

Darley Abbey

Darley Abbey: housing and the development of the community

Darley Abbey contains examples of the classic Derwent Valley three-storey mill workers' terraces similar to the earliest Cromford housing; but it also has a significant number of back-to-back houses, a house type not found in Cromford though present in Belper and Milford, and it has the earliest known example of the cluster house.

This design was promoted by Charles Bage as housing suitable for overseers at the Flax Mill he designed in 1797 for Marshalls on the outskirts of Shrewsbury. It was also used by William Strutt in Belper where, while there is no evidence that the cluster houses were reserved for overseers, it is clear from the rent that they were considered the best the Strutts had to offer their workers. In Darley Abbey it is by no means certain that Four Houses was intended to provide superior accommodation. The houses were no larger than many others in Darley Abbey and there is no evidence of the extensive gardens, private privies and pigsties which made the Belper cluster houses so attractive to those who could afford to live in them.

The cluster blocks in New Road on the other hand may once have come closer to providing superior accommodation than appearances now suggest. But even here it is difficult to see how the curtilage could have contained adequate space for gardens, privies and sties on the scale offered in Belper. However, the two blocks in Lower New Road, in their original form, may have been of a higher quality.

It is tempting to see the hands of Charles Bage and William Strutt at work in Darley Abbey and with William Strutt's family connection with the Evans and Charles Bage's family links with Darley Abbey this is a point worthy of serious consideration. There is however no documentary evidence to substantiate such a claim.

The growth of the community

The growth of the community followed the development of the mills. Between 1788 and 1801 the settlement doubled. Growth was a more measured 22% in the next decade followed by minimal growth, 7%, between 1811 and 1821. But the substantial investment in mill building and machinery in the years 1818-21 was followed in turn by a 37% increase in housing stock by 1831; after which, for the rest of the century, growth was minimal.

Much of the evidence of the Evans concern to nurture their mill community is in the mill ledgers rather than in bricks and mortar. There is of course the church built in 1819 and the school which was constructed in 1826, but their record of educational provision had begun at least 30 years earlier. In 1791, a Sunday School was planned for the attic floor of the mill, and five years later 80 children employed at the mill were attending the Evans Sunday School. A day school, teaching children to read and knit, at a cost of one penny and a farthing per week, was in existence by 1797; and two years later

Darley Abbey		
	Houses	Population
1801	95	615
1811	116	796
1821	125	841
1831	172	1170



there was a night school. Health care was also provided both to residents who were ill and in the form of mass inoculation against smallpox: 79 children in 1797 and 88 in 1800. There was also a club which was organised on the same lines as a Friendly Society, to which members contributed and which paid a weekly sum to members who were unable to work.

Feeding the community was also a major concern for the Evans. Unlike Cromford, Darley Abbey had no market place or public houses, nor is it clear in the early years of this cotton mill community that there were shops. Essential products were however purchased by the mill owners and sold to the residents at cost or at a slight loss. Milk was bought from the tenants of the Evans farms in Allestree and Darley Abbey and sold at tuppence ha'penny a quart. Flour, oatmeal, cheese, beer, coal and blankets were sold on a similar basis though it is not clear that such products were always available or whether they were provided only in times of hardship.

Survival and change

Over the last 40 years new building has obliterated many of Darley Abbey's green spaces and it requires an act of the imagination to recapture an impression of its pastoral character and of the self-sufficiency of its residents. So much of the allotment and grazing land has gone; the cottages now stand in a suburban rather than a rural setting. But the mill ledgers prove that the cows promised to prospective residents in the newspaper advertisements were a reality. Somewhere space was found for them and for the gardens and allotments. And there can be no doubting the importance of the garden and the allotments in sustaining the community.

In 1930, following the death of Ada Evans, the widow of Walter Evans, the estate was sold. Subsequently the two Evans houses, Darley House which had been built by William Evans in the 1780s and where Elizabeth his widow received Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1796 (Coleridge described her as "without exception the greatest woman I have been fortunate enough to meet with in my brief pilgrimage through life"), and Darley Hall- purchased by Samuel Evans in 1835 - have both been demolished. It is now more than 70 years since a member of the Evans dynasty exercised influence and control over the lives of residents in Darley Abbey, yet some evidence of an autocratic past remains to this day.



