracey & Phillips, 2016) by shifting the focus to non-stigmatised aspects of the organisation. Organisations can also deliberately mobilise neutral and potential supportive audiences by highlighting the merit and distinctiveness of the stigma, hence employing co-optation to solicit more supportive audiences (Kašperová, 2021). Whilst this may enhance commercial objectives, the shift in attention towards an overpursuit of financial gain may undermine organisations' moral legitimacy as an SE (Hampel & Tracey, 2019).

Stigma may also possess a positive dimension which SEs can leverage to advance both their social and commercial missions. The potential benefits of organisational stigma include garnering increased attention (Helms & Patterson, 2014), using stigma as a potential resource or asset or as a means of differentiation (out-group social comparison) to promote external audiences' willingness to offer support (Cowden et al., 2022; Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2022), or to gain legitimacy among stigmatising audiences (Hampel & Tracey, 2017). Stigmatised SEs often focus on selling quality products or services to mainstream customers to help general audiences become familiar with their mission; on the other hand, they use the products or services to challenge and reframe the existing institutionalised perceptions around stigma and generate profound social change (Kašperová, 2021; Werner et al., 2024). Moreover, as stigma entails a strong element of moral condemnation, it may serve as 'insurance' to attenuate its negative effect. For instance, customers may impose a smaller market penalty on the stigmatised organisation for potentially low-quality products (Kassinis et al., 2022). Also, uncontrollable stigma, e.g. disability, is more likely to generate sympathy (Zhang et al., 2021).

For SEs, stigmatisation is not something to be avoided or distanced from; rather, it is embraced and casted as an entrepreneurial opportunity whereby de-stigmatisation is

positioned as a core purpose of the organisation. By leveraging the hybrid form of organisation, SEs prove instrumental in challenging stigmatisation (Tracey & Phillips, 2016; Werner et al., 2024). However, the relevant literature also stresses that removing stigma is challenging, as stigmatisation is socially and historically situated (Goffman, 1963). Thus, de-stigmatisation is seen as a process of addressing the material, historical, and political nature of stigmatisation; therefore, its success is subject to a collective will and sustained effort (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022). Nevertheless, in the absence of historically grounded analysis, our understanding of how SEs navigate stigmatised contexts while simultaneously balancing social and commercial objectives, remains limited, a gap to which this study seeks to contribute.

3. Methodology

3.1. *Clarity & Co: material used*

The archival material utilised in this paper is part of a collection that, to the best of our knowledge, has not been used for research purposes before² since it was kept as a private collection by one of the last CEOs of Clarity & Co.³ The collection consisted of ten boxes of material, catalogued immediately after its acquisition, and spans a period of 165 years (from 1857 to 2022). It includes various items, such as governance papers (including annual reports and minutes of committee meetings), financial and legal records correspondence, registers of members, newspaper clippings, story books, promotional material, and photographs.

The archival material used in the analysis comprised annual reports and statements of accounts, a survey report, a story book, and articles found in newspaper clippings. A large part of the data came from annual reports covering the period from 1857 until 1982 (reports from 1983 to 2018 were also utilised, although these were found in Companies House). Table 1 displays data derived from such annual reports. While an effort has been made to present these data on a ten-year interval basis, in many cases, there were gaps in various periods (for instance, the annual reports for several years between 1902 and 1906 and between 1908 and 1917 are missing).

3.2. *Method of analysis*

Investigating an organisation in depth and context throughout the course of its life, we follow a historical case study approach to present our findings (Buchnea, 2023). We conduct a narrative analysis structured around two dimensions: 1) dominant themes drawn from relevant theoretical frameworks (e.g. the decoupling/straddling strategies that the organisation employed to achieve destigmatisation), and 2) distinct patterns that emerged directly from our raw data itself (e.g. novel strategies such as royal patronage and engaging with politicians).

Triangulation across the various types of material included in the collection also took place. For instance, annual report data concerning the stigma negatively affecting the organisation was evaluated based on information found in newspaper article clippings. Secondary material such as books, news websites and websites relevant to social entrepreneurship and charities were utilised, in order to contextualise the analysis (when, for instance, investigating

Table 1. Financial data analysis based on annual reports along the history of Clarity & Co. (at about 10-year intervals)^Δ.

Years	Changes in Employees				Money in				Money out			
	% change in the no. of blind employed	% change in the no. of sighted employed	% change in sales	% change in external contributions*	% change in total gross income ^{&}	External contributions/sales income	External contributions/total gross income	Sales/total gross income	% change in sum payments to the blind	The fixed asset investments [@] /total fixed assets	Sum payments to the blind**/sales	Sum payments to the blind/total gross income
1857	0%		0%	0%	0%	180.00%	64.29%	35.71%	0%	0.00%	90.67%	32.38%
1866	1021%		2253%	979%	1424%	82.54%	45.52%	55.14%	1835%	15.89%	74.55%	41.11%
1876	-54%		22%	32%	40%	89.46%	42.93%	47.99%	9%	11.04%	66.66%	31.99%
1886	-15%		40%	-44%	-2%	35.79%	24.60%	68.74%	-22%	50.30%	37.24%	25.59%
1896	22%		66%	-74%	41%	5.60%	4.55%	81.25%	9%	4.50%	24.27%	19.72%
1907[~]	-3%		29%	277%	33%	16.37%	12.85%	78.51%	33%	0.24%	24.98%	19.61%
1918^{>}	64%		69%	490%	119%	57.02%	34.68%	60.82%	166%	62.74%	39.15%	23.81%
1926	24%		47%	54%	46%	60.04%	36.77%	61.24%	125%	62.66%	60.15%	36.84%
1936	10%		19%	-44%	-4%	28.43%	21.69%	76.30%	-3%	56.00%	49.02%	37.40%
1946	-43%		79%	42%	75%	22.66%	17.65%	77.88%	-58%	41.82%	11.44%	8.91%
1956	8%		49%	-27%	57%	9.40%	8.17%	86.88%	444%	44.24%	35.53%	30.87%
1966	-3%			394%	78%	31.16%	22.65%	72.69%	75%	65.28%	41.79%	30.38%
1976	-9%	0	537%	-59%	379%	2.00%	1.93%	96.56%	-70%	54.99%	1.94%	1.87%
1986	17%	12%	236%	704%	243%	4.78%	4.53%	94.62%	416%	43.22%	2.98%	2.82%
1996	-15%	16%	87%	749%	117%	21.70%	17.69%	81.52%	28%	42.17%	2.04%	1.67%
2006	-52%	-78%	-59%	-42%	-54%	30.83%	22.35%	72.50%	1350%	96.12%	72.76%	52.75%
2016	78%	5%	-18%	-30%	-35%	26.41%	24.16%	91.48%	-8%	77.28%	81.35%	74.41%
2018^z	3%	18%	2%	-15%	-0.30%	22.00%	20.65%	93.84%	-2%	84.66%	77.84%	73.04%

Notes: ^ΔThe financial data included in the table are at about 10-year intervals based on the availability of annual reports. ^{*}External contributions received during the year include donations, legacies, local authority grant, and capitations. [&]Total gross income includes sales, external contributions, investment incomes, other incomes recorded on the income/expenditure statement. [@]The fixed asset investment made in the year includes the purchase of government bonds, corporate stocks and properties. ^{**}Sum payments to the blind including wages, subsidy, sick pay, holiday pay, attendance and incentive bonus, fares, canteen, welfare gifts, and pensions. Z 2018: the last year for which an annual report is provided by Clarity & Co. ~1907: the annual report for 1906 only covered a period of nine months and not available, so 1907 was chosen. > 1918: the 1916 annual report is not available, so the data from 1918, which is the closest available to 1916, was chosen instead.

