



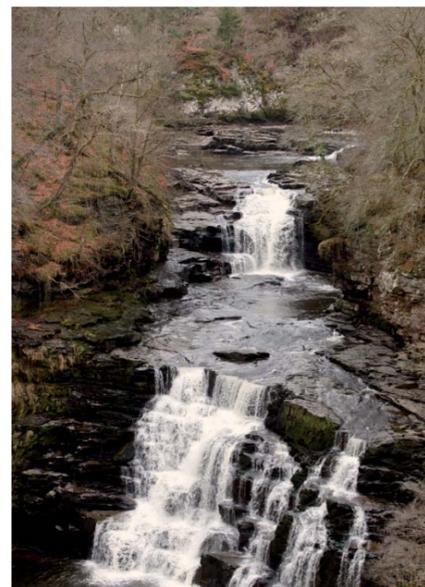
# the fabric of britain

words and photography  
by Dr Kate Davies

## Past and Future work in harmony at Cold Harbour and New Lanark. . .

“You come to a spot as you descend the hill, where you have a full view of the great falls of the Clyde, with the accompanying rocks and woods which form the banks of the river. At the same time you see the green hills and the sheep feeding on them at the summits of the banks on each side and over the tops of the trees. The fine buildings of the factories are just under you: and this, all taken together, is by far the most beautiful sight that my eyes ever beheld.”

William Cobbett’s view of New Lanark from his *Tour in Scotland*, 1832.



**Above**  
Spinning bobbins at  
Cold Harbour Mill.

**Right**  
The falls of the  
river Clyde near  
New Lanark Mill.

Textiles are part of the fabric of Britain. From flax fields to sheep pasture, from rough fells to green valleys, from cottage spinning wheels to factory floors where the terrible cotton dust billowed like snow, the textile industry has completely transformed the shape of the nation. In the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, the land itself seemed made for textiles. Fast-flowing rivers in steep-sided valleys turned the wheels that lent power to Billies and Jennies and Mules. Fertile grassland fed wool-producing animals, while navigable waterways and accessible ports meant that the products that Britons spun and wove and knitted might be carried round the world. Visiting the factories of the Clyde Valley in 1832, William Cobbett described it as the “most beautiful sight my eyes ever beheld.” What Cobbett celebrated here was Britain’s *working* landscape: a place where the production of textiles had become integral to the beauty of the land.

Much of nineteenth-century industrial Britain, of course, was not beautiful at all and by the end of the twentieth century, much of it was seen as an eyesore. Empty factories and crumbling chimneys were regarded as a blot on, rather than a complement to, the landscape. Mills still stood at the heart of their communities, but the loss of large-scale textile manufacturing meant the loss of their connection to their locality as well. Yet in the grim days of the 1980s, local heritage groups transformed two vacant and near-derelect British mills into something as far from dark and satanic as one might imagine. Both mills are now working museums and yarn businesses which, in their successful combination of old and new, are clearly part of the future landscape of British textiles—and British knitting in particular.

These two remarkable mills are Cold Harbour at Uffculme in Devon, and New Lanark in South Lanarkshire, Scotland. In both places, familiar

scenes of industrial decline have been completely transformed through a combination of thoughtful historical renovation and thriving local enterprise. The stories of Cold Harbour and New Lanark are very similar. Both first came into being at the dawn of the industrial revolution, when modern technical innovations meant that textiles could be spun and woven on a previously unimaginable scale. Both mills are still very beautiful buildings in very beautiful landscapes. And both Cold Harbour and New Lanark were shaped by men for whom textiles meant much more than profit: one, a Quaker, who built the life of the mill around his beliefs and ideals, the other, a visionary intellectual who sought to combine commercial enterprise with progressive social improvement.

### Working history

Visiting Cold Harbour on a bright day in Autumn truly is like stepping back in time.



