

The Model Mill

New Lanark in Lanarkshire, Scotland, was once a cotton-spinning mill town with social reform at its heart. Now, it is recognised as a World Heritage Site, but many of the ideals live on. Giselle Whiteaker delves into the history of this fascinating destination.



The New Lanark Mill Hotel

“We should go and have a look at that while we’re here,” I say to my mother Judy as we drive past a sign for the New Lanark World Heritage Site some 25 miles southeast of Glasgow. Rounding the next corner, I realise our hotel is located in the heart of it. The New Lanark Mill Hotel, as the name suggests, is housed in one of the mill buildings of a former 18th-century cotton mill village, nestled in the spectacular Clyde Valley. It’s right next to the River Clyde that once powered the mill machines, and a stone’s throw from the Falls of Clyde, surrounded by pretty woodlands,

but it’s the history of this fascinating place that is the real draw card. Checked in to one of the 38 comfortable rooms, we set off to see what we can learn before closing time.

The village of New Lanark was founded in 1785 by David Dale as a new industrial settlement. Cotton-spinning mills and tenement-style housing for the workforce were built from local sandstone. By 1820, it was an important milling centre and the population had swelled to 2,500.

Things became really interesting, though, when David Dale's son-in-law, Robert Owen, took over the management from 1800, turning it into a model community. Owen set about improving and expanding the business, and used the profits to finance a series of social and educational reforms designed to improve the quality of life for his workers. His novel reforms included not allowing young children to work in the mills; establishing progressive schools for the village, including the first infant school in the world; free medical care and a sickness fund; reduced working hours; and cheap food and household goods at the Village Store.



The Falls of Clyde

Owen left New Lanark in 1824, to travel to America, where he set up a short-lived experimental socialistic community at New Harmony, Indiana. On his return to the UK in 1828, he settled in London, where he continued to be an advocate for the working class. The cotton mills, meanwhile, continued in production until 1968, although the water wheels were replaced by water turbines, and the mills produced their own hydro-electricity from 1898. Now, the village is designated as an Outstanding Conservation Area, and is in the care of the New Lanark Conservation Trust. The village lives on, with a resident population of about 180 people who reside in the beautifully restored Georgian

buildings that are not included in the sections of New Lanark turned over to visitor attractions.

Our starting point is an audio-visual ride following the "ghost" of Annie McLeod, a 10-year-old mill girl, who describes life in New Lanark in 1820. It gives insight into the living conditions at the time and the reforms Owen put into place. We have just enough time before closing to walk through the mill exhibition, which includes working textile machinery that is used to spin wool for the well-stocked Mill Shop, and to pop up to the roof garden, which covers 9,000 square feet of the mill building roof and offers spectacular views of the site.

Seated for dinner at the Mill One Restaurant inside the hotel, John Stirrat, the General Manager of the hotel, pops over to say hello. Like all of the staff here, most of whom are locals, he exudes genuine warmth and is clearly proud of the venue's recent success in reaching four stars. They're deserving – there is a Leisure and Beauty centre that includes a swimming pool, bubble pool, steam room, sauna, a health and fitness studio, and a gym with a full range of equipment, as well as the Beauty Rooms, where Judy has booked in for a facial.

The restaurant seems to be doing well too – it's packed with punters this evening and the menu covers a range of dishes from traditional cullen skink to duck, orange and plum parfait and herb-crusted lamb cannon. The goats cheese and caramelised pearl onion savoury pancake is a definite winner and Judy has only good things to say about her slow-cooked shin of Scotch beef, served with smoked beetroot puree, colcannon mash, charred baby leeks, glazed Chantenay carrots and dressed with red wine jus and a parmesan crisp. The slice of moist carrot cake is also undeniably moreish.



New Lanark from the rooftop garden



Goats cheese and pearl onion pancake



Slow-cooked shin of Scotch beef



Carrot cake

The next morning, we stroll along a forested track through the New Lanark woodlands and Falls of Clyde Wildlife Reserve, gently ascending on the meandering path as we pass Corra Linn, Bonnington Linn, Dundaff Linn and Stonebyres Linn, collectively known as the Falls of Clyde. On the return journey, we are afforded spectacular views across the mill estate.

Driving through the gates as we depart New Lanark, we're pleased we came. Robert Owen's words ring in our ears: "The ever-changing scenes of nature afford not only the most economical, but also the most innocent pleasures which man can enjoy."

We visit the restored Millworkers' House, which shows the living conditions of the 1820s and the 1930s: the Village Store, a period-style shop with an exhibition about Robert Owen's original store; and Robert Owen's house, outlining his work as a social reformer. In Robert Owen's School for Children, restored in 2001, there is a reconstruction of a New Lanark classroom of the 1820s and an exhibition about the restoration of New Lanark. It's easy to while away the day here, but there is also plenty to see in the area, including Cragneithan Castle, the six sites of The Clyde Valley Woodlands National Nature Reserve, Strathclyde Country Park and Little Sparta, a garden, created by artist and poet Ian Hamilton Finlay.



The Village Store



The River Clyde

For more information about The New Lanark Mill Hotel, see www.newlanarkhotel.co.uk or for the New Lanark World Heritage Site, see www.newlanark.org.