Sources: Brunel University London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 16 and Box 2, Annual Reports, various years from 1857 to 1982 (Brunel University of London Archives and Special Collections, CCO, Box 2 and Box 16 1857–1982); The London Metropolitan Archives, The Association for Promoting the Welfare of the Blind, Box A/FWA/C/041/2/1, Vol. 2, Charities, Annual Report, 1907 and Box A/FWA/C/041/3, Vol. 3, Annual Report, 1931; Companies House (1987) (including information on updates on changes in directors, company names, supplementary accounts, and annual reports for 1983–85), and Annual Reports (Companies House, 1983–2018).

the organisation's efforts to enhance the productivity of its employees), but also to triangulate the findings from the primary data collected (when, for example, evaluating the relevance of de-stigmatisation strategies undertaken by the organisation).

3.3. The case of Clarity & Co

The Association began its operations in a small house at No. 21 South Row, New Road (later renamed to Euston Road), London, where the founder, Elizabeth Gilbert, rented four rooms (Martin, 1887/2010). Gilbert was the daughter of the Principal of Brasenose College, Oxford, later the Bishop of Chichester,⁴ and established the organisation in 1854, when she was 28 years old. What seems to have positively affected the quality of Gilbert's early life is the guidance on her upbringing her family received from a doctor, who insisted that 'blindness should be made as little as possible of a disability to the child', and 'that she should be trained, educated, and treated like the other children; that she should share their pleasures and their experience, and should not be kept apart from the mistaken notion of shielding her from injury' (Martin, 1887/2010, p. 3). Such early experiences probably impacted the way that Gilbert made sense of her disability, contributing to her determination to work for the success of the organisation she established. As will be shown further below, this also involved promoting strategies aimed towards challenging public perceptions about the stigma associated with blindness. It appears that the social networks Gilbert was embedded in owing to her family background and the quality of education she received assisted her significantly in her efforts to promote such strategies.

In the first years of the Association, its premises comprised of a factory for the blind, a sales shop and rooms for various trades. This initial location, referred to as the 'Repository' in the Association's first annual report, was managed by Mr. William Hanks Levy, who had been blind since early childhood (1857 Annual Report). The headquarters and all the Association's manufacturing activities in London were moved to Curtain Road, London, in 1969 (2012, 2019 Annual Reports). In 2012, Clarity & Co. purchased the Soap Co., a small SE in Keswick, in the Lake District in England. This factory, along with the London factory, remained with Clarity & Co. until the end of its operations (2012, 2019 Annual Reports).

The blind people supported by the Association manufactured handcrafted products such as mats, baskets, and brushes. During its first 50 years, the association expanded the range of products within these categories (1857, 1907 Annual reports). Such expansion was affected by improvements in technology and the relevant equipment available throughout the period. By the 1960s, basket-making and brush-making were being superseded by work such as toilet soap making and modern bedding manufacture (1966 Annual Report). Clarity & Co. also manufactured on behalf of others and engaged in non-Clarity brand sales in various market sectors, from hotel products to organic soaps (2009 Annual Report).

In the early years of the Association, items were sold at 10% less than the usual retail prices to customers, including hospitals and other institutions (1857 Annual Report). Additionally, an allowance of 8.5% was paid to Mrs. Levy (the wife of the superintendent, who served behind the counter at the Repository) as remuneration for her attendance on goods sold in the shops of the London Repository (1857 Annual Report, p. 4). While either working at their own homes or at the workshops of the Association, the blind were mainly

from the metropolitan area (the City of London or later Greater London) (1857 Annual Report). Additional jobs for disabled people in sales offices rather than in production activities were created in 2007 (2007 Annual Report). In later years, with the expansion of the business, blind and disabled personnel from outside London, e.g. from local areas of the Lake District, were also employed to work at the Soap Co. factory (2015 Annual Report).

To support sales, the Association issued a monthly circular including a price list and an engraving titled 'Blind Persons at Work' during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Additionally, small papers were distributed through letters sent by the Association's supporters. Locations where customers could buy the Association's products were always clearly communicated, including photos of products, names, price lists, etc. (see, e.g. 1898, 1899, 1901, and 1907 Annual Reports), whereas Post Office orders were forwarded to any part of the country. Local authorities and government departments (e.g. War Office) were also supplied by the Association for many years, although the profit margin was low (1936 Annual Report). The Association traditionally depended on door-to-door selling, an approach that was reported and often criticised in newspapers in the 1980s (Brunel University of London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 24, 1985). In later periods, products manufactured in the factory in London were sold through telephone sales throughout the country, replacing the previous strategy of door-to-door selling (2000 Annual Report).

Telephone sales gradually expanded in various geographical areas; however, in 2010, the Association invested in more diverse marketing tools by installing a new CRM software package at the National Sales Office in Portsmouth and re-launching its website with an integrated e-commerce shopping solution. Later, a retail specialist was recruited to develop the Soap Co. into a national, high-end retail brand positioning itself in the ethical luxury market (2014, 2015, 2016 Annual Reports). Profitably growing both the Clarity and the Soap Co. brands was regarded as the key area of business focus. Separate functional areas such as sales, marketing, customer services, and new product development were created in 2018, although this brought an associated cost uplift due to expanding the permanent staff team (2017, 2018 Annual Reports). The Association entered administration in January 2020 due to financial pressures, driven primarily by the substantial pension scheme deficit. As was reported, it was losing money and unable to fill the hole in its pension scheme (King, 2022).

4. Balancing between the social and the commercial

4.1. Sources of tension

The tensions present in the case of the Association seem to have been relevant to the allocation of income, organisational identity, and governance issues (in line with Pache & Santos, 2013; Tracey & Phillips, 2016). The allocation of income relates to the ways SEs prioritise resource allocation (Saebi et al., 2019). It seems there were two major sources of income for the organisation: sales of products manufactured by the blind and bought by regular-paying customers, and external contributions including: donations, subscriptions, legacies, and local authority support.⁵ As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, the proportion of sales against the organisation's gross income was higher compared to the percentage of external contributions against the gross income, except in the first year, 1857. The income from sales as a percentage of total gross income increased rapidly over the first 40 years, peaking at 96.56% in 1976. In contrast, the trend of income from external contributions dropped sharply in the

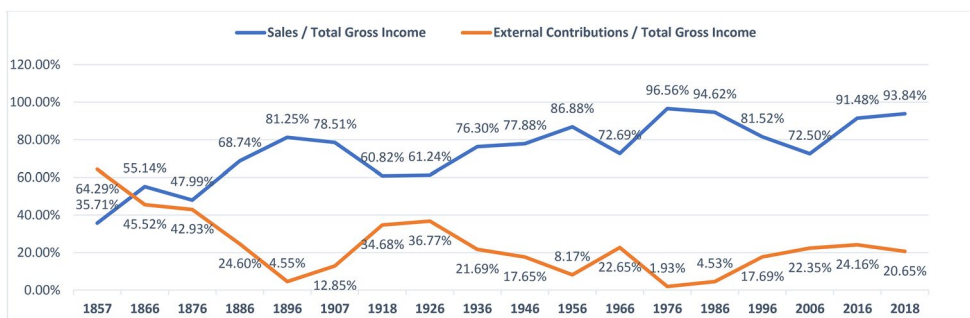


Figure 1. Trend development comparison at Clarity & Co., 1857–2018 (at about 10-year intervals): donation/total gross incomes vs sales/total gross income.

