

The First Darley Abbey Cotton Mill



Little is known of the first Evans mill. A plan drawn by Benjamin Outram in 1792 indicates that the first leat bringing water to the mill was located to the east of the building. In 1788 the mill burnt down. The earliest building which survives is its replacement. There is however good reason to believe that the first structure was much the same as the mill which has survived which is known as Long Mill.

In its first incarnation the mill had a very limited life. There is evidence which suggests it was not ready for production until late in 1786 when Richard Arkwright agreed to lease it from Thomas Evans. The suggestion that the first mill was not ready for production until about this time is further supported by the following advertisement in the Derby Mercury in 1787.

“Darley Abbey cotton mill. WANTED. Families Particularly women and children to work at Said Mill. They may be provided with comfortable houses and every convenience at Darley or Allestry: particularly a milking cow to each family. It is a very good neighbourhood for the men getting work who are not employed in the manufactory”.

The lease with Richard Arkwright was never completed and in 1787 Evans was still buying components from gear cutters and clock makers in Ashbourne and from iron founders to equip the mill with machinery, further evidence of the time it took to fully commission a mill of this size. At the same time he was attempting to find a market for his first production of yarn.

The mill rebuilt and extended

After barely a year the Evans Mill was destroyed by fire. Rebuilding began immediately. The mill had been insured so the Evans escaped total loss. No further set-backs are recorded.

The mill was extended between 1796 and 1805 with a new cut and new buildings and further extended between 1818 and 1821. It also expanded to the north of the original mill site where a number of new processes were installed and ancillary functions such as the counting house and offices and stabling were housed.

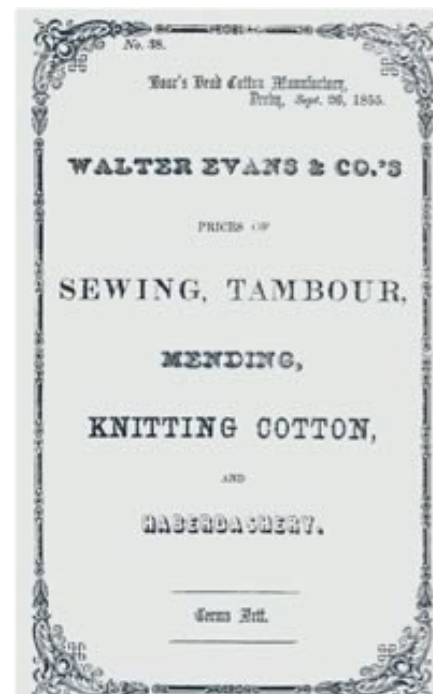
The mills now employed more than 500 people and growth continued until c.1830. In the later years of the 19th century the business retained and developed further the integration and self sufficiency which in the earliest years had been a necessity. Though ultimately spinning was given up and mule-spun yarn was imported from Lancashire, the company continued all the other manufacturing processes including dyeing and added the manufacture of the bobbins on which the thread was sold and by 1862, the printing of labels and promotional material.



A mature and successful enterprise

A catalogue for the 'Boar's Head Cotton Manufactory, Derby' has survived from September 26, 1855, which lists all Walter Evans & Co's products. It includes Sewing, Tambour (embroidery), Mending, Knitting Cotton and Haberdashery, and it is clear that in addition to Evans own output, goods were being bought in for resale. In this way the Evans service to their retailers could be made more comprehensive. Such items included sarsnet, a fine soft silk material used for lining dresses; ferrets, a tape of cotton or silk; galloons, ribbons of gold or silver thread used to trim garments; and handkerchiefs, braces, pins, needles, bonnet wire, buttons and whalebone.

The Evans seem to have been first among the Derwent Valley factory masters to develop a retail as well as an industrial or commercial presence and attempt to serve the market which existed in people's homes for sewing cottons, knitting cottons and embroidery threads and materials.



Catalogue



Box and Bobbin Labels

Evans had agents in London, Manchester, Blackburn, Leicester and Nottingham and travellers who covered other centres such as Birmingham. Their brand name, Boar's Head, a name suggested by the family coat of arms which included a boar's head, was in use by the middle of the century. Boar's Head thread was exported all over the world except to those markets where a porcine image might be culturally offensive. In these cases alternative brand names were used.

In 1862 a visitor noted that Boar's Head crochet cotton was still being wound by hand and that much of this work was carried out "by the people of Darley in their own homes". It is likely that this was the last of the outwork. When the mills first opened it would have been extensive. Cotton picking, still at this time an unmechanised process, was dealt with outside the mill and some of it was put into the hands of contractors. As the firm acquired batting and willow machines the demand for pickers grew less. James Huthwaite discovered this in October 1803 when (Evans)

"gave him notice that it was uncertain how long his hands could be employed to pick for Walter Evans & Co and that he must give the worst of his hands a month's notice on his return home".

In the 1860s and '70s, Boar's Head products won international recognition: at the London exhibitions of 1861 and 1862; in Dublin in 1865; in Paris in 1867; in Vienna in 1873 and in Paris in 1879.

The end of the line

The Evans involvement in the business ceased with the death of Walter Evans in 1903. John Peacock, who had been manager, bought the mills from his estate. The Peacocks ran the business until 1943, when it was taken over by J & P Coats. In 1969 the sale of the mills for other uses began. The mills are now home to a variety of small businesses.



Boars Head Mill in 1862