

Robert Owen and New Lanark

Robert Owen was born in Newtown in 1771. He was the sixth of seven children. There Owen received almost all his school education, which ended at the age of ten. In 1787, after serving in a draper's shop for some years, he settled in London.

He moved to Manchester, and was employed at Satterfield's Drapery. With money borrowed from his brother he set up a workshop making spinning mules but exchanged the business for 6 spinning mules, which he operated in a rented space. In 1792 he was made manager of the Piccadilly Mill at Bank Top at the age of 21, but after two years he voluntarily gave up a contracted promise of partnership in the company.

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.

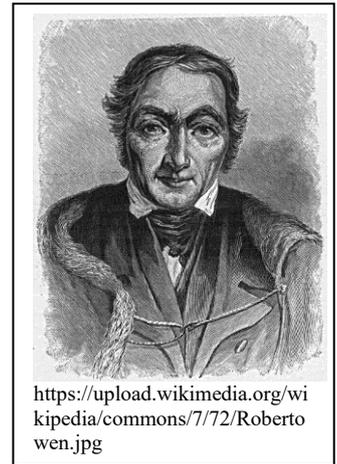
New Lanark Mill

During a visit to Scotland, Owen fell in love with Caroline Dale, the daughter of the New Lanark mill's proprietor David Dale. Owen convinced his partners to buy New Lanark. He was a manager and part-owner of the mills (January 1810). Encouraged by his success in the management of cotton mills in Manchester, he hoped to conduct New Lanark on higher principles than purely commercial ones.

The mill of New Lanark had been started in 1785. The water power provided by the falls of the River Clyde made it a great attraction. About 2,000 people had associations with the mills, 500 of whom were children brought at the age of five or six from the poorhouses and charities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. The children were well treated by Dale, but the general condition of the people was unsatisfactory.

Many employers operated the truck system, and paid workers in part or totally by tokens. These tokens had no value outside the mill owner's "truck shop". The owners could supply shoddy goods to the truck shop and charge top prices. Owen opened a store where the people could buy goods of sound quality at little more than wholesale cost, and he placed the sale of alcohol under strict supervision. He sold quality goods and passed on the savings from the bulk purchase of goods to the workers. These principles became the basis for the cooperative shops in Britain, which continue in an altered form to trade today.

Owen's greatest success was in support of the young. He can be considered as the founder of infant child care in Britain, especially Scotland. At first regarded with suspicion, Owen soon won the confidence of his workers. The mills continued to have great commercial success, but some of Owen's schemes were very expensive, which displeased his partners. Tired of the restrictions imposed on him by men who wanted to conduct the business on the ordinary principles, Owen arranged in 1813 to have them bought out by new investors.

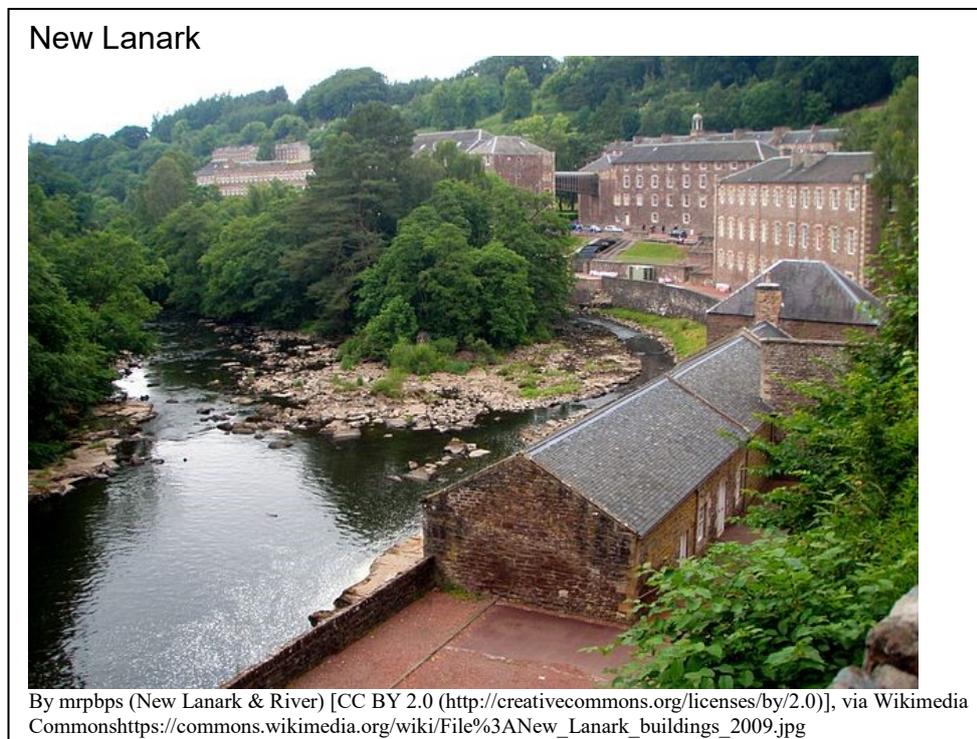


Owen also adopted new principles in raising the standard of goods produced. A cube with faces painted in different colours was installed above each machinist's workplace. The colour of the face showed to everyone the quality and quantity of work completed. This provided incentives to workers to do their best. Although not in itself a great incentive, the conditions at New Lanark for the workers and their families were idyllic for the time.

Owen proposed that communities of about 1,200 people should be settled on land from 1,000 to 1,500 acres (4 to 6 km²), all living in one large square building, with public kitchen and mess-rooms. Each family should have its own private apartments and the entire care of the children till age three, after which they should be brought up by the community; their parents would have access to them at meals, however, and at all other proper times. These communities might be established by individuals, by parishes, by counties, or by the state; in every case, there should be effective supervision by duly qualified persons. Work, and the enjoyment of its results, should be experienced communally. The size of his community was no doubt partly suggested by his village of New Lanark; and he soon proceeded to advocate such a scheme as the best form for the re-organization of society in general.

Owen's model changed little during his life. His fully developed model was as follows. He considered an association of 500 to 3000 people as the fit number for a good working community. While mainly agricultural, it should possess all the best machinery, should offer every variety of employment, and should, as far as possible, be self-contained.

(source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Owen, abridged)



Tasks:

- In not more than ten sentences, give a characterisation of New Lanark.
- Assess Robert Owen's role in social history.