Sources: Brunel University London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 16 and Box 2, Annual Reports, various years from 1857–1982; The London Metropolitan Archives, The Association for Promoting the Welfare of the Blind, Box A/FWA/C/041/2/1, Vol. 2, Charities, Annual Report, 1907 and Box A/FWA/C/041/3, Vol. 3, Annual Report, 1931; Companies House, 'A selection of documents registered before 1 January 1987' (including information on updates on changes in directors, company names, supplementary accounts, and annual reports for 1983–1985), and Annual Reports (Companies House, 1983–2018).

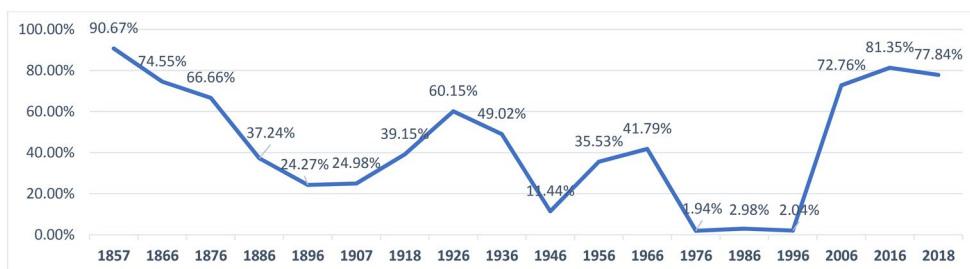


Figure 2. Trend development at Clarity & Co., 1857–2018 (at about 10-year intervals): sum payments to the blind/sales.

Sources: Brunel University London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 16 and Box 2, Annual Reports, various years from 1857–1982; The London Metropolitan Archives, The Association for Promoting the Welfare of the Blind, Box A/FWA/C/041/2/1, Vol. 2, Charities, Annual Report, 1907 and Box A/FWA/C/041/3, Vol. 3, Annual Report, 1931; Companies House, 'A selection of documents registered before 1 January 1987' (including information on updates on changes in directors, company names, supplementary accounts, and annual reports for 1983–1985), and Annual Reports (Companies House, 1983–2018).

first 40 years, reaching a low of 1.93% in 1976. In the last 30 years, it stabilised around 20%. The distinctive trends of these two main sources of income imply that the organisation became more financially independent over time, and the sales it generated were the main source of income underpinning its survival in the market while achieving its social goals (Annual Reports, various years).

Income from such sales was used to fund the wages of blind and disabled employees, as well as relevant subsidies, sick pay, holiday pay, attendance and incentive bonus, fares, canteen expenses, welfare gifts, and pensions. However, despite having a clear focus on promoting the welfare of blind and visually impaired people, as shown in Figure 2, the ratio of total payments to the blind against sales continuously declined over the organisation's life

except for the final two decades. In its early years, donations exceeded sales and combined with sales revenue, allowed the Association to not only cover payments to blind employees but also sustain the business and build reserves for future needs. However, even in years with financial losses, (e.g. in 1936 a deficit of £6,029 was reported, see 1935 Annual Report), the organisation was still committed to its social mission, with the total amount of payments to the blind accounting for 49.02% of its sales. Particularly in the last 15 years, that is, from 2004 onwards, the organisation experienced a serious decline in sales, but still the percentage paid to the blind and disabled against sales resumed to high levels and peaked at 81.35% in 2016 (Annual reports, various years). At the same time, the percentage of fixed assets on investment (in stocks, e.g. British government, corporate stocks, properties) against the total fixed assets, as shown in Figure 3, increased from 15.89% in 1866 up to 84.66% in 2018. This shows that while Clarity & Co. was clearly focused on its social mission, as reflected in its consistent payments to the blind, it also sought quicker and higher economic returns by investing its surplus in the stock markets, ultimately to better support its social objectives.

Organisational identity relates to how the members of an organisation articulate who they are to themselves as well as to outsiders (Gioia et al., 2013). While the organisation claimed that the number of blind and disabled people employed was the main indicator of its social identity, this number fluctuated substantially, and from 1969 onwards, the number of sighted employees also started appearing on the annual reports. Notably, the two figures were equal in 1997 (at 89, as shown in Table 2 and Figure 4). Similarly, although providing jobs to the blind was central to the Association's existence and identity, in 1998, due to pressure on margins from overseas suppliers and an economic downturn in neighbouring countries, the Association decided to cease its operations in Luton. This resulted in the redundancy of 21 disabled and 25 non-disabled employees (1998 Annual Report). Also, while blind people were the primary individuals the organisation aimed to support, the pressure of modernisation led it to decide that 'machinery and plant must be modernised [...] to keep pace with general developments in the trade' (1935 Annual Report). On the one hand, such modernisation meant a blind person could now be trained to perform simpler,

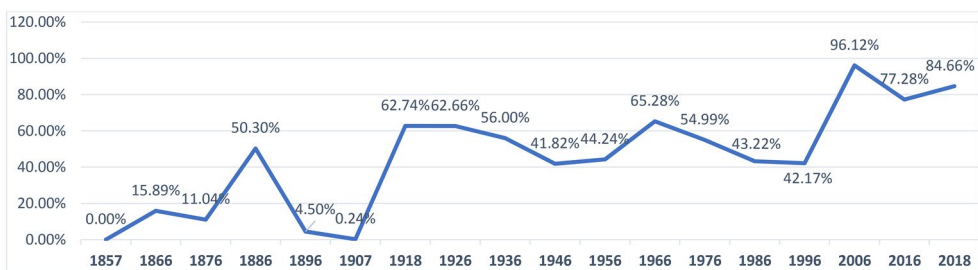


Figure 3. Trend development comparison at Clarity & Co., 1857–2018 (a reflection of data in Table 2): fixed asset investments/total fixed asset.

Sources: Brunel University London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 16 and Box 2, Annual Reports, various years from 1857–1982; The London Metropolitan Archives, The Association for Promoting the Welfare of the Blind, Box A/FWA/C/041/2/1, Vol. 2, Charities, Annual Report, 1907 and Box A/FWA/C/041/3, Vol. 3, Annual Report, 1931; Companies House, 'A selection of documents registered before 1 January 1987' (including information on updates on changes in directors, company names, supplementary accounts, and annual reports for 1983–1985), and Annual Reports (Companies House, 1983–2018).

