



World-class Cromford

Given world heritage status for its part in the Industrial Revolution, Ashley Franklin finds a village that more than deserves its iconic role... and isn't about to rest on its laurels

Top left: Traditional crafts at Cromford Mills
 Above: Cromford's scenic pond
 Below: Mel and Richard of Biddy's Tea Rooms
 Below right: Friends of Cromford Canal at the re-launch of canal boat trips. Left to Right: Eric and Beryl Singleton, Mike Kelley, Wendy Scarle, Adrian Minshull, Wayne Scarle

An internet browse of the world's most historic places invariably throws up Athens, Petra, Machu Picchu, Easter Island, Angkor Wat... with Stonehenge a sole British entry in a few lists. One could state a good case for Cromford, certainly as the most historic village in the world. After all, this is the cradle of the Industrial Revolution, a place that, thanks to Sir Richard Arkwright, changed the world.

The exciting developments at Arkwright's mills is one important story to tell here. The other is about the village itself. If there was a list of Derbyshire's most thriving communities, Cromford would be highly placed. A browse of its busy village website says as much, as does the title of the village festival: Celebrating Cromford.

Celebrating Cromford

There is much to celebrate, as committee

member Ian Evetts reveals: 'Celebrating Cromford is an evolution of The Wakes and some of the events can be traced back to Arkwright's time, including November's Lantern Parade. As well as the actual three-day festival in June, events are run throughout the year which reflect the different interests and businesses in Cromford. We have art exhibitions, open gardens, photo and poetry competitions, a pudding competition, sports day, beer festival, Christmas market and, around this time, a celebration of the apple, where juice is pressed from local apples.'

That, along with the Christmas market, is held on the Scarthin Promenade which houses the legendary Scarthin Book Shop. An internet browse at Britain's best bookshops... yes, you guessed it: it's in there. The Guardian placed it sixth.

There is another list where Cromford would figure: the Scarthin overlooking

Cromford's giant pond is one of Derbyshire's most scenic panoramas. At the other end of the village, there is a strong case for Cromford Station housing the most handsome facade on Britain's railway lines.

If one includes Masson Mill Shopping Village - with its four floors of diverse goods





- Cromford also has a bigger, wider range of retail businesses than any other county village. As Ian Evetts further points out, one can add a 'wonderful' A La Carte restaurant, The Market Place, 'famous for its sizzlers,' 'three pubs - The Bell, Boat Inn and Greyhound - two fish & chip shops, several cafés including quirky new tea rooms that double as an antiques shop, a 'growing arts and crafts presence' including the recently opened Cromford Gallery, a renovated Cromford Institute that houses a 'thriving' W.I., and a Post Office that was saved for the village by generous-hearted residents.

Discovering Cromford

Along with Celebrating Cromford, there is the Derwent Valley Mills' Discovery Days, nine days of events and activities around the autumn half term where Cromford's history comes alive through guided tours of the village, mills, canal and Willersley Castle,

the late 18th century country mansion commissioned by Arkwright as his intended residence (he died before completion), plus demonstrations and displays of traditional crafts and skills, concerts of music and the spoken word and - a first for Discovery Days - a tour of the historic Good Luck Mine with its 11 gauge tramway from the 1830s, an age where the lead miners worked by candlelight. Outside of Discovery Days, there is a tour of the mine on the first Sunday of the month.

It would take you more than a Discovery Days week to explore Cromford fully. The Good Luck Mine is but one of 30 'items of interest' in the area sent to me by villager Malcolm Scothon. He also points to almshouses, the Pumphouse, The Bear Pit, St Mary's Church - with its sublime gold-coloured wall paintings - numerous walks including one alongside Bonsall Brook which is both historic and scenic, and the

former site of Lloyds Bank which, he fascinatingly reveals, suffered a bank robbery in 1985 and had the dubious honour of being selected as Crimewatch UK's first televised crime re-enactment. One of the robbers was brought to justice but it's unlikely to have been as a result of the Crimewatch film: the >





Above: The Duke of Devonshire officially launching the countdown to the opening of the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site Gateway and Creative Cluster at Cromford Mills. The Duke is pictured with Cllr Ellie Wilcox of Derbyshire County Council, Sarah McLeod, CEO of the Arkwright Society and John Rivers CBE, Chair of the Arkwright Society. Photo: Ian Daisley

Below: The 'sublime' interior of St Mary's Church



criminal wasn't convicted until 2010, 25 years after the raid!

