

Vintage working woollen mill



The imposing mill exterior (Picture courtesy of Coldharbour Mill Museum)



Steam days at Coldharbour Mill give a fascinating industrial insight

Tucked away amidst undulating mid-Devon hills, the industrial site of Coldharbour Mill seems strangely at odds with its rural surroundings.

A tall chimney, like a red brick exclamation mark, proclaims its presence. This is the first part of the working wool museum you see while driving through the village of Uffculme.

Then you turn a corner – and suddenly there it is, a mill that has been in continuous production since 1797.

This is not quite the dark satanic mills of the industrial north. But this imposing four storey building excellently conveys the spirit of such premises.

When visiting on steam days, Coldharbour Mill – hailed by Historic England as probably one of the best-preserved textile mill complexes in the country – presents a surprising and sensory experience.

There is the tactile touch of wool, smell of steam, and glowing Dantean furnace of the two boilers built and installed in 1910. But perhaps it is the sounds that lodge in the memory longest.

Like rekindled ghosts of a bygone age they breathe audible new life into this industrial anachronism.

The 18ft tall iron wheel, with its bolted ‘paddles’, lumbers around at 12

Roger Malone visits a working industrial mill in the heart of Devon

revolutions per minute although it can speed up to thirty if required.

Propelled at a tranquil pace through the gravitational power of water the wheel rumbles around like the metallic equivalent of an aged soul with stiff joints.

Running smoothly, the mill’s Pollit and Wigzell engine and beam engine ticks along shrouded in swathes of escaping steam as it drives the belts that power the mill’s machinery.

By contrast the wooden click-clack of the looms is loud and frenetic. The rhythm is sufficiently upbeat for a local jazz band to play in the mill on occasions and incorporate it as a novel percussion section.

Originally owned by world-renowned textile producers Fox Brothers, the mill took fleece from all over the world and transformed it into yarn, cloth and textiles.

With the industrial revolution now providing the opportunity for mass manufacture, rural cottage creations became eclipsed by the output of purpose-built factories.

Previously the wool from sheep sheared with hand scissors was collected, then drawn out by ‘carding’ – the use of two wire paddles brushed together teasing the wool into strands.

This was then fed into the spinning wheel and hand spun.

Now the mills were equipped with mechanical carders – large rotating cylinders of needles teasing the wool into strands that were then fed into, and woven by, the looms.

Coldharbour Mill originally employed 300 workers. Now its rich heritage lives on – run by a core of 60 volunteers with a team of about 20 on duty at any one day.

Here visitors are not just able to relive the sights and sounds of the industrial revolution but also see craftsmen and women making traditional textiles, beautiful knitting yarn and hand woven rugs.

Only after learning the process from sheep’s wool to finished product can you fully appreciate the effort that goes into a pullover.

“We are here to educate people about the industrial revolution and why it was so important to today’s society,” says Hilary Clements.

“We hope that we enrich people’s understanding by showing the role a place like this has played in our social history.”

Compared to many industrial workers the employees at Coldhar-



bour Mill were treated well as the Foxes were Quakers.

Fox Brothers developed a cottage industry into large scale factory production and was central in bringing the industrial revolution to the South West – with textile products distributed throughout the world.

“They made their money by making puttees,” says Hilary.

The mill created 850 miles of cloth in World War I – and more than 12million pairs of puttees during the wars, making it one of the key suppliers.

“The puttee steaming saved many soldiers from trench foot,” says Hilary.

“But there was a dilemma for the Quaker family – should they support the soldiers by making puttees or should they be conscientious objectors?”

Visitors can see the floor where puttees were made on an industrial level – different colours for different branches of the military.

The process of creating textiles, from initial cleaning and combing

raw fleece to yarn and spun yarn, contains a number of stages. Each is brought to life using much of the original machinery.

“We want to appreciate how things are made and value them. It is about quality, not throwaway items – it promotes ‘buy once buy well’,” says Hilary.

“Today we continue to make and sell the yarn and textiles made in the factory as well as running workshops, teaching people how to weave, spin and enjoy the steam experience.”

From 1865 until its close in 1981 Coldharbour Mill was powered by steam. Much of this equipment can be seen powered by steam on special dates throughout the year. This is organised by members of the Steam Volunteer Group who meet on Tuesday evenings to carry out maintenance.

“We are on a journey. There are plans such as bringing more of the factory back into production. It is all about going forward,” says Hilary.

Her father, Pat Salter, worked as a steam engineer at Coldharbour Mill – which helps explain her own special enthusiasm for becoming involved in ensuring its future success.

“It gets into your blood,” says Hilary, who is keen to kindle enthusiasm among a younger generation of visitors.

With its restaurant and shop selling an array of textiles made at the mill this is a heritage venue well worth visiting.

■ The next big event is New Year’s Steam Day on January 1, 2018 from 10.30am to 4pm. There is a similar event on Sunday February 11 and Sunday March 11 and the mill opens again to visitors at Easter with an Easter Steam Special on Monday 2nd April.

www.coldharbourmill.org.uk



Steam Curator and Trustee John Jasper by the boilers. Below, steam team volunteer David Sprague attends to the steam engine. Left: spinning machines.

PICTURES BY ROGER MALONE



Industrial Devon