Linking Darley Abbey to the outside world

Thomas Evans was as entrepreneurial in improving his factory community's transport links as he was in his other business decisions. In 1792 he instigated a plan to link the river Derwent to the Derby Canal and to make it navigable to Darley Abbey weir. Benjamin Outram was commissioned to survey and prepare proposals and a plan has survived which sets out Outram's route for a towpath up the east bank of the river to Darley Abbey where a wharf was to be built. For a while the mill had its own boat. In May 1788 it sank and had to be salvaged and repaired. No evidence to confirm the precise location of the Darley Abbey Wharf has been found. The Derby Canal link provided Darley Abbey with direct access to the canal system and to the river Trent which, with Gainsborough as the principal port,

remained a major artery for goods coming into this part of the region until the coming of the railways.

Of special importance for Evans was the Grand Trunk (or Trent-Mersey) Canal which he used to export his products to the key market in Manchester which he attempted to supply on a weekly basis.

In 1798-99 the Evans improved the community's road links by extending New Road up the hill to join the Derby turnpike. A junction was made at the Mile Ash toll house and the new road took the name Mile Ash Lane. Before and after the new road had been built the Mile Ash tollhouse was used as a collection point for goods. So in September 1793, when Evans was expecting ironwork from the Alderwasley forge, he wrote "Mr Geo Strutt writes us he has ordered you to send a wheel and pinion from his model to be laid down at the turnpike". Waggoners were a constant problem. In June 1799, the iron pillars for the cotton mill which were on their way from Smiths in Chesterfield turned out to have been "left at Derby", the waggoner saying he did not know "they were to come hither". Darley Abbey did not have its own rail link although the North Midland line passed close by. The nearest railhead for the Mill was via Haslam's Lane and Chester Green, Derby.

Housing in Darley Abbey

The settlement the Evans created in Darley Abbey has survived almost completely intact. Many of the houses have been altered externally and internally, for the most part superficially, and the privies and pigsties have gone. But few significant buildings other than the two Evans houses, Darley House and Darley Hall, the Evans farm and the paper mill, have been demolished. It is in no sense a planned or model community having grown incrementally over at least 50 years and no obvious pattern is discernible in its growth. But as an early factory village, in its range of properties and house types, it is no less important than Belper or Cromford.

Like the other Derwent Valley factory masters the Evans provided houses for their mill workers. They acquired a number of houses when they purchased the existing mills in Darley Abbey and some of these were pressed into service to accommodate the first mill families. It is not clear when they began to build their own housing either in Darley Abbey or in the neighbouring settlement of Allestree where they also had factory housing for the Darley Abbey Mills. Plainly, a number of houses were available by 1787 when they advertised for labour in the Derby Mercury offering "comfortable houses with every convenience at Darley or Allestry [sic]". An unofficial census a year later recorded the total number of houses in Darley Abbey as 47, which gives some idea of the size of the settlement at that time and provides a basis against which to measure subsequent growth.

The Square (Flat Square) c.1790 - Nos. 1-12 Listed Grade II West Row Listed Grade II

This was probably the first of the housing development provided by the Evans. It was certainly in existence by 1796 and is believed to date from c.1790. The houses were built on a flat piece of land just over



the bridge from the cotton mills. As the name suggests, they are built round three sides of a square and are three-storeyed, brick-built with slate roofs and one continuous roof line.

The houses to the north and south of the square are larger than those on the west and face into the square. Those on the west face outwards and the kitchen extensions face into the square. The north-south houses contained about 53.3 square metres internally when first built. Those at the rear of the square, on the west, in contrast, were approximately half the size at 27.3 square metres.



Darley Street

Early 1790s - Listed Grade II

There are four groups of semi-detached cottages, three on the western side of the road and one on the east. These are similar in size to the larger houses in the Square. They are three-storeyed and built of brick with slate roofs.



Hill Square

Date Unconfirmed - Unlisted

This square is formed by blocks of houses of which many are back-to-back. Built in brick and slate-roofed they are mostly of two storeys. On the west side the block of three is believed to have been built originally as six back-to-back houses. To the north, the block of four houses has remained back-to-back, as has the lower block of six built into the former Abbey building, now the Abbey Inn.



On the south side there are blocks of four houses and three houses, and between them the two houses which are larger and very much later in construction.

Poplar Row

c. 1800 - Listed Grade II

A row of five three-storey, brick and slate houses which included originally a schoolroom at the end. They occupy the level ground at the bottom of New Road. They are thought to be the houses built by the Evans between 1800 and 1802 referred to in the company ledger as "five houses and a school room".



Lower New Road

Date Unconfirmed - Unlisted

Three-storey brick and slate houses built in the form of cluster houses in two blocks of four with gardens to the side and rear, at the bottom of New Road. They all have later extensions.



