Wilmslow History Trail No. 1 (Second edition: revised)

The Apprentices' Walk

A Walk from Wilmslow to Styal



Price 12p

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One hundred and fifty years ago it would not have been unusual to see a large party of uniformed, well-behaved boys and girls making their way towards Wilmslow along the banks of the River Bollin to worship at the parish church. They were indentured apprentices from Styal, where, in 1784, Samuel Greg, a wealthy cotton manufacturer of Manchester, established a cotton mill in the heart of the countryside. Substantially, the path we shall take will follow in their footsteps as they returned home after the service. It is no more than two miles from Wilmslow to Styal and our route will be through park and wood, avoiding roads. Ultimately, we shall emerge at Greg's factory with the settlement he established for his employees close by.

Our starting point is Wilmslow parish church, at the centre of the oldest part of the village, from where we proceed along Chancel Lane with the church on our left. Almost immediately we cross a bridge over the River Bollin and to the left we see a sweep of elegant parkland in the valley of the river, flanked by wooded hillsides which in turn are crowned by large detached dwellings. This is known as the Carrs. Immediately above the car park, which was the site of a school demolished in recent years, at the entrance to the Carrs, is a tree-lined walk, originally called Silk Mill Lane. It peters out within a few yards and – as its name suggests – was access to a silk mill, the site of which cannot now be reached, on the northern bank of the Bollin. Eventually, the silk mill became a laundry and in 1923 it was destroyed by fire in mysterious circumstances. There is still evidence, by and in the river near the site, of the means by which river water was harnessed as power for the mill. In the woods, up on our left and approached by a higher path, are the few remains of a ruined chapel.

At the far end of the Carrs we cross Pownall Bridge, once the main route to Pownall Hall and built to replace a wooden structure which collapsed early in the nineteenth century when the river was in flood. A signpost marked "Styal" indicates a path almost parallel to the Styal Road to a narrow wooden bridge close to Twinnies Bridge over the River Dean, near to that river's junction with the Bollin. Beyond this point the Bollin makes its way towards Greg's mill lower down the river and one path on the far side of the wooden bridge follows the right bank of the river almost to Greg's mill. Another path, beyond a double stile, crosses an undulating field which runs down to the river. At the far end of this path is a gate which leads into woodland, belonging to the National Trust, which will continue until we reach the sluice immediately before the mill. There is a path beginning higher up the field which provides another route to Styal, but which may be used, alternatively, as we return to Wilmslow.

Now begins a charming section of the walk. A wide variety of trees, a meandering river flowing nearby to the left, a clearly marked pathway and a steep bank to the right – in May covered by a host of bluebells – present us with scenes which all lovers of countryside will enjoy. The valley is also notable for a variety of balsam which grows here profusely. It is a tranquil spot, this sheltered part of the Bollin Valley, despite the proximity of Ringway Airport on the one side and bustling Wilmslow on the other. For half a mile the path continues, occasionally broken by a small wooden bridge or wooden steps conveniently placed to facilitate ascent or descent. The river which feeds the mill is on our left, and on the right

may be seen the quarry from which the mill derives its name, and from the stone of which it was built.

We now approach the site, Quarry Bank, where Samuel Greg built his mill on land he leased from Lord Stamford, Earl of Warrington. The site was chosen because Greg had calculated that the fall of the river between Pownall and Quarry Bank was sufficient to provide adequate power for a mill. Moreover, a lofty factory would have strong foundations on the sandstone rock beneath and provide him with valuable building material too. Accustomed as we are to see factories in squalid urban settings, it is an unusual experience to catch a first glimpse of this elegant, five-storey relic of the Industrial Revolution at the end of a delightful walk through woodland. As we approach it we see on the left caves reputed to have been inhabited by hermits before the arrival of Greg, and an impressive dam, built at the end of the eighteenth century to control the water flow when the original wooden water wheels were replaced by an iron one capable of producing a hundred nominal horsepower. In order to increase the speed with which water through the tail race could escape into the Bollin downstream, a tunnel was pierced from Quarry Bank to Norcliffe, a distance of three-quarters of a mile. At a cost of a little over £2,000 the task was completed in 1819. It was cut by pick and shovel with everybody pressed into service – including the apprentices – and with no engineer called in to supervise the work. Indeed, Samuel Greg directed operations himself.

