

DISCOVERING THE DERWENT VALLEY II: BELPER & MILFORD

Taking up the route from Cromford, Ashley Franklin investigates the delights of the valley through Belper to Milford and Makeney



Rex Preston sketching beside Cromford Canal. Inset: Rex's sketch

MILFORD & MANHATTAN

SINCE BEING commissioned to produce the first photo-book of the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site, I have been vigorously promoting this area to anyone within earshot. My favourite line is: 'Without Milford, there would be no Manhattan.' To any resulting raised eyebrows, I note the engineering genius of William Strutt whose father Jedidiah turned Belper and Milford into mill towns and, alongside Richard Arkwright in Cromford, initiated the factory system and Industrial Revolution. Then follow this with the fact that the Strutts' influence also extended to America.

The knowledge of textile machinery acquired by Milford mill apprentice Samuel Slater, who sailed to New York city in 1789 at the age of 21, transformed Stateside mills to such an extent that US President Andrew Jackson conferred on him the title 'Father of American Manufacturing'.

Equally as significant, William Strutt helped develop the world's first iron-framed, fire-resistant mills, like the one in Milford, making them the world's safest buildings. Eventually these were the inspiration behind the building of skyscrapers. So it follows: without Milford there would be no Manhattan.

PRESERVATION & CONSERVATION

In this second part of my journey down the Derwent Valley covering Belper, Milford and the wider Amber Valley, it's hard to miss this area's

great value as a place for a staycation. However, a World Heritage Site is not purely about tourism. Theoretically, it's more to do with protecting and conserving a historic area, with the avowed intent of enhancing 'its character, appearance and economic well-being.' As Adrian Farmer, the Heritage Co-ordinator for Derwent Valley Mills, explains: 'Tourism is important, because it helps people to understand the importance of the Derwent Valley Mills. The income it generates is also helpful to ensure the site remains protected and properly conserved. Protection and conservation, however, will always lie at the heart of the work.'

So, effectively, visiting here will set in motion a cycle whereby money spent will preserve and improve what we already have, making it even more of an attraction, bringing yet more visitors and so on...



Nicky Crewe, the new Manager of Strutt's North Mill, Belper

WALKS & WATER

Protection and conservation are especially vital when one considers the valley's increased value as a place for walking. When I moved to the Chevin in the late 1970s, we would see perhaps five or six rambling groups in a year. Now, there are more cagoules than you can shake a trekking pole at.

Between 25th May and 7th June the third Discovery Walks Festival includes 49 walks, with over half around the Belper area. The walks – in the mornings, afternoons and evenings – cover cultural heritage, industrial history and the pure pleasure of the landscape, ranging from a 200 yard stroll to a seven mile hike.

As our journey begins just south of Cromford, first mention goes to the Betty Kenny Storywalk in Shining Cliff Woods at Ambergate on 28th May where you see the ancient yew tree under which 18th century charcoal burner Betty Kenny and husband Luke brought up eight children. It is thought that rocking their children to sleep in a hollowed out bough inspired the lullaby 'Rock-a-Bye-Baby'.

Opposite Shining Cliff Woods is the Ambergate end of the Cromford Canal. This quiet level walk-for-all-seasons is especially good at the moment, as a noticeboard declares: 'When the sun comes out, insects appear as from nowhere.' As do ducks of all varieties, newts, pike and even the occasional water vole and grass snake.

Never mind just walking, bring your easel or sketch pad. Along this stretch of water – and in other parts of the valley – there is a landscape waiting to be captured via brush or pencil. It was no surprise for me to find Rex Preston sketching beside the water: this is how he began painting as a teenager, when he came to live at the Bridge Inn beside the River Derwent in Duffield.

'My first paintings were of the water,' Rex points out. 'My bedroom at the pub looked out on to the river and it was wonderful to sit there and experience nature's changing moods. It was inspirational. If I had lived in a less beautiful area, I might have painted quite differently. Even now, 50 years later, I still love to paint in the Derwent Valley.'

Although Rex mainly sketches and then completes the painting in his studio, his distinguished artist son Mark can often be seen hereabouts painting en plein air, as can Andrew Macara, who has produced a whole series of abstracts based on Cromford Canal reflections.



HERITAGE & HEAGE

The Derwent Valley is photogenic, too, as I discovered on circular walks for my book *Derbyshire Ramblings*, one of which takes us to Heage windmill. There are two Discovery Walks starting and finishing at Heage Windmill. After I wrote in *Derbyshire Life* that 'the shape, singularity and sheer nobility of a windmill makes it one of the most prepossessing sites on earth', I was invited to become a Trustee of Heage Windmill. I accepted

with glee and took on the task of revitalising the windmill's website. Promoting the mill comes easily: who couldn't fail to admire Britain's only six-sailed stone windmill, so superbly restored by volunteers in 2002 that it looks as good as it did when first built in 1797? Costumed guides reveal the workings of all those cogs, levers, pulleys, weights and trapdoors which enable the mill to produce its own flour.

