

The Landmark Trust

NORTH STREET, CROMFORD, DERBYSHIRE

The late eighteenth century saw a period of rapid technological advance and expansion in Britain that later spread worldwide and it represented the beginnings of modern industrial society. Cromford, then a tiny hamlet in an isolated valley, was to play a crucial role in that development and has helped earn the Derwent Valley its reputation of 'the cradle of the industrial revolution' and World Heritage site status.

In 1770, Richard Arkwright signed a lease on land in Cromford to erect a cotton spinning mill. Arkwright came from humble origins and was a barber and wigmaker by trade. There was a fervour of invention at the time, and one of the chief quests was the need for a successful automated spinning machine. Arkwright teamed up with a clockmaker called John Kaye and his partner Thomas Hayes to perfect a model of the spinning machine, based on pairs of rollers rotating at different speeds. Arkwright patented the design of his spinning frame (later also known as the water frame) in 1769 and also took the crucial decision that the new spinning frame was to be licensed for use only in units of a thousand, which meant that it became factory-based technology (unlike the earlier but less efficient Spinning Jenny, which remained cottage-based). Such large machines also required external power to drive them; after a brief experiment with horsepower in Nottingham, Arkwright moved to Cromford.

Arkwright built his first mill in 1771, using waterpower from Bonsall Brook and the Cromford Sough (a drain from the lead mines in the hills above). He found his labour force partly from the miners' families, partly through advertising in the local papers. Those who moved to Cromford had to be housed, and it was for this purpose that North Street was built. Arkwright specifically advertised for large families and the thirty houses on North Street would have housed much of his initial workforce. They represent one of the earliest examples of the terraced industrial housing that was to become so characteristic of industrial towns over the next century. Unlike later versions, North Street was built to a high standard, with attention to details like sash windows and almost classical door frames which would have impressed those used to the poorer quality housing of the day. The upper floors still have their original, long windows, a sign that the occupants were expected to supplement their income by spinning or knitting. Typically, it was the women and children who were employed at the mill, tending the machines and joining broken threads. The men would be employed for building, for machine-making or mending, as mill supervisors or at home on their loom or knitting frame. At No 10 North Street, filled-in blocks in the floor of the attic room suggest that frame knitting was carried out here, the vigour of the operation of the knitting head requiring such a machine to be stabilised by fixing it to the floor (unlike a hand loom).

Arkwright became immensely wealthy and his development of the mills and community at Cromford was a model followed all over the world. Before his death in 1792, he started to build Willersley Castle on the Tor overlooking the mill site and St. Mary's Church. The mills in Cromford declined through the nineteenth century as steam power took over from water, and the cotton industry gradually migrated to Lancashire. Cromford was left much as Arkwright had built it. In 1979 the Arkwright Society acquired the former mill site from Burrells Paints and have been restoring it ever since in partnership with English Heritage.

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North Street, Cromford

The exact date of construction of the street is not known, but by 1776 seems most likely, when Arkwright's second mill became operational. North Street was probably the first of his projects in Cromford beyond the mill site. The houses are solidly built of the local gritstone and were originally built as one room deep dwellings on three floors. Compared with later such terraces, the rooms are relatively generously sized, at some fifteen feet square, and are spared neighbours to the rear as became more typical for later housing of this kind. They also offered more than just accommodation.

Internally, each house was the same. The front door opened from the street into a living room with a cooking range, where the family would have spent what few waking hours were left after the long day at the mill. The ground floor had stone flags on timber joists over a cellar. A narrow, slightly winding staircase led to a first floor bedroom, and then up to the workroom on the second floor (perhaps also used as a second bedroom). There would have been an earth closet outside; water would have been drawn from the village pump. At a later date, a lean-to was added onto the back of each house, providing a separate kitchen. The street would almost certainly have backed onto fields, much as Number 10 does onto its paddock. Arkwright once rewarded his best workers with 'a milch cow' each, and even in the twentieth century some of the houses had pig cotes at the bottom of their small back gardens. Urban patterns of work were being established, but the inhabitants of North Street would otherwise have lived a fairly rural existence.

Today, the Landmark Trust owns Numbers 4,5,6,8, 10 and 11. All except Number 10 are let to private tenants. The street had remained in the ownership of the Arkwright family until 1924 when the houses were sold to individual owners. In 1961, Matlock Urban District Council bought Numbers 4-9 with the intention of demolishing them and building an old people's home on the site. Derbyshire County Council intervened with a Preservation Order. In 1965, the Ancient Monuments Society agreed to buy them from the Council for £400. All had existing tenants and the houses were badly in need of repair and modernisation, specifically provision for bathrooms and toilets. The Society lacked the capital to initiate such improvements and the resources to act as landlord. The National Trust was approached initially, but was only interested in managing the whole street. The Society then approached John Smith, founder of the Landmark Trust in 1965 and also an honorary member of the Society of Ancient Monuments. Landmark agreed to acquire the properties.

Coincidentally, Landmark had also been approached about Numbers 10-11 at the other end of the street. Numbers 4, 5, 6 and 8 were acquired in April 1974 and numbers 10-11 soon followed. The appearance of North Street was considerably less uniform than it is now. Doors were of different styles and colours and most of the long second floor windows were partially blocked. With the help of grants from the Historic Buildings Council and the District Council greater uniformity began to be established, a process still continuing. Roofs were stripped and re-laid, and electric cables removed from the front of the houses. Wherever possible, the four-light windows on the second floor were reinstated.

When the Trust bought Number 10, it had been encroached upon considerably Number 11. It had only a tiny kitchen in an additional lean-to against the main extension at the rear, entered through a door where the rear-facing window in the living room is today. This meant most of today's kitchen and bathroom s had become part of Number 11. We demolished this little kitchen lean-to and inserted a new window in place of the door. The area within the main lean-to at the back rearranged with Number 11, to allow for today's kitchen and a ground floor bathroom behind (a small bathroom on the second floor room was removed). A new pantry was built, and the floor level in the lean-to was lowered on the ground floor. This meant losing the earlier (cramped) first floor in the lean-to and filling in the cellar windows, although the window surrounds were retained. The cramped eighteenth-century staircase design did not comply with today's Building Regulations and so the current steep flight was inserted to be as economical with space as possible, while still meeting requirements. The resulting layout is much closer to that which would have been found in Arkwright's day – a one room deep dwelling, although now with provision for today's necessities: an inside loo and bathroom and a sensibly sized, separate kitchen.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. North Street sleeps up to 4 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.