Table 2. The number of blind and sighted employed at Clarity & Co. (1857–2018).

Year	The No. of Blind Employed		The No. of Sighted Employed		The No. of Blind Employed		The No. of Sighted Employed		The No. of Blind Employed		The No. of Sighted Employed		The No. of Sighted Employed	
	Year		Year		Year		Year		Year		Year			
1857	14		1882	92	1907	76	1932		1957	107				
1858	43		1883	77	1908		1933		1958					
1859	64		1884	75	1909		1934	187	1959					
1860			1885	64	1910		1935	179	1960					
1861			1886	61	1911		1936	171	1961	100				
1862	170		1887	61	1912		1937		1962					
1863	170		1888	68	1913		1938		1963					
1864			1889	60	1914		1939	164	1964	105				
1865			1890	79	1915		1940		1965	108				
1866			1891	67	1916		1941	124	1966	103				
1867	157		1892	66	1917		1942	101	1967	99				
1868			1893	80	1918	125	1943	106	1968					
1869			1894	73	1919	174	1944		1969	91			43	
1870			1895	77	1920	151	1945	94	1970					
1871	156		1896	78	1921	154	1946	98	1971					
1872			1897	77	1922	152	1947		1972					
1873			1898	80	1923	147	1948	97	1973					
1874			1899	72	1924	151	1949	95	1974	109			67	
1875			1900	76	1925		1950	93	1975	99			73	
1876	72		1901	83	1926	155	1951		1976	94			74	
1877	84		1902		1927	168	1952	89	1977	100			74	
1878	87		1903		1928	176	1953	96	1978	101			76	
1879			1904		1929		1954	99	1979	100			98	
1880			1905		1930	158	1955		1980	98			81	
1881	99		1906	78	1931	170	1956	106	1981	91			71	
Year	The no. of blind employed	The no. of sighted employed	Year	THE no. of blind employed	The no. of sighted employed	Year	THE no. of blind employed	The no. of sighted employed	Year	THE no. of blind employed	The no. of sighted employed	Year	THE no. of blind employed	The no. of sighted employed
1982	92	74	2011	46	35									
1983	93	73	2012	44	33									
1984	92	72	2013	48	38									
1985	101	75	2014	70	30									
1986	110	83	2015	80	20									

(Continued)

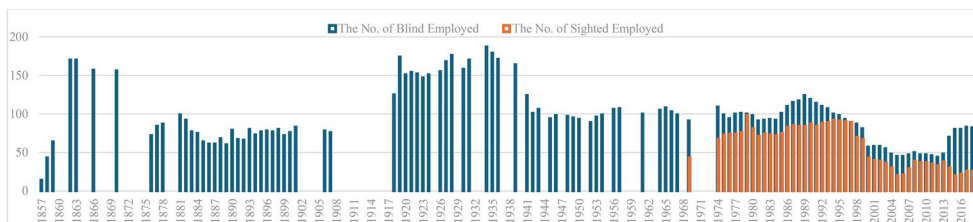


Figure 4. Trend development comparison at Clarity & Co., 1857–2018 (a reflection of data in Table 2): the number of blind employed vs the number of sighted employed.

Sources: Brunel University London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 16 and Box 2, Annual Reports, various years from 1857–1982; The London Metropolitan Archives, The Association for Promoting the Welfare of the Blind, Box A/FWA/C/041/2/1, Vol. 2, Charities, Annual Report, 1907 and Box A/FWA/C/041/3, Vol. 3, Annual Report, 1931; Companies House, ‘A selection of documents registered before 1 January 1987’ (including information on updates on changes in directors, company names, supplementary accounts, and annual reports for 1983–1985), and Annual Reports (Companies House, 1983–2018).

machine-assisted tasks (1966 Annual Report). However, engaging in trades with modern high-speed machinery increased the ratio of sighted to blind workers (1969 Annual Report). Also, the use of machinery required the employment of expert staff at current market rates, significantly increasing costs. This appeared contrary to the Association’s original intent, which aimed to save on expenses by redirecting funds that would otherwise have been spent on sighted supervision to directly benefit the blind.

Governance relates to how management is exerted in an organisation (Pache & Santos, 2013). Governance tensions were mainly expressed as operational efficiency issues arising when, for instance, deciding about employing sighted or blind people in the management team. While allowing blind people to run the workshop was clearly aligned with the social purpose the organisation served, some questioned their operational suitability from a commercial perspective (Martin 1887/2010, p. 88). Strategic thinking did not seem to be present in the broader management of the association’s workshops and factories, raising questions about their capacity to operate effectively and achieve commercial success (Martin, 1887/2010). Governance-related issues were prevalent throughout the life of the organisation. In the late 1960s, the organisation hired the management consultancy firm Urwick, Orr and Partners to conduct a survey on its ‘sales problems’ and to provide recommendations for improvement (Brunel University of London Archives and Special Collections, CCO, 1967). The investigation resulted in a report highlighting that, among others, a re-arrangement of responsibilities and the creation of a solid marketing plan were needed to ensure operational efficiency would be improved. In subsequent years, there were clear efforts to improve efficiency, productivity, branding, and investment return. For instance, in 2014, Stroud Consulting was hired to initiate a process improvement campaign expected to increase productivity. The initiative did indeed result in a nearly 80% improvement in the output of the manufacturing department (2014 Annual Report).

However, a decline in its core social performance indicator, the number of blind and disabled individuals employed (2014 Annual Report) implies that the Association’s social mission was undermined by the above enhanced commercial developments, highlighting the enduring tension between its social and economic objectives. The sighted were employed and recorded from 1969 till 2018. Their number remained at a lower level than that of the

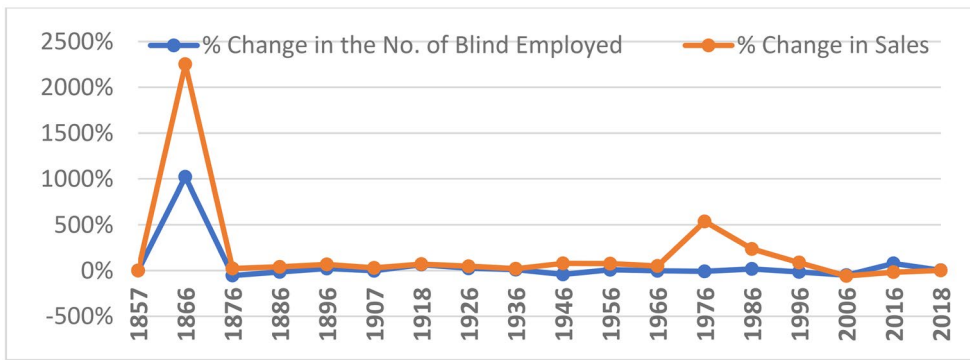


Figure 5. Trend development comparison at Clarity & Co., 1857–2018: % change in the number of blind employed vs % change in sales.

