

The Mills after Richard Arkwright



After Sir Richard Arkwright's death in 1792, Richard Arkwright junior sold most of his remaining cotton mill interests outside Matlock Bath and Cromford. That he retained these mills may well have had more to do with their role in sustaining the Willersley Estate than their inherent profitability.

At Cromford the disputes over water rights which had rumbled on through the 1830s reached a conclusion in 1839 and, by 1847, when Thomas Carlyle visited the area, he was made aware the end was near. He wrote to his brother "the Mother of all the Mills [is] very nearly fallen silent now, likely soon to go out altogether".

From the late 1820s profits from the Cromford and Masson Mills are likely to have been nominal and there are few indications of any attempt to improve their performance. In 1834 the Factories Inquiry recorded that water frames were still in use in the Arkwright Mill and 20 years later when the son of Johann Gottfried Brugelmann visited Masson he was amazed to see "the great inventor's machinery, mahoganied by age, is still at work.... after more than seventy years of toil".

The mills passed to Peter Arkwright 1784-1866 and on in turn to Frederic Arkwright 1806-74. The family earned universal acclaim locally for keeping the mills at work during the cotton famine in the early 1860s at considerable cost to themselves, but their patience was not infinite. In 1872 Frederic had both sites valued and came close to a sale. Only Masson had retained any value. No more than a small section of the Cromford Mill remained in use: a winding room; a blowing room; and a making up room. But it was left to his son, Frederic Charles Arkwright (1853-1923) to resolve the problem. In 1883 he brought into partnership an experienced cotton spinner from Dukinfield, John Edward Lawton and it was Lawton who breathed new life into Masson Mill.

Renaissance

With new machinery, new working practices and new supervisors imported from Lancashire, Masson entered the growing market for sewing thread created by the popularity of sewing machines. A measure of Lawton's success is the substantial mansion he built, Cromford Court, overlooking Masson Mill.

By 1890, Masson Mill was exporting its products to Melbourne, Calcutta, Madras, Constantinople, France, Spain, Mexico, Vera Cruz, Mauritius, the Canary Islands, British Columbia, Chile, Monte Video, Buenos Aires and the West Indies.

In 1897, the mill became part of the English Sewing Cotton Company. It continued in used until 1992. Work then began to adapt it to new uses and, after a major repair programme had been completed, it opened in its new form in 1999.

Cromford Mill: the Colour Works Years

The Cromford Mill site was less fortunate. It had no place in Lawton's plan. Towards the end of the 19th century, sections of it were used as a brewery and one of the buildings became a laundry. The Arkwright machinery at Cromford Mill was advertised for sale but there was little interest. Platts, the great textile machinery makers, acquired a water frame and other pieces to use as exhibition items to help them sell their modern equipment. Ultimately their purchases found their way to the Helmshore museum in Lancashire where they are still to be seen. Other items were donated by the Arkwright family to the Science Museum in London. Most of the Cromford machinery is thought to have been smashed. The second mill remained in a useable state and was let to William Hollins, the inventor of Viyella, a name derived from the nearby Via Gellia, whose company was using it in 1890 when it was destroyed by fire.

Early in the 20th century, the Arkwright family sold Cromford Mills and the site was divided between a colour pigment manufacturer and a laundry. It was intensively developed, every open space pressed into service for production units. The water courses were covered over and built upon and the historic buildings disfigured by lift shafts, lean-to sheds and new doorways and window openings.

In 1929 fire destroyed two floors of the first mill (Building 18), and in 1961 fire reduced the bow fronted building (the Barracks) to a shell which was subsequently demolished.



Rescue and Conservation

By 1979, it was no longer economic to manufacture colour pigments at Cromford Mill. It was purchased by the Arkwright Society, the local civic society for the Matlock area. The Society embarked on an incremental strategy of repair and re-use.

Cromford Mill is now home to a range of small businesses and retail outlets which provide work for approximately 100 people. At the same time, the mills operate as a popular heritage destination welcoming visitors from all over the world.

