

# Robert Owen and New Lanark

A Man Ahead of His Time

## Robert Owen (1771-1858)

Robert Owen was a man ahead of his time. During his lifetime, he endeavoured to improve the health, education, well-being and rights of the working class. This driving ambition to create a better society for all took him around the world, from a small mill village in Lanarkshire in Scotland to New Harmony, Indiana in America with varied success. Although, he encountered much criticism and opposition in his lifetime, he influenced reformers who came after him and many of his views are as relevant and resonate today in their modernity and progressive nature.

## Origins

Born on the 14th May 1771, in Newtown, a small market town in Wales, Robert was the sixth of seven children born to the local saddler and ironmonger. He was an intelligent boy who read avidly, loved music and was good at sports. He began his career in the textile industry early on, from around the age of 10. By the time he was 21 he was a mill manager in Manchester. His entrepreneurial spirit, management skill and progressive moral views were emerging by the early 1790s. In 1793, he was elected as a member of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, where the ideas of reformers and philosophers of the Enlightenment were discussed. He also became a committee member of the Manchester Board of Health which was set up to promote improvements in the health and working conditions of factory workers. Meanwhile, in Scotland, New Lanark Cotton Spinning Mills were being established. This enterprise was to prove pivotal in Owen's career as a businessman and social pioneer.

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## New Lanark – Beginnings

The story of New Lanark begins with the River Clyde. In 1784, an enterprising and far-sighted Scot, David Dale embarked on an ambitious plan to found cotton mills powered by the natural energy of the powerful Falls of Clyde in Lanarkshire. Dale was already a very successful businessman and a member of Glasgow's entrepreneurial elite. At New Lanark, he built 4 large mills and solid stone housing for his mill-workers. It was to become the largest cotton-manufacturing establishment in Scotland with a living and working community of 2500 at its height, with many early workers coming from the Highlands and later, Ireland. Cotton was spun there for almost two hundred years.

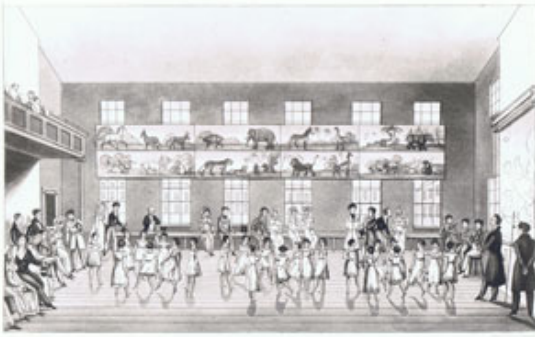


David Dale was, for his time, considered an enlightened employer and although he employed pauper apprentices, the education and welfare of his workers were important to him.

When Dale sold New Lanark Mills to his new son-in-law Robert Owen in 1799, little did he know that this would become *“the most important experiment for the happiness of the human race that has yet been instituted in any part of the world.”*

Robert Owen.

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## A Model Community

Under Robert Owen's management from 1800 to 1825, the cotton mills and village of New Lanark became a model community, in which the drive towards progress and prosperity through new technology of the Industrial Revolution was tempered by a caring and humane regime. This gained New Lanark an international reputation for the social and educational reforms Owen implemented. New Lanark had the first Infant School in the world, a creche for working mothers, free medical care, and a comprehensive education system for children, including evening classes for adults. Children under 10 were not allowed to work in the Mill.

Leisure and recreation were not forgotten; there were concerts, dancing, music-making and pleasant landscaped areas for the benefit of the community.

When Owen opened the Institute for the Formation of Character, which was effectively a community education centre for his workers, he outlined his visionary plans for an astonishingly progressive and enlightened system of education which he believed was the key to a happier society, and universal harmony.