Sources: Brunel University London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 16 and Box 2, Annual Reports, various years from 1857–1982; The London Metropolitan Archives, The Association for Promoting the Welfare of the Blind, Box A/FWA/C/041/2/1, Vol. 2, Charities, Annual Report, 1907 and Box A/FWA/C/041/3, Vol. 3, Annual Report, 1931; Companies House, 'A selection of documents registered before 1 January 1987' (including information on updates on changes in directors, company names, supplementary accounts, and annual reports for 1983–1985), and Annual Reports (Companies House, 1983–2018).

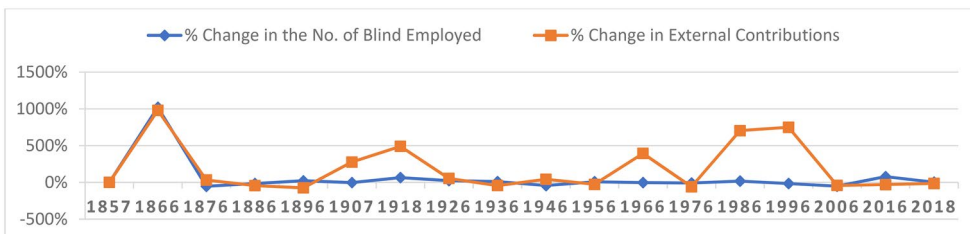


Figure 6. Trend development comparison at Clarity & Co., 1857–2018: % change in the number of blind employed vs % change in external contributions.

Sources: Brunel University London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 16 and Box 2, Annual Reports, various years from 1857–1982; The London Metropolitan Archives, The Association for Promoting the Welfare of the Blind, Box A/FWA/C/041/2/1, Vol. 2, Charities, Annual Report, 1907 and Box A/FWA/C/041/3, Vol. 3, Annual Report, 1931; Companies House, 'A selection of documents registered before 1 January 1987' (including information on updates on changes in directors, company names, supplementary accounts, and annual reports for 1983–1985), and Annual Reports (Companies House, 1983–2018).

blind, but it was equal to the latter at around 90 in 1996 and 1997. Figures 5–7 demonstrate that the changes in the number of blind employees followed patterns similar to the changes in sales but not to those in the external contributions received and the sum payments to the blind. This suggests that the increase in the number of blind employees was positively related to productivity, while public contributions were not affected by changes in the number of blind employees. The overall reduction in the number of blind and disabled people employed throughout the life of the organisation may also reflect the difficult financial situation the latter was in during various parts of its life. In the early 1990s, this was expressed by, among others, the accumulation of excessive debt (1995 Annual report, p. 5) and should

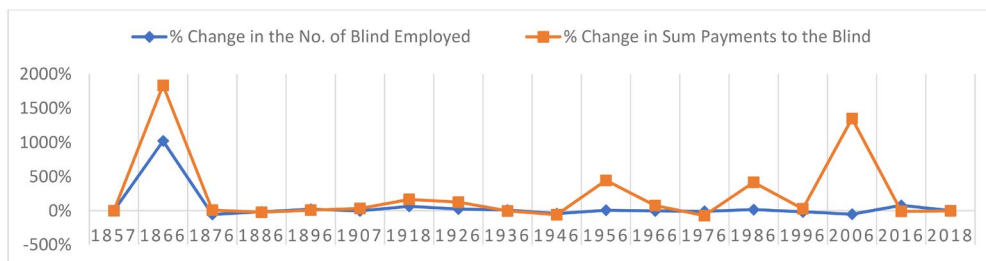


Figure 7. Trend development comparison at Clarity & Co., 1857–2018: % change of the number of blind employed vs % change of sum payments to the blind.

Sources: Brunel University London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 16 and Box 2, Annual Reports, various years from 1857–1982; The London Metropolitan Archives, The Association for Promoting the Welfare of the Blind, Box A/FWA/C/041/2/1, Vol. 2, Charities, Annual Report, 1907 and Box A/FWA/C/041/3, Vol. 3, Annual Report, 1931; Companies House, 'A selection of documents registered before 1 January 1987' (including information on updates on changes in directors, company names, supplementary accounts, and annual reports for 1983–1985), and Annual Reports (Companies House, 1983–2018).

also be probably considered symptomatic of the wider recession affecting the British economy at the time (Dow, 2003).

Another source of governance-related tensions had to do with the sales approach the organisation followed in its later years. Traditionally, the commercial (non-Clarity brand) side of the business focused on high-volume, low-margin contract manufacturing for other brands. This helped cover overheads while ensuring the factory operated at a capacity that matched the number of employees. However, the success of non-Clarity brand sales in 2009/10 shifted the Association's focus towards securing contracts that generated better margins, moving away from purely volume-driven business development activities (2015 Annual Report). Overall, it seems that towards the organisation's final years, less attention was paid to the social mission it pursued as reflected in the declining number of blind and disabled individuals employed.

4.2. Social enterprise under stigma: insights from Clarity & Co

Being blind herself, the founder of the organisation was very aware of the stigma affecting the blind, as one of the many letters addressed to her shortly after its establishment would highlight, were 'unjustly and selfishly excluded [from]...the privileges of social life' (Martin, 1887/2010, p. 136). It was thought that due to their condition, the blind had to lead lives of inactivity, and that 'if they were poor and friendless, they would inevitably add beggary or pauperism to the sadness of their lot' (The London Metropolitan Archives, c. 1914). Echoing Gilbert's perspective, the Association appeared committed to sparing no effort in realising its objectives by providing employment to blind people and 'adopt[ing] any means that may appear best calculated to promote [their] general welfare' (1857 Annual Report, p. 1).

However, stigma affected the perceptions not only of the general public but also of those at the steering wheel of the Association. For instance, the fact that the products sold were the outcome of blind peoples' labour was seen as the organisation's main competitive advantage but also, simultaneously, a sales deterrent. It was assumed that the quality of products made by the blind would be naturally poor, particularly when compared with imported

products ‘which a blind person could not make unassisted’ (1857 Annual Report, p. 5). This stigma discouraged customers, and it worsened when the third-party supply market became cutthroat, with price parameters overshadowing quality (2002 Annual Report). To overcome this stigma, the Association had to establish strategies that would ‘induce’ persons to purchase the work of the blind (1857 Annual Report, p. 5).

Moreover, it was assumed that blind workers could not work quickly enough (The London Metropolitan Archives, c. 1914). In cases of substantial losses, these were primarily attributed to ‘the established fact that blind employees produced less than 30% of the output expected from a sighted person doing similar work’ (1980 Annual Report). To compensate for the perceived lack of speed, the Association had to pay the blind double the wages usually given by manufacturers to their employees, calculated in relative terms based on the output of the blind worker (1866 Annual Report).

The above explained why Clarity & Co. made every effort to assure the public that the various articles made by the blind were of ‘first-rate quality’ (1878 Annual Report, p. 4). At the same time, they were very proud when receiving letters of appreciation from customers on the high quality of their toilet soap (1956 Annual Report). The Association established the Laboratory Quality Control and Development to emphasise their commitment to ‘high regard for quality and service’ (1975 Annual Report). However, again, in financially difficult years, e.g. 1898, low (or negative) profits were attributed to ‘the difficulty of blind workmen in competing with the sighted and with foreign work’ (1898 Annual report, p. 8).⁶ It was probably under such conditions that the steering committee often felt the need to stress that ‘the Public [...] will get full value for their money’ when referring to the products made by the blind (Brunel University of London Archives and Special Collections, CCO, n.d.).