**Above and Above Right**  
Samples from the dye house  
at Cold Harbour Mill.

**Right**  
Carding.





*Left*  
The mill clock at Cold Harbour Mill.

*Below*  
The Galloway furnace still in use at Cold Harbour Mill.

*Below Left*  
A view from the bridge at Cold Harbour Mill.



Descending into a valley rich with seasonal colour, you can picture the scene just as it might have been in 1799 when Quaker manufacturer, Thomas Fox, first saw and purchased this site, transforming it from the production of grist to wool. As you approach the mill you see the old water wheel—an original wheel—standing exactly where it did when it provided power for Cold Harbour's early machines. The river runs onward, and the wheel turns steadily through the golden autumn day. But as you cross the bridge passing Cold Harbour's first mill buildings, you encounter a sudden bustle of activity and noise. Somewhere, there is the whir and hiss of a huge engine; men in overalls haul crates of wood toward a furnace; and the whole world seems to spring to life with the energy of heat and steam. Because Cold Harbour's basic infrastructure remained intact when it was sold in 1982, the group in charge of its thoughtful reconstruction were able to install engines and boilers just like those that stood in the nineteenth-century mill. These impressive

machines are maintained by an enthusiastic and knowledgeable 'steam team' and are regularly in operation on specific days throughout the year. But the real business of the mill—the wool that it produced and still produces—is to be found in the building next door, where carding and spinning and weaving are demonstrated for visitors on original machines. The mill is dark, it is dusty, and it is noisy. It is just as it would have been, in fact, and, unlike so many places where history has been transformed into heritage, it is not in the least pretentious. Here, you can find out about textile history and processing in a clear and straightforward way. Yarn is still produced on these machines in the traditional worsted fashion—the short-draw process which leant Thomas Fox's hard-wearing cloth international renown.

**A New World?**

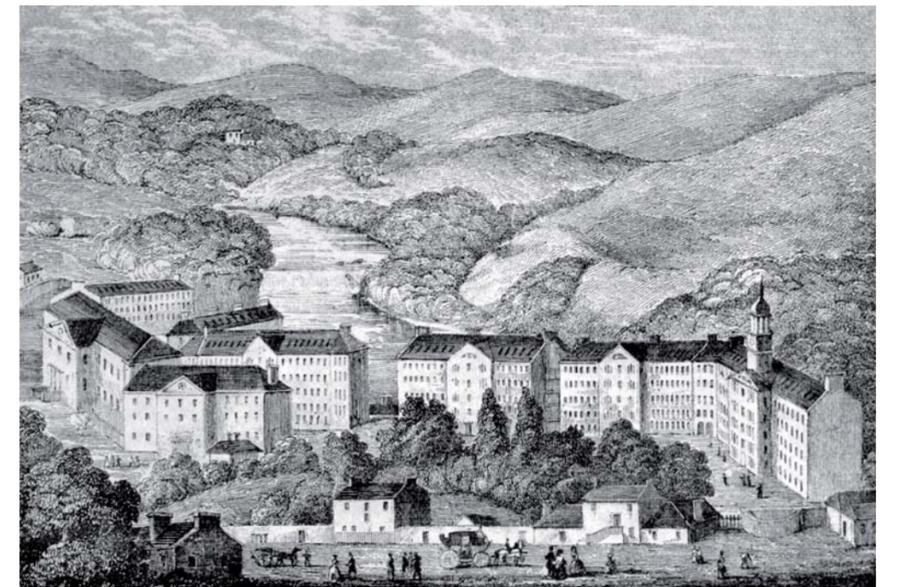
At Cold Harbour, Thomas Fox was not just a textile entrepreneur, but a manager who combined philanthropy with capitalism. He

restricted the use of child labour, built well-proportioned mill cottages with vegetable gardens to encourage self-sufficiency, and provided food for his workforce at cost during years when bread was scarce. But New Lanark's Robert Owen was an even more visionary social innovator, regarding his mill and employees as models of what he called 'the new moral world.' Owen believed that the human character was formed by its environment and, at New Lanark, found himself able to put this proposition to the test. He reduced working hours and employed teachers in an institute for child and adult education. Owen provided nurseries for babies and young children so that working mothers would be free to earn and learn. He established a system of free healthcare for his employees, and developed on-site mutual businesses that were important forerunners of the international co-operative movement. The spectacular waterfalls and picturesque scenery of the Clyde had always appealed to British artists and poets like Turner and Wordsworth. By the early nineteenth century,



