

# Quarry Bank Mill, Cheshire

In this feature in each issue we look at past winners of National Heritage's Museum of the Year Award and what has happened to them since.

Quarry Bank Mill on the River Bollin at Styal near Wilmslow in Cheshire is a living part of Manchester's industrial revolution, yet it is in the countryside on the fringe of the great metropolis. One of the finest surviving cotton spinning mills of the first generation, it was built by an Irishman called Samuel Greg in 1784 and was prosperous during his lifetime. Although it was overtaken by new technology in the second half of the 19th century, somehow it was kept running until 1959.

By now on land belonging to the National Trust, in the 1960s Quarry Bank Mill's buildings needed urgent repair which would be expensive, and there were several options: it could become a trading warehouse, a hotel or possibly a crafts centre, but they were all discarded in favour of it becoming a museum.

The National Trust leased it to the new Quarry Bank Mill Trust, and in 1977 they opened it as a museum of the pre-urban era, when cotton mills dotted the countryside and there was space to give reasonable accommodation for workforces.

Under the first director, David Sekers, Quarry Bank Mill launched the Power Project in 1981, which was effectively to restore the original power supplies to the mill as far as possible, and it struck a chord with the public which won it the award from the judges for 1984, the mill's bicentenary. "People are thirsty for involvement in a way they weren't a decade ago" Sekers said then. "New museums are aware that there is a great public interest which is not being harnessed if you are lecturing to people, talking down to them and making them feel small. The barriers are being pulled down".

A working water wheel was installed in 1986 – inspected and approved by the Queen Mother – along with other authentic pumping equipment, and the power galleries were created in the mill, with the engine house itself was refurbished.

The Apprentice House five minutes walk from the mill was home to about 60 boys and girls, brought from local workhouses or from parents who could not afford to keep them. In 1988 it was restored and turned into a museum, conducted by an originally costumed superintendent, to show how working children as young as seven lived in the most primitive and basic accommodation by modern standards, although compared to other mills their treatment would have been regarded as decent and humane by the standards of the day.

A doctor and school was provided for them, where they learned to read and write, though their main purpose was to provide readily available, trained and cheap millworkers. Now, 30 children a day could feel life as working children of the Industrial Revolution did, while in the mill

visitors of all ages could learn how to weave cloth, an early hands-on approach for visitors for which they proved enthusiastic.

In 1998 a main beam engine from the 1830s was installed, brought from nearby Macclesfield, and new power galleries were opened by Quarry Bank Mill's patron, Princess Anne. A horizontal engine was installed in 2000, and a main turbine three years later.

This spring a new feature was being added, with the completion of the restoration of the gardens at Quarry Bank House at a cost of £350,000, with most of the work carried out over the last year by 60 volunteers. In the 1790s Greg decided to build his family home next to the mill, and in 2006 Quarry Bank House and gardens were acquired by the National Trust, making it one of the most complete restored mill estates in the UK.

In the mid 19th century Samuel's son Robert

Hyde Greg was a passionate gardener, who created the garden and commissioned local nurseries to hybridise rhododendrons, giving them names associated with the Greg family and the locality. These unique hybrids to Quarry Bank are being researched and reinstated with the help of the Cheshire Rural Recovery fund and a generous private benefactor who has helped acquire the garden.

A Victorian rustic bridge across the Bollin has been restored, to reflect the post Samuel Greg era when the gardens came into their own, and appropriate painting and planting schemes have been created around it.

But have David Sekers's prophetic words of two decades ago about drawing a modern public to a 200-year-old monument to the Industrial Revolution proved true? Visitor numbers bear him out – they have gradually grown to over 100,000 a year, more than twice original estimates, and the gardens are expected to add another 30,000. "It's immersion in history" Sekers said. "It's about much more than monuments now, much more than machines, it's about people and the monuments are a backdrop."