Statements of this sort also probably reflected the competition pressures affecting manufacturing businesses in 19th century London (Riello, 2012, p. 509). Importantly though, they also seem to relate to stigmatised perceptions regarding the abilities of visually impaired people. Indeed, the blind workers Gilbert insisted on running the workshops were considered to be ‘often of a very feeble capacity’ (Martin 1887/2010, p. 88). Such perceptions resonate with wider-held beliefs about the perceived inferiority of people with visual impairment and other disabilities, which have been present in British society not only throughout the life of Clarity & Co. but in earlier periods, too (Bates, 1998; Reynolds, 2019).

Another source of stigma for the organisation seems to have been the risk of becoming associated with ‘a whole host of less reputable imitators’, whose actions had caused ‘considerable and justifiable criticism in the Press and on radio and television, [...], creat[ing] a situation where even genuine organisations have had difficulty in operating’ (1964–1965 Annual report, p. 4). Such stigma was, according to the Association, one of the reasons behind the ‘severe reduction in sales’ for some product lines between 1964 and 1965 (Ibid). Issues of this sort were probably the reason why the following statement repeatedly appeared in annual reports throughout the life of the Association: ‘The public are earnestly requested to refuse to assist any Charity connected with the Blind which does not publish a Report showing a responsible Committee of Management and a Statement of Accounts Audited by a public Auditor’ (1918 Annual Report, p. 6).

Even worse, there were also cases of outright illegal schemes or profit-making initiatives that exploited charity laws under the pretence of supporting people with disabilities. Towards the late twentieth century, similar cases often appeared in the press. For instance, there were

news items explaining how 'bogus salesmen' carrying false identities were making money by pretending to represent charitable organisations (Brunel University of London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 24, 12/15, 1989a). Such events had a negative reputational impact on any charitable organisation. Indicatively, in 1989, an incident where the Association's door-to-door sales representatives in Guildford were 'confronted by angry householders' mistaking them for disingenuous profiteers was reported in the press (Ibid., 1989b). Telling of the negative climate was the fact that certain organisations supporting the blind rushed to publicly disassociate themselves from charitable bodies that engaged in door-to-door sales (Brunel University of London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 24, 4/8, n.d.). Overall, the publicity such cases attracted created an undoubtedly negative climate for the Association, making it even more difficult for it to gain the public's trust, as newly developing stigmas against charities were added to the already existing stigma relevant to blindness. Such reality necessitated the assumption of several strategies on the part of the Association, seen as a bulwark against such stigma and the perceptions that it led to.

4.3. Clarity & Co. and the pursuit of de-stigmatisation strategies

One of the strategies the Association adopted was straddling/decoupling (Lynch & Rodell, 2018; Zhang et al., 2021), whereby it sold products not made by the blind to attract customers, with the aim of increasing demand for products made by the blind. As stressed in the 1857 annual report, 'foreign and other fancy goods, duly labelled as not having been made by the blind, have been exposed for sale, by which means, [...] the advantage has been gained, of inducing persons to purchase the work of the blind, who might not otherwise have been attracted to the shop' (1857 Annual Report, p. 5). This strategy materially increased the levels of sales (1858 Annual Report), undoubtedly serving its economic sustainability and commercial purposes. However, it also seemed to reflect tensions within the organisation's identity, it suggested a greater focus on the commercial aims rather than its social character, which was all about promoting the work of the blind.

The Association also actively employed strategies that fostered a sense of groupness, thus consolidating a sense of common identity among the blind and visually impaired people it employed. For instance, Gilbert staunchly resisted the idea of hiring non-blind people in key positions in the organisation. In 1859, she rejected a proposal to hire a 'sighted' accountant responsible for 'buying and selling, the control of workrooms and management of stock, [and] the care of ledgers, accounts, bills and receipts.' Though the arrangement would presumably have allowed her more time to focus on the charitable aspect of the organisation, she rejected it. Her propensity to reject that and similar proposals has been attributed to Gilbert's eagerness to 'show what the blind can do alone and unaided' (Martin 1887/2010, p. 186–187). It should also be seen as an example of the boundary management approach, expressed as a very conscious decision to exclude non-blind people from executive positions within the organisation and thus enhance the sense of groupness amongst the blind members of it (Clair et al., 2016).

Building on the power of groupness and forging a sense of common identity was central to the Association's efforts towards de-stigmatisation, even throughout challenges to grow the business. When expansion was highly needed to face reduced levels of trade in 1878, there was a specific emphasis on keeping the number of sighted employees as low as possible. In 1897, the increase in sales was reported to be not on a par with an increase in

profits; however, the strategy the organisation employed to address this challenge was either to reduce the blind workers' wages or their number, rather than hiring sighted employees, an approach relevant to governance tensions mentioned previously. In later periods, developments such as the participation of blind workers in the labour protests in 1920s London, where male members of the National League of the Blind of Great Britain and Ireland were marching and 'staking a claim to rights within a wider labour movement' (Bohata et al., 2020, p. 228) could be seen as additional examples of a wider effort on the part of organisations supporting the blind to forge a sense of common identity amongst their members.

The Association also cooperated with other societies supporting visually impaired people. For instance, it regularly provided office space to the Association of Workshops for the Blind, whose Honorary Secretary was the Association's General Manager (1935, 1939 and 1943 Annual Reports). Such efforts likely enhanced the social mission of the organisation, since there was a substantial increase in donations (between 1918 and 1926, see Table 1) and a significant increase in the number of blind people employed by it. Specifically, there were 125 blind employees in 1918 increasing to 155 in 1926 in comparison to only 14 in 1857 (Annual reports, various years). Such developments also reflected the proliferation of charitable support in the interwar period due to the impact of the First World War. The devastation caused by the conflict, and the spread of 'internationalized images of suffering' (Field, 2020, p. 1), led to increased public interest in assisting those who were injured or had suffered bereavement (Herman & Yarwood, 2015). The positive attitudes that emerged were specifically addressed towards the blind, too. Indeed, in the British post-First World War framework, war blindness was seen as 'the transparent reflection of war sacrifice' (Anderson & Pemberton 2007, p. 460).

It seems that the togetherness approach worked quite effectively, especially given that it was a source of support during difficult times. For instance, in 1940, severe damage caused by enemy action meant that several departments housed at the headquarters on Tottenham Court Road had to cease their operations. It was one of the member organisations of the blind group—the National Institute for the Blind—that provided accommodation for the Association. (1940, 1941 Annual Reports and 1943 Annual Report, p. 5). Similarly, in 2014, as the Work Choice programme (established in 2010 to help organisations like Clarity & Co. provide specialist employment services for disabled people (DWP, 2013) was nearing its end, the Association played a crucial role in the formation of the Supported Business Alliance. The Association hosted meetings with the Minister for Work and Pensions to advocate for the involvement of its members in the future delivery of specialist disability employment services. Thanks to these efforts, the alliance secured a two-year extension of the Work Choice programme, while a post-Work Choice programme was also developed (2014, 2015 Annual Reports).