On the fringes of this part of the World Heritage

top Belper Mill from the River Gardens

above Strutt's North Mill with its refurbished gallery of mill machinery and costumed characters during a 'Cotton Tales' event



Millworkers' cottages, Long Row, Belper

Site, there are another two heritage attractions well worth mentioning: Midland Railway at Butterley and Crich Tramway Museum. The annual Belper Steam & Vintage Rally also takes place at Denby on 13th and 14th June.

A first-time event at the Tramway Museum reminds me of John Betjeman's observation that 'Derbyshire has every kind of scenery except the sea.' In the last week of May the Tramway Village will be transformed into a family-themed seaside resort complete with beach, deck-chairs, buckets and spades.

A cannonball shot away from Crich is Wingfield Manor and I can recommend a tour of the Manor's desolate grandeur. In 'The King's England' Arthur Mee declared it 'amongst the finest remains in our land' – though sadly tours are restricted to only the first Saturday of the month.

BELPER & STRUTT

The richness of heritage in Belper is such that wherever you walk you feel the impact of the Strutts. Belper was totally transformed by Jedidiah and his family, becoming almost a principality through the Strutts building workers' houses, schools, churches, post offices, hospital,

library, swimming baths, the River and Memorial Gardens, and the paved market place. They also provided running water, milk, fresh food from their farms, a comprehensive health service and telegram system.

What's more, wherever you walk in this and any other part of the world, you can thank Jedidiah Strutt: his Derby Rib invention revolutionised the manufacture of hose. That same technology keeps your socks up today.

How the village of Belper was transformed into the world's first factory community can be explored at the Strutt's North Mill Visitors Centre. The centre is run entirely by dedicated volunteers who, with the help of some original machinery and demonstration models, help bring alive the stories of cotton spinning, stocking making, the Strutt family and Belper Mill workers. The centre has had a continual struggle with funding, though there is fresh optimism with both the appointment of a new manager, Nicky Crewe, who has a decade of experience in heritage tourism in Derbyshire, and a grant injection from both the Heritage Lottery Fund and Arts Council England's new Museum Resilience Fund. There is also to be a two-year funding and visitor support post. Considering the immense importance of Belper ▶

'The richness of heritage in Belper is such that wherever you walk you feel the impact of the Strutts'



Time for tea in Belper with Rebecca Fowkes of the Bus Station Tea Rooms



Milford



Heage Windmill

in forming the factory system, I believe the visitor experience deserves to be on the scale of Ironbridge or the Black Country Museum. Granted, that would require a prodigious funding campaign or, preferably, a seven-figure cheque from a generous benefactor but, pleasingly, a vision of the North Mill as a major tourist attraction is in Nicky's line of sight: 'These latest funds will help us move into a new phase for the Mill and when you consider that the people who developed the

cotton spinning industry here and built these mills "thought big" it would be great to be able to follow in their tradition.'

What the North Mill Centre currently offers was enough to make a profound impact on one tourist who wrote in the Visitors' Book: 'A fascinating insight to an industry no longer making things. To touch a building that was actually in use – far, far better than reading in a book.'

Also, the rural landscape setting for the mills and their communities is set to improve thanks to the Heritage Lottery funded DerwentWISE scheme which, over the next five years, will deliver over 60 projects largely concerned with 'conserving and restoring features of natural and cultural historic importance within the landscape.' Fancy a staycation as a volunteer? DerwentWISE, a project managed by Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, offers you the chance to help maintain and enhance meadows and ancient woodlands or be trained in techniques such as hedge laying, building surveying and dry stone walling. You could even become a leader or guide on tours and walks.

A wealth of Discovery Walks have been planned in and around Belper to explore the town's early industrial housing, the old workhouse, historic cemetery, George Stephenson's railway, the tramways, River Gardens, the nature reserves in Belper Parks and along Wyver Lane, and St John's Chapel, Belper's oldest surviving building.



The Milford flag



Vintage attractions at the Belper Steam Rally which comes to Denby on 13 and 14 June



Milford



ICE HOUSE & TEA HOUSE

One Discovery Walk takes in the Bridge Hill Ice House, one of the few surviving structures belonging to Bridge Hill House, the Strutt's residence in Belper. That house was demolished in 1938 but on the plot there is now a beautiful new house, completed last autumn, designed and owned by Stephen and Caroline Cavers. It's now open as a luxurious Bed & Breakfast establishment. Lounging on the veranda, I could understand why guests, according to Caroline, 'sit here going "Wow"!'. Set high on the hillside in Lodge Drive, the panoramic view of Belper is glorious and the bedrooms have been planned on the ground floor with living space above to make the most of the view.