The woodland path is left behind at this point. On the left is an attractive dwelling house overlooking the mill yard and built in Regency style. It was lived in by the manager of the mill and in Greg's Styal it is inferior only to the splendid mansion built at the close of the eighteenth century immediately to the north of the factory and about 100 yards to the north of the manager's house, for Samuel Greg. The mill is located between the two houses. Initially, in 1784, it was a four-storey building, 90 feet long and 30 feet wide, and accommodating 3,000 spindles: later, in 1795, a fifth storey was added and the length of the mill doubled. Across the top of a doorway of the mill – in quaint, uneven letters – are the words, "Quarry Bank Mills built by Samuel Greg Esquire of Belfast, Ireland. Anno Domini 1784."

To the right are several buildings possibly used to repair and service machinery, to stable horses and to store the durable thread spun in the factory. We pass below a wooden bridge which linked this complex of buildings to the factory. At first the mill was exclusively devoted to spinning and it was not until after Samuel Greg's death in 1834 that steps were taken by his son, R. H. Greg, to introduce weaving. Thereafter, weaving became an important aspect of the work, and, after 1894, the mill was solely concerned with it.

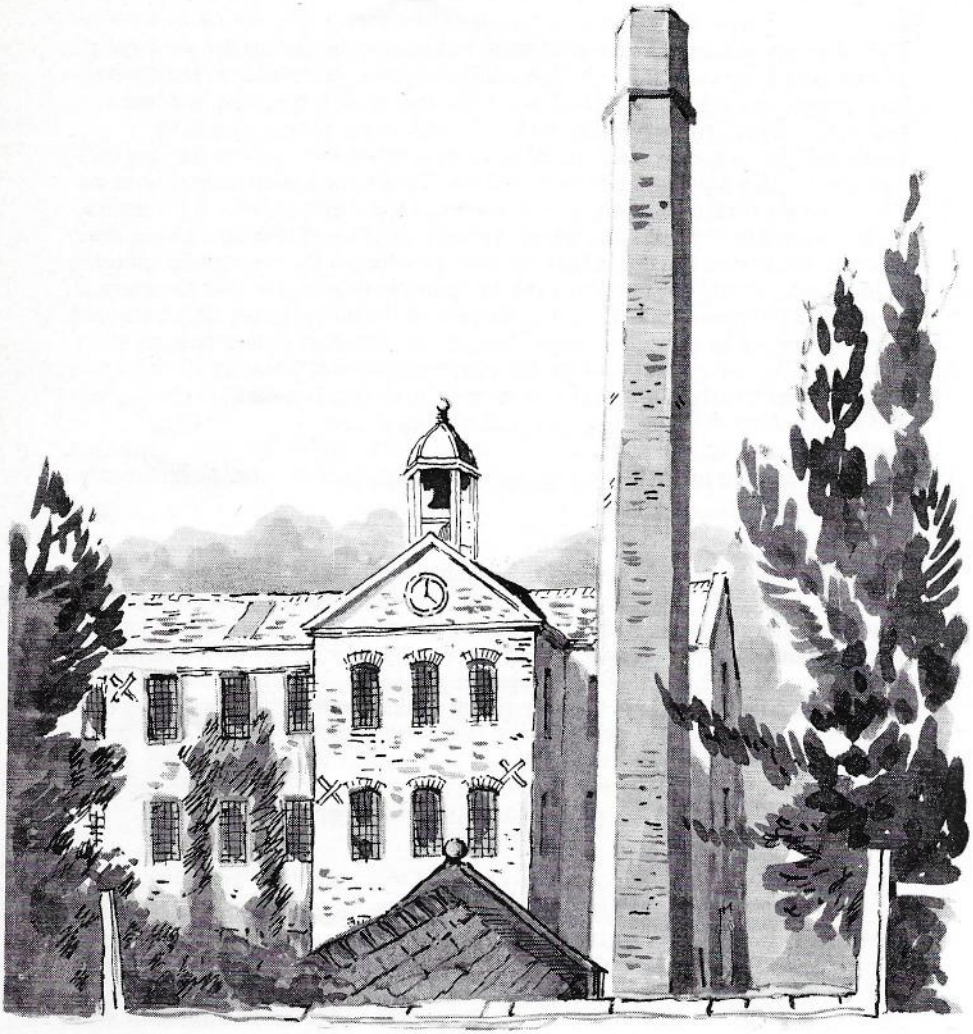
The narrow road which passes the mill is well maintained and increasingly steep as we make our way to the group of buildings where Greg's employees lived. We may pause to notice, as we pass, a narrow cobbled path which goes between the factory and Quarry Bank House and leads to a bridge across the River Bollin. This affords access to a pleasant public area giving a view of the other side of the factory – note the culvert from the turbines which replaced the original water wheel. Also, over a highish fence is a view of the ample garden of Quarry Bank House with its wide variety of trees and shrubs. It should be noted that the house and garden are private property and not National Trust property.