A further de-stigmatisation strategy the Association employed entailed efforts to garner increased attention by the public (Helms & Patterson, 2014). This was done by securing the support of prominent members of society and engaging with centres of political and social power. The Association actively sought the support of such figures throughout its life and was particularly eager to bring on board such people as patrons, members of the Council, or, more broadly, friends and supporters of it.

In this context, donations received by royalty were appropriately highlighted in the Association's annual reports.⁷ Indeed, securing patronage from Queen Victoria in 1859 was

considered a particularly important milestone for the Association.⁸ In the early twentieth century, the patrons were the King and Queen as well as Queen Alexandra, while the Duchess of Bedford was the President of the Association. Also, people such as the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Duke of Rutland appeared in the Association's list of vice-patrons (1918 Annual Report, n/a). Similarly, in 1924, although unsuccessfully, the Association attempted to add the prefix 'Royal' in its title (1924 Annual Report). The Association sought opportunities to engage with royalty throughout most of its life. For instance, in 1956, the opening of several houses for blind workmen and their families was announced. The houses were opened in the presence of the Princess Royal to commemorate the Centenary of the Association (Brunel University of London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 24, 1956a). The Association also sought relations with foreign royalty, with visits such as that of the Maharaja of Patiala in the 1920s being highlighted in the press (Brunel University of London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 24, 1925).⁹

There was also close engagement with various centres of political power. For example, considering the quality of education provided to blind children, Gilbert herself sent a memorandum not only to all the institutions supporting the blind in the country but also 'to several influential and friendly members of Parliament' (Martin, 1887/2010, p. 239). The ceremony involving the opening of the houses mentioned above was attended by Robert Carr, the then Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Labour, who noted his satisfaction with the fact that, as he stressed, the State had abandoned the old concept that 'the welfare of the handicapped was none of its concern but something to be left to charity' (Brunel University of London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 24, 1956a).

Further evidence shows that the Association also engaged in building public relations with other organisations and a presence in mass media (Brunel University of London Archives and Special Collections, CCO Box 24, 1956b). In 2011, Clarity & Co. hired the services of a public relations company to develop new ways of promoting the organisation (2011 Annual Report, p. 6) and, in addition, sought support through securing 'celebrity endorsements' (2013 Annual report, p. 7).

The Association prided itself on the support it enjoyed from public figures of this sort (Clarity, n.d.) and followed the same approach as a de-stigmatisation strategy throughout its history. For instance, in 1995, the opening of a new production line in the Luton facility and the presentation of the Quality Standard ISO 9001, which had been awarded to the organisation, was attended by the Duchess of Gloucester and highlighted with due appreciation in the relevant annual report (Ibid). In the decades leading up to the organisation's closure, the strategy of engaging with such centres of political and social power and leveraging relevant connections to promote its interests continued. This time, support was mainly sought from politicians rather than royals, especially as patronage from the Duchess of Gloucester ceased in 2006.¹⁰ For instance, in 2008, the Association stressed its clear focus on developing relationships with government and local authority bodies to take advantage of legislation promoting the use of supported businesses in public sector procurement (2008 Annual Report, p. 6).

Overall, Clarity and Co. successfully engaged with centres of social and political power quite successfully throughout much of its early history. It is highly likely that Gilbert's religious, family and educational background provided her with favourable conditions to form connections with such centres, especially the royalty, which in turn strengthened her capacity to gain their support. This approach not only enabled Clarity & Co. to channel

increased public attention towards people with vision impairment but also positively affected the organisation's public profile, augmented resource flows and helped alter public perceptions about the abilities of people with visual impairment. Analysis reveals that in 1857, external contributions (donations, subscriptions, and legacies) accounted for a significant 64.29% of total income, while sales accounted for only 35.71%. Over time, these proportions reversed, as shown in [Figure 1](#). On the one hand, this shift reflects a move away from public sympathy expressed through donations towards greater recognition and acceptance of the quality of products made by visually impaired workers. On the other hand, it indicates that the organisation's reduced engagement with centres of social and political power in its later years contributed to a decline in external support. Additionally, the fact that capitation for blind and disabled employees received from local authorities started appearing on the organisation's accounting statements since 1988 could be seen as another indication of de-stigmatisation, this time expressed through increased institutional support.

5. Discussion

This study advances the literature on social entrepreneurship from a historical perspective by examining how SEs operating under stigma achieve their social mission, while maintaining economic self-sufficiency. Through an in-depth historical case study of Clarity & Co., our findings offer important theoretical contributions to the social entrepreneurship theory by revealing how SEs navigate persistent challenges and unique opportunities characteristic to stigmatised contexts.

First, our findings contribute to social entrepreneurship theory by reframing de-stigmatisation not solely as a process of stigma management, but as a strategic organisational resource that fundamentally shapes how SEs navigate their dual social and commercial objectives. This dimension remains underexplored, as prior research has largely concentrated on the processes of stigma reduction itself and treating de-stigmatisation as the removal of negative labels or a means to regain legitimacy (Tracey & Phillips, 2016; Werner et al., 2024). Our findings challenge this by showing that, for SEs with stigma embedded in their business model, de-stigmatisation is not a one-off event but a continuous, dynamic process that mediates hybrid tensions. Specifically, strategies such as boundary management and decoupling do more than simply achieve social legitimacy, they actively reshape the scope and content of both social and commercial missions over time (e.g. through the establishment of the national Supported Business Alliance; collectively resisting some adverse regulatory changes; manufacturing unbranded products for external clients). Moreover, our analysis reveals the important trade-offs of de-stigmatisation strategies. Overreliance on these strategies may lead to unintended consequences potentially threatening long-term viability, e.g. identity dilution, increased operational costs, or reduced productivity, which are often overlooked in the literature. This nuanced perspective advances the field by showing that managing stigma is indispensable to the broader challenge of balancing competing logics and objectives that define social entrepreneurship (Wry & York, 2017). Hence, this research deepens our understanding of how the early forms of SEs proactively leverage de-stigmatisation as an organisational capability to sustain both social and commercial missions, offering a more comprehensive, process-oriented perspective on social entrepreneurship that goes beyond the stigma management alone.

