

PETER NIGHTINGALE, RICHARD ARKWRIGHT AND THE DERWENT VALLEY COTTON MILLS, 1771–1818: A REPLY

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In a short response it is impossible to deal adequately with the deluge of detail, in both the text of their Rejoinder and the appendix, with which Mrs Buxton, Mr Charlton and Mr Hool seek to overwhelm me. If a number of minor errors and peripheral imperfections have crept into my work, they have not affected the substance or conclusion of the article. I can only consider a few topics in their commentary that they appear to be particularly concerned about, and are largely set out in the main text.

My critics take exception to the description of Cromford in the 1770s as an area of industrial dereliction. This is pretty obvious to anyone who has studied the history of lead mining in Derbyshire. The best source, which I quote, is R.R. Angerstein, the Swedish industrial spy. In his journal for 1754 he recorded that ‘On Cromford Moor there were innumerable shafts of lead mines to be seen, some of which have been sunk to depths of more than 600 feet ... There are 12 cupola furnaces as well as innumerable other furnaces’.¹ Not surprisingly, there are no trees in Angerstein’s drawings of the area.²

Buxton, Charlton and Hool are dismissive of my reference to Arkwright’s social ambitions and the attractions of Matlock Bath to a social climber. The early record comes from Henson’s *History of the Framework-Knitters* (1831), which relates the impression the inventor left with contemporaries in Nottingham.³ His favourite expression at that time was that he would ‘ride in his carriage’ when his hard-won project came to fruition.⁴ He eventually did so, marrying a son and daughter into the county gentry, notwithstanding (as one of the class, Captain John Gell of Hopton Hall, complained) that ‘he held us all here as enemies’.⁵ His wife could not bear his overwrought ambitions.⁶

The three authors dislike my tabulation of Arkwright’s property in Cromford, claiming that it is meaningless to calculate an average cost of domestic housing units. This complaint reveals unfamiliarity with the history of working-class housing in the period. Of course there were some variations, but the urbanisation of the Industrial Revolution period featured replication of simple two- and three-roomed dwellings in long terraces. This can easily be recognised in the long rows of North Street, Cromford, a design that Arkwright’s builder, Samuel Stretton, probably brought from Nottingham.⁷ Simple calculations of costs help to put the Cromford experience in its proper context.

The use of the word ‘ruthless’ in reference to Arkwright’s extensive borrowing in the 1770s is also objected to, the critics maintaining that it was a rational development. In truth, Arkwright left so little of personal papers (letters, diaries etc.) that it is virtually impossible to identify the real personality behind so much achievement. However, the court case with Peter Nightingale, retold in my article, must surely point to a ruthless streak. Here was Arkwright suing his principal financier for infringement of his patents, when there were scores of other pirate cotton spinners he could have taken to court. One may suspect some connivance between the two entrepreneurs but Arkwright’s choice of opponent was not rational, much less constructive.⁸

I am well aware of the ongoing research on waterpower on the Cromford mills site and appreciate that this may make interpretations I made in my first book nearly 50 years ago subject to revision. My old friend Patrick Strange has been working on the complex problems for over forty years. My derogatory reference to the Cromford power system built for Arkwright is based on Sir William Fairbairn's account of Thomas Lowe, the Nottingham millwright, whose wheels and transmission system, built for Arkwright at Catrine, were called 'heavy and clumsy'; in particular the waterwheels were 'ill constructed, deficient in power, and constantly breaking down or getting out of repair'.⁹ This is a large subject which I examine at length in a forthcoming paper¹⁰ and spoke about at the Arkwright Society's conference on the Industrial Revolution, held at Cromford in September 2015.

Where little or no evidence is available, as often appears in the present experience, historians believe it is legitimate to explore the possibilities. Such, for instance, is the problem of the location of Arkwright's early house in Cromford and the possible role of the Black Dog (now the Greyhound) inn. *The Universal British Directory* (1790–8) entry on Wirksworth recorded that 'No stage [coach] comes or goes to this town'.¹¹ In the 1790s the coach from Derby to Manchester and back via Bakewell passed through Cromford just once a day,¹² scarcely enough to justify a monumental £500 investment in a coaching inn, except for the sake of a personal prestige project, especially when we consider the well-accustomed hotels in Matlock Bath.

My research on Nightingale, as the acknowledgements on page 189 emphasise, represents the first instalment of a history of the Smedleys, the knitwear company. It was never intended to be the comprehensive history of Arkwright and Cromford my critics seem to be looking for. Their own work, *Cromford Revisited*, certainly falls far short of any such desideratum.¹³ My critical review of this book exposes its limitations.¹⁴ The two authors entrust, as they say, the writing of the history of Cromford to future historians,¹⁵ but they make the task so much more difficult by declining to record most of their sources. This is not a platform from which they should be hectoring serious historians.

REFERENCES

- ¹ T. and P. Berg (eds.), *R.R. Angerstein's Illustrated Travel Diary 1753–1755: industry in England and Wales from a Swedish perspective* (London: Science Museum, 2001), 206, 209.
- ² *Ibid.*, 207, 209.
- ³ G. Henson, *The Civil, Political, and Mechanical History of the Framework-Knitters, in Europe and America* (Nottingham: Richard Sutton, 1831), 367–71.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 368.
- ⁵ R.S. Fitton, *The Arkwrights: spinners of fortune* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 195, 310.
- ⁶ Henson, *Framework-Knitters*, 367–8.
- ⁷ S.D. Chapman (ed.), *The History of Working Class Housing* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971), esp. ch. 4; S.D. Chapman, 'The rebuilding of Newark in the eighteenth century', *Nottinghamshire Historian*, 2015 (forthcoming). For Stretton see next paragraph.
- ⁸ Fitton, *The Arkwrights*, ch. 4.
- ⁹ W. Fairbairn, *Treatise on Mills and Millwork* (London, 1861–3), II, 112; W. Pole (ed.), *The Life of Sir William Fairbairn, Bart. partly written by himself* (London, 1877), 121.
- ¹⁰ 'The Strettons and the Lowes', *Transactions of the Thoroton Society of Nottinghamshire*, 119 (2016).
- ¹¹ P. Riden (ed.), *Derbyshire Directories 1781–1824* (Derbyshire Record Society, 33, 2006), 98.

¹² Ibid., 193.

¹³ D. Buxton and C. Charlton, *Cromford Revisited* (Matlock: Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site Educational Trust, 2013).

¹⁴ *Textile History*, 45 (2) (2014), 279–80.

¹⁵ Buxton and Charlton, *Cromford Revisited*, Preface (unpaginated).

EDITORS' NOTE: *This reply marks the end of this exchange in the pages of the Derbyshire Archaeological Journal.*