Despite the mill's apparent remoteness in the late eighteenth century, the means of communication with the outside world already existed. Cheshire, in the mid-eighteenth century, was in the van of canal building, initially in the construction of "navigations" and, later, by 1760, in the development of completely man-made waterways. The Bridgewater Canal – the first completely artificial waterway in England – was authorized by Parliament in 1759 and subsequently planned and built by James Brindley in the early 1760's. The Trent and Mersey Canal – then called the Grand Trunk Canal – was built in 1766. Man-made waterways were used by Greg for the importation of cotton from Liverpool – he used a variety of cottons, but he was a pioneer in the use of American cotton. Moreover, the yarn produced at Styal was transported away either along the Bridgewater Canal or along the main turnpike road through Wilmslow. A causeway was built from the mill to link up with the bridle path along which we came from Wilmslow.

One problem which Greg faced was that of insufficient labour, although Manchester proved to be a valuable source of supply. In workhouses locally there was satisfaction that Greg was prepared to provide employment for many of those who had suffered as a result of the trend towards enclosure and thus relieve the parish of an onerous burden. The working population of the mill steadily increased from over 250 during the 1790's to 413 at the time of the 1851 Census. Moreover, the factory was reputed to be producing more yarn than any other cotton factory in the land. By the 1830's the reputation of Greg's factory was having a profound effect locally and was responsible, in part, for persuading the House of Lords to approve the Cheshire Junction Railway Bill of 1836.

As the road moves out of the Bollin valley we approach the Apprentice House, at first glance two identical buildings locked together like Siamese twins. It was erected, in two stages, on the site of a claypit and was capable of accommodating 100 children. By 1847, when the apprentice system ended, 2,000 boys and girls had passed through it. By twentieth-century standards the regimen was harsh, with a 14 hour day punctuated by brief breaks for meals, but by the standards of his day, Greg's concern for the health and welfare of his apprentices was not characteristic of most employers, who seem to have exploited child labour ruthlessly unless checked by factory legislation which the authorities ensured was implemented. Materially, the inmates benefited from being in Greg's care, and that few chose to play truant was not so much testimony of the freedom they enjoyed within their small community as of the grimness of a freer life outside.