Second, our findings advance social entrepreneurship research by revealing and theorising the dual nature of stigma in SEs, showing that stigma is not merely a barrier to overcome but can also be strategically harnessed as a source of organisational strength and differentiation. Different from Wong and McGovern (2023), who emphasise how commercial firms must leverage sponsorships or provide enhanced community services to access social resources and legitimacy, our research reveals that SEs can directly mobilise their stigmatised identity, such as blindness in the case of Clarity & Co., as a distinctive asset. Clarity & Co. capitalised on its association with blindness to benefit from lower consumer expectations, public sympathy, increased organisational visibility, and preferential treatment. This enabled the organisation to secure sales from the blinds' neighbourhood community, local governments, and War Offices, despite operating on narrow profit margins. Collectively, these outcomes enhance the SE's legitimacy, thus creating opportunities to augment resource flows (Li & Sarpong, 2024; Tracey & Phillips, 2016). This extends theory by showing how, in the SE context, stigma can be directly harnessed as a leverage for opportunity creation, thus revealing how SEs sustain hybrid missions under adverse conditions. Importantly, we highlight that stakeholder responses to stigma are heterogeneous (Helms et al., 2019), implying that stigma is a socially constructed concept rather than an inherent liability. Audiences do not interpret or evaluate the stigma of blindness in a uniform way. By theorising stigma as both a constraint and an enabler, our work advances social entrepreneurship scholarship beyond a deficit model, offering a deeper understanding of how SEs can transform social liabilities into organisational assets and sustain hybrid missions in the challenging stigmatised contexts. This duality advances our understanding of the complex nature of stigma in social entrepreneurship and offers insights to help SEs manage it more effectively.

Finally, this study makes a significant theoretical contribution to social entrepreneurship by providing a historical perspective on the persistence and complexity of stigma in SEs. Unlike the existing literature on stigmatised commercial firms, which suggests that stigma can be eradicated through social approval-seeking and strategic action (e.g. Hampel & Tracey, 2017, 2019), our findings reveal that SEs face stigma that is deeply embedded in social, historical, and institutional structures, making it resistant to complete removal. Different from Jones et al., (2024), where associating with elite networks helps commercial firms such as Barclay Bank deflect criticism and build their reputation, our analysis of Clarity & Co. shows that anti-stigma initiatives in SEs demand sustained, multi-level engagement with political, social, and institutional actors. Even with persistent efforts, such as securing royal patronage, engaging politicians, and modernising public relations, SEs often achieve only incremental changes in public attitudes and stakeholder evaluations. Our study advances the understanding of social entrepreneurship by demonstrating that SEs must confront stigma as a systemic phenomenon, requiring not just organisational strategies but also the co-creation of participatory architectures and the mobilisation of diverse social actors for broader, long-term change. Overall, our findings highlight that the management of deep-rooted stigma in SEs is an ongoing, collective process, and that the lack of institutional transformation may leave even long-lasting SEs vulnerable to severe financial pressure arising from a substantial pension deficit. This perspective advances social entrepreneurship theory by highlighting that disrupting deeply entrenched forms of stigma, such as the ocularcentric systems of inequity in our case, and reframing societal and institutional attitudes towards blindness require sustained political, cultural, and social transformation.

6. Conclusion

This study sought to answer one core research question, *‘how do social enterprises employ de-stigmatisation strategies to achieve their social mission while simultaneously sustaining economic self-sufficiency’*. Drawing on an in-depth analysis of Clarity & Co.’s 166-year history, including the sources of tensions inherent in SEs, the nature of stigma, and de-stigmatisation strategies, this study deepens our understanding of the early forms of social entrepreneurship and its evolution in advancing social change. Findings reveal that de-stigmatisation in SEs functioned as an evolving strategic capability central to balancing the SE’s social and commercial imperatives. Instead of passively reacting to stigma, Clarity & Co. proactively mobilised it as a strategic resource, transforming a socially discrediting condition into a source of organisational differentiation. The longitudinal perspective reveals that SEs’ de-stigmatisation is a historically embedded strategic process through which SEs advance their social and commercial missions over time.

Theoretically, this study contributes to social entrepreneurship literature by reframing de-stigmatisation as a core organisational capability that underpins the hybridity of SEs. By foregrounding temporality and historical context, our analysis challenges extant literature, which mainly regards stigma reduction as SEs’ main avenue to gain legitimacy (see the recent literature review by Zhang et al., 2021). Instead, our historical exploration highlights that relevant strategies can also function as a tool allowing SEs to constantly reshape the content and scope of their social and commercial missions over time. In the same vein, our findings reveal that stigma can also be a source of organisational strength for SEs, challenging contributions which view stigma merely as an obstacle to be overcome. Furthermore, our examination of Clarity & Co. highlights that SEs under stigma must confront it as a systemic phenomenon which can be tackled only through coordinated efforts from diverse social actors. Overall, our analysis throws light on early forms of social entrepreneurship but also enhances our understanding of the processes with which SEs engage in their effort to bring about social change.

Future research on the historical development of SEs could systematically investigate factors contributing to their failure, particularly in relation to managing the tensions between social and economic missions when stigma is present. In this context, it would be valuable to examine how SEs are affected, but also how they can potentially self-correct, when economic objectives start to dominate social goals, and how this influences their long-term viability. Future research could also focus on analysing historical financial data to uncover insights into how stigma management evolves across different stages of SEs’ development. The founder’s social imprinting effect (Battilana et al., 2015) in SEs, particularly regarding the longevity or erosion of their social mission, is an equally important topic that deserves further investigation.

Notes

1. The existence of a few enlightened examples pointing in the opposite direction should also be acknowledged. For instance, one of the main characters in Walter Scott’s novel *The Bride of Lamermoor* is a blind woman portrayed to be independent and possessing ‘extraordinary powers’ of a prophetic nature (Bates, 1998, p.130).
2. The London Metropolitan Archives appears to be the only other source of archival data about Clarity & Co. Records available and used in this paper concern the organisation’s annual reports for 1888, 1896, 1897, 1899, 1907 and 1931 as well as an internal report (The London Metropolitan Archives 1888, 1896, 1897, 1899).

3. The reference here is to Nigel Lewis (for relevant information see 'Soap through social enterprise'), who donated the collection to Brunel University's Archives and Special Collections, in liaison with the research team.
4. Gilbert's mother also came from a family affiliated with the Church of England, (Martin, 1887/2010).
5. The organisation also invested in the stock market. At certain periods, the performance of such investments was quite positive (2004 Annual report, p. 5).
6. At the time, the President of the Association was the Archbishop of Canterbury, while the Duchess of Bedford served as the 'Lady President'. There was also a fourteen-member committee, accompanied by members holding the role of the secretary, manager, auditor, etc.
7. For instance, on the 4th of February 1856, Queen Victoria sent a cheque for £50 to Miss Gilbert, towards the 'needy funds of the new association'. This was immediately followed by several further subscriptions. This strategy was re-iterated in 1934 when the association was looking for new subscribers to replace 'old friends' who had died (1934 Annual Report).
8. See Martin (1887/2010, p.173–174) and 1859 Annual Report, p.3.
9. The fact that, similarly, to the Princess Royal's presence in the house opening ceremony, the Maharaja's visit also appeared in the press of the time can also be seen as a further indication of the organisation's efforts to engage in publicity.
10. It could be argued that political support also made it easier for the organisation to secure local authority grants for a substantial part of its life. These appeared in the organisation's annual reports from 1935 to 1981. This source of funds accounted for the 1/3 of the organisation's total external contributions in 1981 (1981 Annual Report). The benefits derived from such relationships were recognised in the 1974 Annual Report as well (p. 4). Information about the end of royal patronage in 2006 was found in the 2006 Annual report, p. 5. No references about any further support received from royalty were found in subsequent reports.

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No potential conflict of interest is declared by the authors.

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