Cromford Canal

If you visit Cromford Canal, you can now take in a boat trip - a service revived after 14 years - on the 52-seater Birdwood, a refurbished 1938 narrowboat. This is another significant milestone for the 900-strong Friends of Cromford Canal who formed in 2002 to restore, in the words of Operations Manager Mike Kelley, 'an obliterated canal that was no more than a linear rubbish tip.' As Mike further points out, in spite of the rolling hills hereabouts, Cromford Canal was built without one lock: 'Even today, that would be difficult, let alone 220 years ago when all they had to work with was a pick and shovel and a wheelbarrow. So, we wanted to restore something that was not just beautiful but also a remarkable engineering achievement.'

Arkwright's Legacy

A similarly daunting task lay ahead for the volunteers who formed the Arkwright Society in 1979. In 1922, the site on which Richard Arkwright's mills, warehouses and workshops had been developed, was used as a colour works. Over 50 years of producing pigments for industrial paints almost destroyed the prospect of restoring the mills before it even began. The site was contaminated with lead chromate and all the key buildings had fallen into disrepair. Arkwright's legacy was a place of rack and ruin. Undeterred, the founding members of the Arkwright Society gradually removed 6,000 tonnes of rubble and clung on to their vision.

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Four decades on, their dedication and determination will soon be fully rewarded: next year sees the completion of the first part of a four-phase 'Master Plan' which will eventually see a major 'multi-use heritage and cultural tourism attraction.' As the Society's Chief Executive Officer Sarah McLeod explains, this development is due to the Society moving from conservation to regeneration: 'People have seen us spend millions and yet nothing seems to have happened. An awful lot has happened. The first 30 years of the Society was all about getting the site cleaned up and, importantly, acquiring Grade I listing. In 2008, what had



Above: Cromford Mill
 Below right: Carole Easton of Cromford Post Office with Chris Bastin, who spearheaded the residents' campaign to save the post office

long been a voluntary organisation became a proper business and we began to make real plans. That was key, because funders need to see a vision. They also need to see this site. Because we're tucked away, a lot of people don't realise the extent of the complex here. When they walk through the gates, they go "wow." I was a schoolgirl hereabouts when the mill was derelict. We never took any notice of the fact that this was the birthplace of the factory system. How could I not have been taught that as a child?

Sarah showed me a digital impression of a spectacular audio-visual experience that awaits us in Arkwright's first mill next year. That will be just the start of what Sarah believes is 'one of the most exciting museum design projects in the world', with multifarious themed tours, highlighting not just Arkwright's legacy but the entire Derwent Valley Mills heritage. Further developments will see a 100-cover restaurant, business units, function rooms, youth hostel and a new home for Derbyshire Wildlife Trust.

Arkwright Society Chairman John Rivers is thrilled to see the mills 'recovering their former glory', not least because it will be honouring arguably history's most important industrialist who brought

water-powered cotton spinning machinery to Cromford and, with it, the factory system. 'This was the first place in the world where the techniques of mass production were practised,' John points out.

'A Working Village'

Without Arkwright, Cromford may have remained a cluster of cottages around an old packhorse bridge and a chapel. By the turn of the 18th century, he had erected not only housing but an entire village. The considerable community spirit engendered by the families of 1,000 workers connected to one factory and village has clearly filtered down through the ages. 'This is still a working village,' says resident Chris Bastin, 'and one where people care about where they live.'

This is illuminated by a campaign, spearheaded by Chris, to save Cromford's threatened post office, run by Carol Easton. 'I was deeply humbled when residents rallied round,' says Carol. 'Three years ago, the building housing the post office was to be sold by auction. Given the risk of the post office not being re-sited, meetings were held where eventually 55 residents - many of them pensioners - offered to donate up to £3,500 each to buy the building. Within ten days, £150,000 was raised. As it turned out, a

local property developer bought it outright for us. I doubt that would have happened without the action plan as that property developer came to the first meeting. So, in the end we didn't need the residents' money but I shall never forget the pledges those villagers made. It says everything about the pride and love people have for Cromford.'