The Apprentice House stands imposingly at the junction of the road from the mill and a lane which leads to the first of two complexes of buildings which Greg adapted or built for his employees. When the mill was built it was soon apparent that existing buildings in Styal could not accommodate all his employees. Moreover, lodgings would have been unsuitable for complete families whom he wished to attract to his mill. For workers to have to live at some distance from Styal – say, at Handforth or Ringway – would have entailed a good deal of walking at both ends of a long day of arduous work. Greg needed his workers to be close by their work, and, furthermore, he wished them to live in surroundings which were beautiful and congenial. These reasons persuaded him, initially, to adapt buildings in the locality to his needs. We pass, first of all, a group of buildings which demonstrates Greg's ability to improvise – Farm Fold. The cottages we see here were adapted from a group of farm buildings – a farmhouse



Quarry Bank Mill

became five cottages: three cottages were made out of a dairy: a shippon became four cottages and the outline of the shippon's central arch, bricked in, can be seen to this day: two cottages were created out of a particularly fine cruck cottage.

For a time these adaptations suited Greg's needs, but as the factory grew and the labour force increased, and as he required more land, he decided to build new houses opposite to Farm Fold and now separated from it by lawns, gardens, a straight cobbled path and a car park. The Oak Farm Estate consists of brick-built houses, each constructed to accommodate two or three families and equipped with a kitchen range on each floor. Today, they seem incongruous in their pleasant rural setting, for they resemble in some particulars – for example, their cramped backyards – the terraced dwellings of heavily industrialized towns. Many of the houses possess cellars, as Greg anticipated that eventually spinning at the factory would be supplemented by domestic weaving, so that there would be no need to "put out" work. The invention of the power loom, which ensured that weaving – like spinning – would need to be carried on in factories, meant that the cellars were never used for the purpose intended, however. Despite some resemblances to urban housing of an inferior kind, the frontages are attractive and a walk along the unmade road which divides the estate leads to a small secluded green and a quaint black-and-white cottage which has given its name to the estate. For the use of his people, Greg built a shop at one end of the first row of houses.

Samuel Greg, the son of a wealthy Belfast shipowner, Thomas Greg, had been educated at a public school and university. Like many young gentlemen of his day his formal education had culminated in a Grand Tour. It was consistent with his philanthropic approach to life that he should wish to provide elementary education for the children of his employees and for his apprentices. Thus, he built a school in 1823 where the very young could be taught during the day and older boys and girls could be instructed in the evening. Moreover, Greg himself conducted some classes for adults, so that his small school, bustling with activity, anticipated that interest in educational advance which later in the century seemed crucial for a rapidly industrializing community.

There is too, at Styal, a chapel, built in 1820, near to the estate of Oak Farm, called at first "Oak Chapel", but now known as the Norcliffe Chapel. Greg was a Presbyterian and had little liking for the Anglican Church. It displeased him that he was obliged to send his apprentices to the parish church of Wilmslow in order to comply with the provisions of the Health and Morals Act of 1802. Few of his employees embraced the Anglican faith and it was to meet their needs that he built a chapel. He appointed the minister and in the years which followed the opening of the chapel, Congregationalists, Methodists and Baptists were successively incumbents.

Our outward walk has now reached its end. Those seeking refreshment may find it, at the appropriate times of the day, at the nearby "Ship Inn". The return to Wilmslow may be by the same route as the outward walk, although at the far end of the spacious car park laid out beyond the trees above Quarry Bank House there is the beginning of an alternative route which takes the walker back to the Carrs along a well-defined path through fields above the Bollin valley.

Most of the walk has been through an area which, before Greg's arrival late in the eighteenth century, was open marshy heathland. Its few inhabitants scratched meagre livings digging peat and selling it to farmers in the area. Prior to the establishment of the mill much of the land was enclosed so that agricultural improvements would be practicable – the area of forbidding waste land was thus reduced. It was then that Greg arrived in the area and for a period was able to reconcile rural charm and industrial efficiency.