The Cavers also provide private tours through Visit England and foreign visitors, especially from the USA, are amazed to find themselves staying in the heart of the Industrial Revolution. As Caroline reveals: 'Many who come for a short break are drawn by Derbyshire and the Peak District in general and look to visit Bakewell, Chatsworth and the many small pretty villages. When we tell them they are looking over "the valley that changed the world," they become intrigued and, looking down on the Mills as we do, the conversation flows easily into the history of the valley. The next thing we know, our guests' itineraries are rescheduled with visits along the Derwent Valley.

What's more, guests leave saying they have only just scratched the surface of everything there is to see, and vow to return.'

Guests who stay in one of the five luxurious, modern double bedrooms at Chevin Green Farm in Milford might well be amazed to know that this B&B is effectively rubbing shoulders with the finest hotels in Britain. Run by Sarah Marley and husband David, Chevin Green Farm is one of only five newcomers to win a coveted place in the Michelin Guide 2015. It's also one of the few ▶

above Gardens open on 27, 28 June: top left clockwise, Mr & Mrs Wheeldon of Sandbed Lane, Mr & Mrs Fairweather of Windmill Rise, Mrs Brinkworth of Whitemoor Hall, Mr & Mrs Leigh of Mount Pleasant Drive
below Stephen and Caroline Cavers sitting in front of their beautiful Bridge Hill House



B&Bs to be listed alongside 66 hotels. This 350 year-old farm has been in Sarah's family since 1929 and, with its history of dairy farming, it is eminently suitable that Sarah has introduced a popular tea theme to the establishment. As their website states: 'We are just your cup of tea.'

HIGH STREET & LONG ROW

If you have a craving for the warm infused leaf, Belper is home to some splendid tea rooms. One that opened recently, Gillivon, is helping to encourage shoppers and visitors to the Mill end of town. Here you are just a few steps away from the charming millworkers' houses on Long Row, and it's only a few more steps to the Mill and the quiet escape of the River Gardens, which has a full summer programme of music events from the grand bandstand. On 27th and 28th June a big Open Gardens event features more than 20 hidden garden gems in the town and the town's floral splendour was rewarded in 2012 with the accolade of Best Town in the Britain in Bloom competition.

Belper now has a fresh accolade: the Great British High Street of the Year 2014. A walk through the town centre reveals a host of independent niche outlets like gallery shop Hall of Frames, specialist off licence Liquid Treasure, award-winning deli Fresh Basil, and several chic gift shops. The old Lion Hotel is now back in private hands and being restored to its former glory; the Ritz, Belper's revitalised picture house, will celebrate its tenth anniversary next year while ironmongers Tomes has just celebrated its centenary and remains one of the few high street stores left where you can buy fork handles and four candles!



A cyclist on the Chevin



The Holly Bush, Makeney - 'the best hanging baskets in British pubdom'

The British High Street judges were especially impressed with Belper's innovative Ambassadors scheme which involves over 80 trained locals, predominantly retailers, who are on hand to inform visitors of everything Belper has to offer.

It's a great success story. As Joanne Bamford, Amber Valley's Town Centres Development Officer reveals, the borough attracts over four million annual visitors, generating around £15 million each month, income which supports over 2,500 full time jobs. 'It encourages a vibrancy and vitality to the area,' says Joanne, 'which makes it a lovely place to live and work for us all.'

I'll vouch for that. I have witnessed the steady development of this area since moving here in 1977 and have sensed that World Heritage Site status has turned growth into rejuvenation. As for my community here in Milford and Makeney, we have two of the finest traditional pubs in Derbyshire, the King William and the Holly Bush – the latter soon to show again why it has the best hanging baskets in British pubdom – one of the finest Italian restaurants in the Midlands in Angelo's, the Strutt Arms is soon to re-open as a restaurant, splendid walks along The Chevin, warm and friendly neighbours, and a palpable sense of history which a Discovery Walk on 26th May will reveal. What's more, the long derelict site of the mill complex is set to be converted – within the next five years – into domestic and commercial buildings which should add vitality to the village and local economy. I can't possibly leave anyway: I run the village website, so I'm staying awhile, perfectly content to reside in the midst of this most historic World Heritage Site. For me, it certainly beats Manhattan. In fact, I'll take Milford every time. ♦



Yvonne Graves and Gill Elliot of Gillivon

"It encourages a vibrancy and vitality to the area, which makes it a lovely place to live and work for us all"

FOR MORE INFORMATION

see www.derwentvalleymills.org.

A brochure of the Discovery Walks – 25th May to 7th June – is widely available