



Cromford's scenic pond



The Waiting Room, Cromford Railway Station

Discovering the *Derwent Valley*

Ashley Franklin begins the first of three 'staycations' on his doorstep
- travelling down the Derwent Valley Heritage Site

Little did I know when I moved to Milford in the late 1970s that I had come to a place that would be declared as one of 'Outstanding Universal Value to Humanity'. That came to pass in 2001 when the historic Derwent Valley Mills complex between Cromford and Derby was inscribed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

Ever since then, I have been breaking the ice at parties by revealing that our village's old Strutt mill is, officially, as iconic as the pyramids of Giza and the street where I live as romantic as the Silk Road. In fact, never mind comparing our World Heritage Site with the other 1,006 sites, the Derwent Valley is perhaps the most significant.

Gosh, am I really telling you that this

seemingly unremarkable 15-mile stretch of the Derwent is more noteworthy than the Grand Canyon, Galapagos Islands and the Great Barrier Reef? Er... yes, actually.

You still might not be aware - and I wasn't, even when I came to live in my Strutt cottage - that the Derwent Valley Mills is the birthplace of the factory system. This is why Adrian Farmer, the Heritage Co-ordinator for Derwent Valley Mills, believes this site is of such profound importance:

'In terms of the sheer scale of change and impact on the history of the human race, the Derwent Valley Mills - along with Ironbridge (another World Heritage Site) - lie at the core of the story of the Industrial Revolution. There are very few sites which can honestly say they have had a significant effect on

world history. Many have influenced it, but the factory system developed in the Derwent Valley brought changes which completely transformed the way people live their lives.

That impact is still very much being felt today, and probably always will. Nothing was ever the same again - people had to learn to work by the clock, in buildings specifically designed for work, and therefore had to live nearby. These were big changes that we now take for granted. Like Ironbridge, the Derwent Valley Mills ushered in a massive change to society. We should be proud of that.'

So, what are you waiting for? This jewel in our British Crown is on your doorstep and, as we spring into summer, I'll be revealing its attractions in this, the first of three journeys through the valley. >



An historical tour of Cromford Mills

Matlock Bath

What helps in selling the northern starting point of your journey is that you can mix it with a visit to Matlock Bath, a millstone's throw from Cromford where the World Heritage Site officially begins. Matlock Bath is its own special heritage site: as well as being likened to alpine Switzerland by Lord Byron, it is arguably the only place in the world that feels like a landlocked seaside resort, with its South Parade of gift shops, chip shops, ice cream parlours and amusement arcades, backed by wooded hills dotted with charming, brightly coloured period cottages. Furthermore, beneath the limestone cliffs opposite, the iron bridge, bandstand, gardens and pleasure boats quietly echo Matlock Bath's past as a Victorian spa resort.

If you belong to a family with a taste for lively activity, there are plenty of opportunities to canoe, sail, abseil, climb and fish. There are also two notable visitor attractions: Gulliver's Kingdom, ideal for 3 to 13 year olds with its 50 rides and 35 play attractions; and Heights of Abraham where a cable car takes you - in one-third of a mile - on a climb of 554ft to a hilltop park where you can take in cavern and mine tours and an adventure playground while - as with Gulliver's Kingdom - admiring the stunning views.

There are plenty of walks hereabouts. In my book *Derbyshire Ramblings - Walking in Circles down the Derwent Valley* - there is a circular walk that gives you equally memorable views from above Riber Castle and, once it brings you down to Cromford,



Crafts on display at the Georgian Market in Cromford Mills

takes you up again to High Tor for further 'wow' sights.

The sequel - to be published next summer - has been commissioned by the Arkwright Society and will be the first photo-book of the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site. It's an exciting commission and through it I have discovered aspects of the valley I had not previously appreciated.



The millworkers' cottages on North Street where No.10 is available as a Landmark Trust holiday property



Visitors to Masson Mill Textile Museum being shown the machine known as 'The Devil.'

Heritage Mills

Take Masson Mill, popular largely as a 'shopping village' with its four floors offering everything from warm woollen clothing to whisky collections, gift sets to golf clubs. But have you visited its Working Textile Museum? As its leaflet proclaims: 'The Mills are Alive... with the sounds, sights and smells of a working cotton mill from the 18th and 19th centuries.'

On what was - I admit with some shame - my first visit, I discovered that they have the most comprehensive collection of historic working textile machinery in the world. Masson Mill's owner Robert Aram, a former history teacher, began buying up mills during the mass closures of the 1980s with a view to turning them into industrial units. When Masson Mill was up for sale in 1988,

he found 'the jewel in the crown', and immediately set about transferring machinery from his other mills to make Masson his showpiece museum.

As Robert points out, Richard Arkwright built Masson Mill in 1783 'at the height of his power' - and his wealth, too. The expensive mellow red brick was seen as a symbol of the magnate's own mellowing as a result of his increasing prosperity.