*"What ideas individuals may attach to the term "Millennium" I know not; but I know that society may be formed so as to exist without crime, without poverty, with health greatly improved, with little, if any misery, and with intelligence and happiness increased a hundredfold; and no obstacle whatsoever intervenes at this moment except ignorance to prevent such a state of society from becoming universal."*

**Extract from Robert Owen's "Address to the Inhabitants of New Lanark"  
New Year's Day, 1816**

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## Inspiring a Modern Approach

While at New Lanark, Robert Owen demonstrated management policies that are now widely recognised as precursors of modern theories relating to human resource management, as well as skilful and ethical business practice. His work inspired infant education, humane working practices, the Co-operative Movement, trade unionism, and garden cities.

Even today New Lanark attracts visitors from all over the world who come to see the historic buildings and visit the award-winning Visitor Centre. Robert Owen's legacy continues to inspire New Lanark Trust, the independent Scottish charity which is dedicated to restoring and caring for the historic village of New Lanark in Southern Scotland. The site is now a World Heritage Site. Visit [www.newlanark.org](http://www.newlanark.org) for further information.

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## His Works

In his lifetime, Robert Owen was a prolific writer and campaigner. [Read extracts from a selection of his writings](#) on:

*A New Society for a New Millennium*  
*Education*  
*Social Inclusion and Early Intervention*

*Women*  
*Rules for the Inhabitants of New Lanark*  
*The Environment*  
*Health, Preventive Medicine & Health Education*

[Parenting](#)[Working Conditions](#)[Employment Training](#)[Child Care/ Workplace Nurseries](#)[Care for the Elderly and Infirm](#)[International Co-operation](#)[Campaign for Universal Harmony](#)[Go to top](#)

## Find out more about Robert Owen

For further information about New Lanark World Heritage Site click on the link: [www.newlanark.org](http://www.newlanark.org)

Owen's inspirational and influential ideas are explored in film in New Lanark Visitor Centre. *The Quest for Universal Harmony* highlights the continuing relevance of Owen's ideas to today's society. For information about visiting New Lanark World Heritage Site go to [www.newlanark.org](http://www.newlanark.org)

## Recommended Reading

- **Robert Owen, A Biography**  
F. Podmore [Allen & Unwin, 1906]
- **Life of Robert Owen**  
G. D. H. Cole [Macmillan, 1930]
- **Robert Owen: Prince of Cotton Spinners**  
ed. J Butt [David & Charles 1971] [ ISBN 07153 51648]
- **A New View of Society and Other Writings by Robert Owen**  
edited with an introduction by Gregory Claeys, [Penguin Classics 2007] [ ISBN 0 14 043348 1]
- **Historic New Lanark**  
Donnachie and Hewitt [Edinburgh University Press, 1993][ ISBN 0 74860420 0]
- **Selected Works of Robert Owen in 4 volumes**  
ed. Gregory Claeys [Pickering 1993] [ ISBN 1 85196 088 0]
- **David Dale of New Lanark**  
David McLaren [Caring Books, 1999] [ISBN 0 9523649 3X]
- **Robert Owen: Owen of New Lanark and New Harmony**  
I Donnachie [Tuckwell Press, 2000]  
[ ISBN 1 86232 131 0]
- **Nomination of New Lanark for inclusion on the list of World Heritage Sites**  
Historic Scotland [2000] [ ISBN 1 903570 00X]

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## Published by New Lanark Trust

- **The Story of New Lanark** [ISBN 0 9522531 0 0]
- **New Lanark Heritage Trail** [ISBN 0 9522531 2 7]
- **Living in New Lanark - A brief history of housing and living conditions in the village** [ISBN 0 9522531 1 9]
- **New Lanark Village Store & the Development of the Co-operative Movement** [ISBN 0 9522531 3 5]
- **New Lanark Power Trail - From water-wheels to hydro-electricity** [ISBN 0 9522531 4 3]
- **The Story of Robert Owen - A brief guide to his life and work** [ISBN 0 9522531 5 1]

These booklets can be purchased from New Lanark's Online Shop: <http://newlanarkshop.co.uk>

For more details of Trust publications contact [education@newlanark.org](mailto:education@newlanark.org)

## Web Links

[New Lanark World Heritage Site](#)

[The Robert Owen Museum, Newtown](#)

[The Open University](#)

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[UKbookmakers.info](#)

[Support the campaign for a Robert Owen bank note](#)



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