

May 2021



Dear Club Members,

This month's fibre celebrated the 250th anniversary of the birth of Robert Owen. Born in Newtown, mid-Wales in 1771 on 14th May. Most of his life was spent away from Newtown, but it's where he returned at the end of his life, and he's buried there.

He's now famous for being one of the founders of utopian socialism, and the co-operative movement. As a business man he was very successful, rising from a childhood of relative poverty, lack of education, and poor living conditions. He was the 6th of 7 siblings, two of whom died in childhood. He left school age 10 to be apprenticed to a draper in Lincolnshire. His business acumen after that saw him spending his teenage years in London working in drapers shops, before moving to Manchester aged 18.

It was from this foundation that he built his reputation as an entrepreneur, and where he started to become influential on matters of public health and working conditions. This led to him visiting Scotland, and marrying Ann Dale, the daughter of a Glasgow philanthropist. David Dale ran the New Lanark Mill in Scotland, one of Britain's largest cotton spinning mills. The mill is powered by the River Clyde, and employed around 2000 people. Five hundred of these were children from the poor houses and other charity homes in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Owen eventually bought out Dale from New Lanark, and he went on to dramatically change the living and working conditions at the mill. At the time the truck system of payment was common. Employers paid their workers in tokens that could only be used at the shop owned by the employers. This allowed them to charge inflated prices for low quality goods as the workers were left with no alternatives. In contrast Owen set up a system which would become the foundation of the co-operative societies that became common throughout the UK, and are still found today. Goods were sold for only slightly above their wholesale price, allowing workers to benefit from lowered prices.

He also provided education from childhood to adulthood, including developing the first nursery schools, providing safe childcare for young children, allowing women to return to work. The mill itself was very successful commercially (providing a 50% return on investments), and developed an international reputation. Social reformers, politicians and even royalty visited to study the methods used. In 1810 he campaigned for an 8 hour day with the slogan "eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest"

Owen was a socialist, and felt that the best way for conditions to improve for workers would be the establishment of self-sufficient communities. He felt that around 1,200 people should settle on around 1,2000 acres of land, all living in one building with public kitchens and dining halls. In a way that seems quite startling to modern ears he felt that families should care for children up to the age of 3, but after that they should be raised by the community. This model is known as utopian. In 1825 Owen went to America to set up a community based on these ideals. The settlement was called New Harmony, and was established in Indiana. The community was established with the aim that it would become a centre for educational reform, scientific research and artistic expression. Ultimately after 2 years the experiment was a failure. Probably not helped by Owen's frequent

absences as he often travelled back to the UK. Ultimately, members of the community often failed to agree, and these disputes led to a distinct lack of harmony!

Despite the failure of his vision at New Harmony we owe a great deal to Robert Owen. His work at New Lanark showed that there was an alternative way to treat your workers, and concept of an 8 hour working day is still with us, even in these times of flexible working!

New Lanark remained in operation until 1968, and a conservation trust was established to prevent the demolition of the workers village built by Robert Owen to provide quality housing for his workers. The site is now recognised as a Unesco World Heritage Site, and is well worth a visit. They no longer spin cotton, but instead spin wool, and you can buy yarn made on the site.

As for the colours and fibres I've chosen this month, I've tried to honour the country of Owen's birth by using Black Welsh Mountain, and where he made most impact up at New Lanark in Scotland by using Cheviot. The Whitefaced Woodland is the closest I can get to a wool from Manchester, where he started out. The colour is a bit of a joint inspiration. Owen was born in Newtown, which at one point was described as the Leeds of Wales, becoming extremely well known for making high quality wool flannel. Owen never got involved in the textile industry in his home town, though they could have done with his influence to improve the working conditions in the town, which were described as being dreadful. One of the most popular colours for the flannel was red, which was thought to be particularly warming for invalids! Further south, in 1831, Welsh miners rose up against the ironmasters and the British state. As a symbol of their rebellion they flew a red flag, arguably the first time that it was used as a symbol of workers insurrection. I've tweaked the colour slightly. . . we've had a few scarlet red shades recently, and decided to go for something more pink toned to give us a bit of variety.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Further Reading/ Watching-

Robert Owen- Simplified version

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/zxwxvcw/articles/zfr9382>

Robert Owen

<https://www.bl.uk/people/robert-owen>

Robert Owen Museum in Newtown-

<https://www.robertowenmuseum.co.uk/overview/>

Robert Owen at New Lanark-

<https://www.newlanark.org/introducing-robert-owen>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZU2l2nOymg>

Yarn made at New Lanark

<https://www.newlanarkspinning.com/>

Robert Owen and the co-operative movement

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bidDhtgGkKE>

The Merthyr Rising

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/clips/zamd7ty>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merthyr_Rising

A history of Newtown's textile trade-

<https://youtu.be/PqUnb53TnVI>

The 8 hour work day

<https://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/03/how-the-8-hour-workday-changed-how-americans-work.html>

New Harmony

<https://www.indianamuseum.org/historic-sites/new-harmony/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Harmony,_Indiana

<https://archive.curbed.com/2019/8/5/20748964/new-harmony-indiana-history-utopia>

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

25% Black Welsh Mountain,

12.5% Whitefaced Woodland

25% Cheviot,

37.5% Corriedale