Peter and Yvonne Daykin came to >





Above: Laura Ellen Bacon in her Cromford Mill studio
 Above right: Helen Smith of Ellie fashion house
 Right: Eve Hewlett and Edmund Hunt of Scarthin Books
 Below: Dave Blanchard of Split Tin Guitars

Cromford 40 years ago and, initially warmed by a neighbourly welcome, found a place 'steeped in history and set in beautiful countryside; a perfect place to settle down in and bring up children,' states Yvonne. Now retired, Peter is perfectly placed to walk the High Peak Trail and the canal, which he does every day.

Writer Chris Thompson, who has scripted for *The Archers*, *Emmerdale* and *Heartbeat*, moved to Cromford with wife Ann in 1975. 'Having lived in a sprawling suburb, the sheer beauty of this place was breathtaking,' he recounts. 'One warm summer's evening, we went for a walk up on the High Peak Trail and, as the sun was setting, we heard the sound of a Gavioli organ coming up from the Meadows. It was magical. We went down to find preparations underway for the Steam Rally which was then held there. We still talk about that evening.'

In their time, both aforementioned couples have seen the loss of a butchers, chemist, greengrocers and bakers, although the latter has been replaced by *Biddy's*, a charming, quirky tea rooms and antiques shop run by Mel and Richard. Here in this cosy emporium, brimful of vintage

antiquities, nostalgia comes served with a side order of campness, topped off by Mel and Richard's extravagant garb. They also have arguably the most tasteful, decadent toilets in café society. Themed events are a speciality, with a 1940s school dinners 'party' planned - 'complete with lumpy tapioca,' smiles Mel.

Another recent arrival is the Cromford Studio & Gallery, run by artist Martin Sloman as his workplace, a tuition place and a showcase for 'Derbyshire's wealth of



talented, innovative, artists, potters and silversmiths.'

Further up the hill on Cromford's main street is *Ellie's* fashion house, run by Helen Smith, servicing smart, stylish and classical clothing and accessories largely for the discerning mature woman, with key names including *Emreco*, *Intown* and *Adini*. 'I love this village and its location,' says Helen, 'and although I don't live here, the lovely residents make me feel like part of their community.'

Nearby is *The Old Lock Up Studio*, so-called as it housed the village jail in the 1780s. Run by artist Rachael Pinks, this is another heartwarming example of community generosity, with many residents contributing to the £4,000 required to pay for the lease. In what Rachael tells me is a first for Cromford, the studio houses four artists/makers and runs life-drawing classes, children's art workshops, painting workshops and quarterly exhibitions, co-curated by Rachael and award-winning artist Clay Smith. Unusually, these exhibitions - under the title *Salon* - showcase several artists for just one night, though the evening always attracts over 100 people. As



Left: Rachael Pinks and Clay Smith of The Old Lock Up Studio
Below: Martin Sloman of The Cromford Gallery

Rachael reveals: 'People tell us we are the only exhibition space in Derbyshire promoting the region's contemporary artists.'

There is an artist of a kind creating novel musical instruments in his cottage high up on Mount Pleasant. After gifting his son a cigar box guitar with surprisingly good sound quality, Dave Blanchard decided to make one himself, using a tin box. He now runs Split Tin Guitars, his instruments - which also now include basses and fiddles - all beautifully hand-crafted and an assured

ice-breaker at any gig. 'They are decidedly low-tech instruments,' advises Dave, 'but they are just what we need in this increasingly high-tec world!'

Further traditional crafts can be found in Cromford at Q-Eye, a cosy bead shop run by Pat Gillson, a resident who, when she came to live in the village, intended to stay for six months. 'That was 14 years ago!' Pat reveals. 'Visitors to Cromford village initially think we are a few shops situated on a very busy cross roads of the A6,' says Pat. 'Mind you, the crossroads are a honeypot and have

made Cromford a true destination village, because once people start to walk around, they feel the lovely ambience of the village with its unique, unspoilt charm, fascinating shops, and extremely friendly and polite people. We are quite a breath of fresh spring air.'