J. T. BEVER
August, 1977

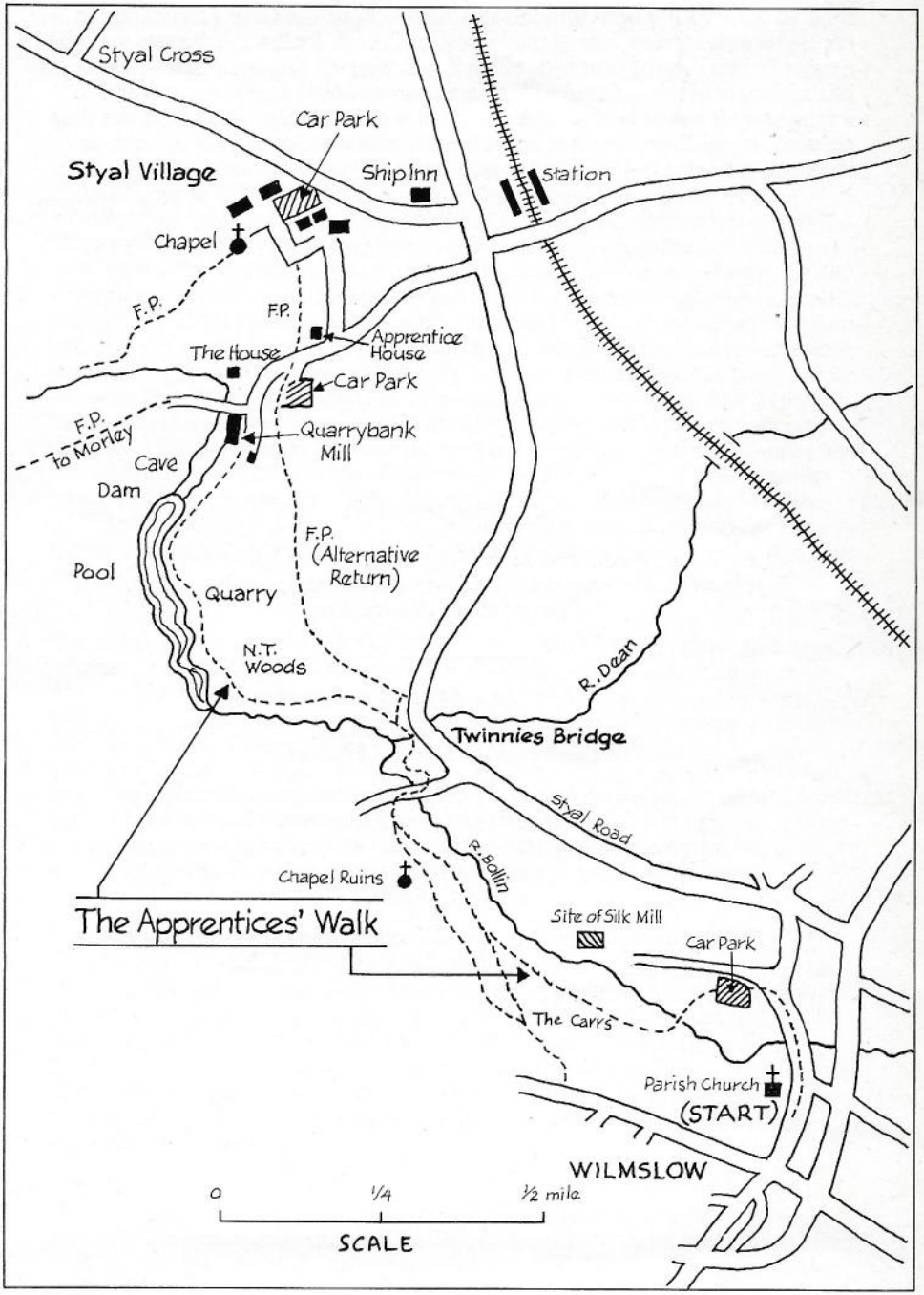
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