

The Derwent Valley – the crucible of the Industrial Revolution

In 2001 a seventeen mile stretch of Derbyshire's Derwent Valley was designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. It now ranks alongside other sites, such as Mount Kenya National Park, the city of St Petersburg and the island of Rhodes, as an area chosen for its unique attributes and world importance.

The Derwent Valley is indeed unique for it was here that the Industrial Revolution found its greatest expression and where the face of Britain's textile industry changed forever. This was due to the ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit of pioneers such as Richard Arkwright. His invention of the Water Frame in 1769 transformed textile production from an intimate cottage industry, employing individual spinners and handloom weavers, to a highly developed factory system. The machine could spin 128 threads at a time – ten times that of its forerunner, the Spinning Jenny. Moreover, these machines could be mass produced and were so complex that they needed to be installed in large mills located in deep valleys close to a source of water power and with access to a workforce. Mill sites were often developed into small communities, with housing for the workers and amenities such as a school and church.

Cromford Mill, Arkwright's second mill, built in 1771, is regarded as the world's first successful water-powered cotton-spinning mill. Together with Masson Mill, built by Arkwright at Matlock in 1783, Cromford became the blueprint for other mills developed within the Derwent Valley, most notably those at Belper, Milford and Darley Abbey [[link to Darley Abbey Society LHI page](#)]. Arkwright's factory system was so visionary that his mills became the model for cotton manufacture throughout the UK, Europe and the USA.

Other technological inventions during the eighteenth century – Watt's Steam Engine, Crompton's Spinning Mule and Cartwright's Power Loom – gave further impetus to Britain's textile industry. They enabled mill owners to harness a more stable source of power and to

utilise more efficient and faster machines. Again, Arkwright was the pioneer – he built the first steam-powered mill in Nottingham in 1790, which paved the way for further development, initially with the building of Robinson's mills along the River Leen, near Hucknall [[link to Hucknall Heritage Archive Project LHI page](#)], in Nottinghamshire. By 1810 there were over 2,000 steam-driven textile mills in the UK. This number had risen to 100,000 by 1830, which demonstrates the speed with which the textile industry had expanded within forty years.

The development of the textile industry in the 18th and 19th centuries had a huge impact on local communities and leaves a legacy which is ripe for research. Many local history groups and LHI projects are involved in this investigation:

- the Darley Abbey Society, Derbyshire, has been examining one of the earliest mill settlements in Derbyshire's Derwent Valley.
- Bonsall History Project, Derbyshire, has produced a number of books relating to the history of the village, including its involvement in the textile industry.
- Hucknall Heritage Archive Project, Nottingham, is recording the heritage of this former mining and textile village.