Inside the museum, the atmosphere of a working mill is as real as Robert intended: 'We haven't done it up Walt Disney fashion,' he states. 'You get proper working machines where, for example, you can see, hear and smell 2,000 looms clattering away. These machines do genuinely make cloth. What we have here is authentic and evocative.'

Along with the looms, you can see cotton

'mules', carding engines, a gruesome-looking machine known as 'The Devil' and a room containing a staggering 680,000 bobbins, the largest collection in the world.

While Masson Mill was in operation up until 1991, the recovery of Arkwright's first mill complex in Cromford has been a massive undertaking. It was used as a colour works for 50 years from 1922 so, when it closed, the newly-formed Arkwright Society took on a contaminated, seemingly irreparable site. They removed 6,000 tonnes of rubble and clung on to a vision which is, at last, soon to be realised.

It has been a visitor attraction for several years with highly informative guided tours, historical talks and events and activities including demonstrations and displays of traditional crafts. This summer promises a

Book Festival and a Scarecrow Weekend. Excitingly, by the end of the year the completion of the first part of a four-phase 'Master Plan' will enable us to visit a major 'multi-use heritage and cultural tourism attraction.'

'Because we're tucked away around the corner from the A6 (which Masson Mill sits prominently alongside), a lot of people don't realise the extent of the complex here,' says Arkwright Society's Chief Executive Officer, Sarah McLeod.

As she reveals, the restored and regenerated mills will form 'one of the most exciting museum design projects in the world.' One key aspect is the opening up of the five-storey Building 17, which has lain unused since the 1970s. It has gradually been repaired and converted. The ground floor will be a visitor 'Gateway' centre that will highlight both Arkwright's massive

legacy at Cromford Mills and the entire World Heritage Site.

Cromford and Lea

Arkwright's legacy isn't just confined to the mills. A walk up Scarthin Rock (there is a guided walk if you prefer) gives a panoramic view of the hillside and of Willersley Castle, the mansion intended as Arkwright's home which was almost complete when the industrialist died. His tomb is in St Mary's Church, which is also worth a visit for the sublime wall paintings and stained glass by artist AO Hemming. Although St Mary's is closed outside services and Willersley Castle is now a hotel, both their doors are usually thrown open during the annual event-packed Discovery Days held each autumn.

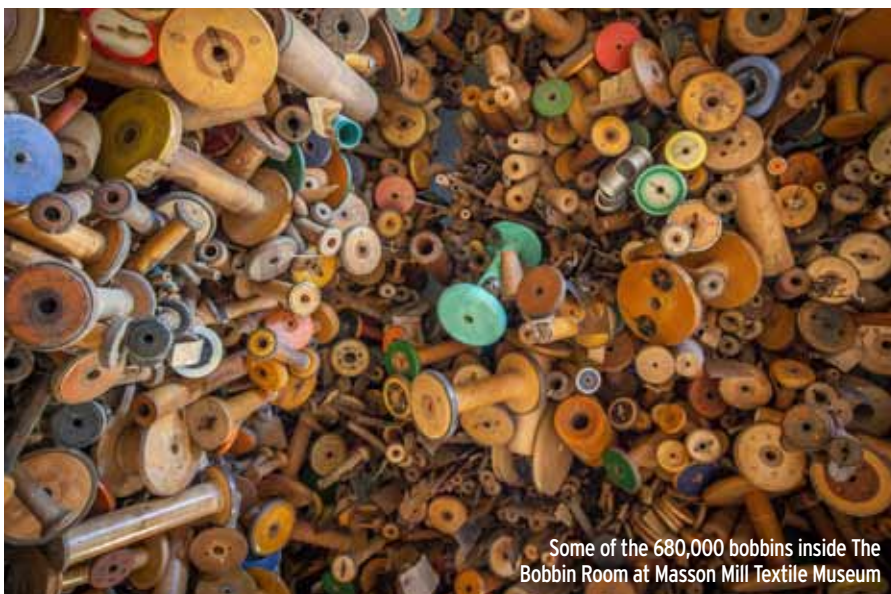
Cromford village and its millworkers' cottages is almost like a living museum and can be explored at any time. It's also blessed



Willersley Castle from Scarthin Rock



Dave Mitchell, proprietor, Scarthin Bookshop



Some of the 680,000 bobbins inside The Bobbin Room at Masson Mill Textile Museum

with pubs, cafes, art and craft centres, and one of the 'ten best book shops in the world' (according to the Guardian). Scarthin Books also overlooks the huge and glorious pond, one of the most attractive sights in the county.

Despite the rise of e-books and online ordering, Scarthin Books remains a popular destination, a beautifully organised labyrinthine chaos of almost 100,000 titles across 13 rooms. Proprietor Dave Mitchell fears that the shop is becoming a museum but, on a more positive note, adds that 'it's an ever-changing museum where you can actually take away a bit of it.' He is also heartened by the fact that Scarthin 'has become not just a One-Stop but a Long-Stop bookshop.'