*Above*  
The mill cottages provided for the workers at New Lanark Mill.

*Right*  
A 1818 print of the New Lanark Mill by John Winning - thanks to the New Lanark Trust.



*Below and Below Right*  
The river Clyde and the chimney at Cold Harbour Mill.



the 'grand experiment' at New Lanark meant that international visitors flocked there from all over the world. For some visitors, however, Owen's ideas proved too radical to countenance (including William Cobbett, who remarked on the impropriety of seeing children of both sexes dancing together in their simple white robes).

**Future landscapes**

Thanks to the careful work of the New Lanark Trust, the mill village and surrounding landscape are remarkably well preserved. The tree-lined banks of the Clyde mingle their natural beauty with the quiet Georgian elegance of the buildings, and the prospect view across the valley remains as breathtaking as it was when William Cobbett saw it in 1832. Through a range of thoughtful heritage projects scattered about the site, the visitor is able to gain an accurate and emotive sense of life in the village, from the very different perspectives of owners David Dale and Robert Owen, to the displaced émigrés from

Skye who were New Lanark's first workers, to a Victorian child who was born, educated and employed there. Cotton was the mill's original product, but now woollen yarn is spun at New Lanark using a traditional long-draw process on an 1891 mule. In 2001, the village was declared a UNESCO world heritage site, and the mill is a source of tremendous local pride, as well as an important source of local employment. Lorna Davidson, deputy director of the New Lanark Trust, is incredibly enthusiastic about the development of New Lanark's now popular yarn. "We are very proud," she says, "to provide hand-knitters around the world with a product that reflects the care and craftsmanship of an earlier era. And of course," Davidson continues, "our knitting visitors can also enjoy the spectacle of these splendid old machines in production."

In a similar way to New Lanark, at Cold Harbour, the history and future of co-operative enterprise go very much hand in hand. Small

outfits like John Arbon Textiles and UK Alpacas have found that Cold Harbour affords the ideal location for their new ventures. "The lure of the mill is irresistible," says John Arbon, who combines a commitment to quality modern yarns with a passion for traditional textile-producing methods and machines. This combination of tradition and innovation is very appealing to today's knitters, for whom craft is about so much more than process and finished product. Knitters are now savvy, informed and very interested in the provenance of the materials they use, in its connection to particular landscapes and communities, in textile and fibre history, and in the politics of yarn production. Cold Harbour and New Lanark are organisations that speak to many of these concerns. The mills are heritage sites with their feet in the past, but they are also small businesses, with their faces firmly turned toward the future. And at the heart of both enterprises is the sense that hand knitting really *is* the future.

**Links:**

Cold Harbour:  
<http://www.coldharbourmill.org.uk/>

New Lanark:  
<http://www.newlanark.org/>

John Arbon Textiles:  
<http://www.jarbon.com/>

UK Alpaca:  
<http://www.ukalpaca.com/>

Robert Owen Society:  
<http://www.robertowen.org/>



*Left*  
A view from Robert Owen's school House at New Lanark Mill.

*Below*  
Original pots in the dye house at Cold Harbour Mill.



*Above Left*  
Teasels used in the dye room at Cold Harbour Mill.

*Above Right*  
A spinning mule at New Lanark Mill.

*Left*  
Yarn production from the 1920s at New Lanark Mill.

*Below*  
The clocking in machine at Cold Harbour Mill.