Scarthin Books

Cromford is certainly a destination village for bibliophiles, with Scarthin Books offering 13 rooms containing over 95,000 books, new and old. Of the few book shops we have left, many merely survive; Scarthin thrives. Key to their success, says General Manager David Booker, is 'our reputation for superb customer service and having so many strings to our bow: new, secondhand, expensive, rare and antiquarian books; school trade, café; idiosyncratic visitor attraction; village hub; host of various events and groups; and, significantly, not paying high town centre rent and rates.'

As proprietor Dave Mitchell adds, the rise of e-books and online retailing has cemented Scarthin's aim 'to stick to what do best and do it better.' Being a destination bookshop certainly helps. 'People browse our shelves for hours and combine it with a cuppa and cake. We are not so much a One-Stop bookshop as a Long-Stop bookshop. We also have a gift room full of little treasures that can't easily be found elsewhere. Also, our Children's Room selection has to be one of the most comprehensive around, and the decor in there - thanks to artists Katy and Claire - is a local wonder.' There is also Scarthin's reputation for rarities - is there another bookshop with a whole section on Nomadic Peoples? - and peculiarities: 'There can't be another bookshop selling the complete works of Agatha Christie in Icelandic,' believes Dave. 'Outside of Iceland, that is.'

Alison Uttley

Not surprisingly, Scarthin's Children's Room has a whole section devoted to Alison Uttley, the Cromford-born author best known for her children's series about Little Grey Rabbit and Sam Pig. Laura Ellen Bacon, the local contemporary sculptor whose site-specific creations woven from natural materials has propelled her to national recognition, has a studio inside Cromford Mills and she is thrilled to now be closer to an author she has long revered: 'My mum introduced me to her books as part of a shared love of local history and I found them so evocative. Her writings reflect upon her childhood based in the hills above Cromford and I rather felt that they rang true of my own experiences growing up on a farm, as a child happily bonded to the surrounding fields and woodland. Her >





childhood memories are detailed with such clarity. It's not just that we, the reader, can feel the weight of the December cold pressing into the old farmhouse, or that we hear so softly the hens at the open back door as they tread inside with 'questing foot'; it's her exquisite recall of emotions from each season and location. She wrote with such a knowing hand, a deep knowingness that the child within her and all that she cherished was still within her somehow - at least that's how I respond to her work. I'm starting to write more and more within my work now - and it is most definitely due to the impact that Alison Uttley's writing had upon me.'

Cromford & Ambridge

Alison Uttley is not the only author to have drawn on Cromford. Soap scriptwriter Chris Thompson declares that living in Cromford was valuable to him when working on 150 episodes of *The Archers* at the turn of the 90s. Ambridge's annual single wicket competition - still a firm event in the soap's calendar - was entirely based on one introduced in Cromford when Chris played for the village team. 'Many locals were convinced that Ambridge was, in fact, Cromford, so close were fictional

and factual events,' reveals Chris, 'and it's true that I used snatches of conversation and character traits.'

Ian Buxton, Derbyshire county cricketer from 1959 to 1973 - and Derby County player in the 60s - was born in Cromford; as was Lawrence Furniss, a footballer who was instrumental in re-launching his club *Ardwick* as *Manchester City* in the early 1900s. However, Cromford will always be dominated by the name of Sir Richard Arkwright, and become even more so with the future developments at Cromford Mills. When the Master Plan is complete, 100,000 visitors a year could become 250,000.

As Arkwright Society Chairman John Rivers comments: 'Coupled with all the places one can visit elsewhere in the World Heritage Site, maybe Cromford Mills will help create employment in the way Arkwright did in his time, and improve the economy of the area based upon enhancing the rural environment in which Arkwright's mills were built. This would be a fitting tribute to a man who changed the world.' ■

Above: Willersley Castle
Above centre: Cromford Railway Station
Right: Pat Gillson of *Q Eye*