Upper New Road

Date Unconfirmed - Unlisted

This group of two blocks in the cluster house format comprises eight houses in all. The blocks are brick-built with slate roofs and the elevations have been given an unusual elegance for mill workers' housing, the doors being set in blank arched recesses. The road-side elevation has been rendered and painted but the quality of the original brickwork is evident at the rear.



The houses to the rear have allotment gardens. No evidence remains of ancillary buildings to house privies or pigsties, though there is ample space for there to have been such facilities. The care with which these blocks have been designed is thought to be attributable to their high visibility from the Evans residence.

The Hollies/White House

Date Unconfirmed - The White House Listed Grade II

The Hollies is a large house built in brick and slate attached to a larger house, the White House, which was built later. These substantial dwellings were used as managers' houses and the White House was the home of John Peacock who purchased the mills after Walter Evans' death in 1903. It has not proved possible to establish when these houses were built but on stylistic grounds it is likely that they were both part of the early 19th century development of the community, though the Hollies has been much altered.



Brick Row

1826 - Listed Grade II

A row of fourteen, three-storeyed houses, built of brick with slate roofs, in a single terrace. Documentary evidence suggests they were constructed in 1826 at the same time as the adjoining school, though stylistically they appear earlier. Most of the windows and doors in the row have been altered but one or two of the original iron casements set in larger wooden multi-paned frames have survived, as for example at No. 11.



An interesting feature of the row, not evident externally, is that some of the top storeys are not part of the same house as those below. The Evans needed flexibility in their housing provision and spreading the attics of some houses across adjoining houses offered an opportunity to provide additional space for larger families.

Allotments for each house were provided on the other side of the road. The house at the northern end of the row was adapted to give it the appearance of a lodge for Darley House whose main drive was opposite.

The Four Houses

1792 - Unlisted

These four houses are built of brick and slate in the cluster house form and contain three storeys. Each house was originally 45 square metres internally. They were completed in 1792, an early experiment with the cluster house format, later to be adopted by Charles Bage in Shrewsbury and by William Strutt in Belper. Unlike the Belper cluster houses they do not have private gardens or pigsties, though they were provided with “necessaries” (lavatories) in 1796. They each had an allotment on land behind the Mile Ash houses.



Mile(s) Ash Lane

1795-96 - Listed Grade II

A single stepped terrace of 13 houses built in 1795-96. It contains three storeys and is built of brick and slate and each house in the terrace was provided with a lavatory and a pigsty together with a plot of land to the rear. Shortly after the terrace was built the Evans constructed the new road in front of the terrace which linked the mill community to the turnpike (now the A6), at Mile Ash.



Lavender Row

Date Unconfirmed - Listed Grade II

This is the terrace in Darley Abbey which gives the greatest impression of quality in construction and design. It is of three storeys and built in brick and slate with a stepped roof line to accommodate the slope. Architectural distinction is provided by the lintels over the windows and doors having projecting keystones. Each house had a lavatory and a plot of land to the rear.



Folly Houses

Date Unconfirmed - Unlisted

These houses are on the other side of the river from the main village. Thomas Evans acquired the site in 1778 possibly with a view to using the adjoining stream of water to power a mill. When this proved impossible the houses were added to the Evans housing stock. Two of the original three houses remain.



Houses in Mill Yard

c.1800 - Listed Grade II

Five houses were built within the perimeter of the cotton mill site. They were constructed at different times as the mill expanded and were occupied by foremen at the mill or at the adjoining bleaching and dye works. The houses reflect the status of their occupiers, being larger than most of the other houses in the settlement.



St Matthew's Church

1818 - Listed Grade C

Designed by Moses Wood of Nottingham (Built by Walter Evans in 1818). It is described by Pevsner as “unaisled, of Commissioners’ type with tall slender windows with Perpendicular tracery and angle pinnacles”. The square tower at the west end is also pinnacled. The crypt beneath the altar contains the remains of nine members of the Evans family, together with those of Moses Harvey, a junior partner in the cotton mill. The Churchyard has ornate cast iron gates of impressive size; many of the slate headstones were provided by the Evans for their workers.



Darley Abbey School

1826 - Listed Grade II

Built in 1826 as a school room with houses for the Master and Mistress at each end. Red-brick, two storeys, the windows to the ground storey are round-headed and in round-headed recesses; there is a sill band to the first floor and a stone cornice; there are pediments to the ends (which project slightly), a pediment in the centre with a clock and plain wrought iron railings enclosing a small playground at either end. It was endowed by Walter Evans who left £8,000 in his will to be invested for the teaching of poor children aged four to twelve in the parish “and not more than 40 at a time”. The building is now in use as offices.