General Manager Dave Booker is also



upbeat about Scarthin's 'reputation for superb customer service' and as 'a centre for new, secondhand, expensive, rare and antiquarian books, covering every conceivable subject under the sun.' You can even buy an Agatha Christie novel in Icelandic.

Cromford Canal is another living museum of sorts, especially since it started offering horse-drawn canalboat trips, following the return of a narrowboat after nearly 15 years absence. The painstaking restoration of a canal that was, by all accounts, no more than a linear rubbish tip is thanks to the praiseworthy dedication of the Friends of Cromford Canal. There are few more pleasant walks in Derbyshire than along this towpath with its abundant wildlife, especially at the Cromford end which

"This is classic fashion that is permanent. It's also British made and the finest quality you can get. Why would you want to buy any other knitwear?"

includes High Peak Junction - the old railway workshops with numerous relics plus a working forge and café - and Leawood Pumping Station, home to a beast of a steam-powered beam engine.

Close to High Peak Junction is John Smedley Ltd at Lea Mills. This family-owned business has been manufacturing high quality knitwear since 1784, which makes it the longest working factory in the world. A factory tour - which must be booked in advance - leaves you marvelling at the intricate processes and rigorous quality control that has made Smedley's a world-

leading brand. Future tours promise to be ever more fascinating as the company is working hard to collate its vast archives, which include the Long Johns it claims to have invented.

There is also a factory shop selling mainly discontinued stock and slight seconds, though you try finding a flaw in any garment - I couldn't. If you call in, don't be surprised to rub shoulders at the racks with a visitor from Japan: 25 per cent of Smedley's exports go to the Far East. Visitors of all ages beat a path here, as store manager Andy Bull states, "This is classic fashion that is permanent. It's >

also British made and the finest quality you can get. Why would you want to buy any other knitwear??

From one riot of colour to another in Lea: the Rhododendron Gardens. Its four acres support 550 types of rhododendrons, azaleas, kalmias and other plants and also attract over 50 species of bird. Although the flowers peak in early May, owner John Tye says that during the flowering season the gardens ‘totally change every fortnight’, adding that several season ticket holders visit as much as twice a week. I can also recommend the fluffy scones and cherry almond slices served in the café.

Where to stay

With so much to see in this part of the World Heritage Site, you may care to stay over. For something a little out of the ordinary, the red door of Hodgkinson’s Hotel in Matlock Bath is a portal to a plush Victorian age.

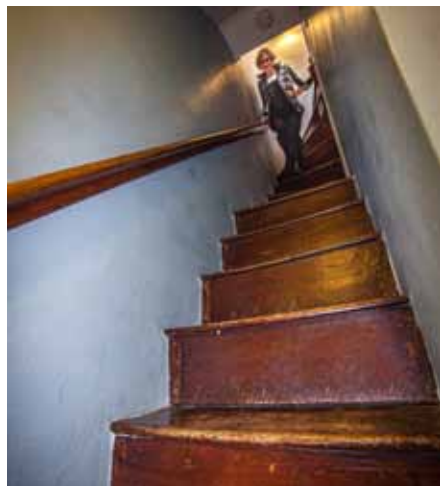
In Cromford, another Victorian building of special appeal offers arguably the most handsome railway station frontage in the country. The old Waiting Room, now restored and beautifully refurbished, makes a charming holiday cottage and its position on the platform of an operational railway line may even make it unique. A Grade II listed building, it was derelict when Tim Collis and Ryan Phelps bought the Station House and found the Waiting Room was included in the sale. As Tim reveals, ‘The potential of The Waiting Room screamed at us. We thought it might feel a little long and narrow on the inside but because we kept the high ceilings it somehow managed to feel cosy and spacious at the same time. As for it being on the platform: the insulation and secondary glazing make it fairly quiet, even when a train pulls into the station; and our guests love both the romance and convenience of its position. Many of our guests arrive by train and 25 per cent of them are railway enthusiasts.’



Horse-drawn boat trip along Cromford Canal



John Smedley, the world’s oldest working factory



The steep stairs at 10 North Street

At the other end of Cromford, on North Street, enthusiasts of industrial history have the rare and rich opportunity to stay in a genuine three-storey gritstone millworker’s house, built by Arkwright in 1776. 10 North Street is managed by the Landmark Trust which rescues historic buildings and makes them available as tourist accommodations (another Derbyshire property is Swarkestone Pavilion).

Referred to by the Trust as ‘one of our quiet gems’, North Street is described as ‘the earliest planned industrial housing in

the world’ and ‘the finest of its type ever built’. In reflecting and experiencing upon the living quarters of the earliest of factory workers, guests have to cope with incredibly steep stairs. One guest left the suggestion: ‘How about a fireman’s pole instead of stairs?’ The same guest also declared that the house was ‘better than my wildest dreams.’

Is it any wonder Adrian Farmer tells us how proud we should be of our World Heritage Site? In the next issue I anticipate discovering more to be proud of as I explore Ambergate, Belper and my home village of Milford. I’ll put the kettle on. ■