

An overview of the life of Robert Owen

"By my own experience and reflection I had ascertained that human nature is radically good, and is capable of being trained, educated and placed from birth in such manner, that all ultimately (that is as soon as the gross errors and corruptions of the present false and wicked system are overcome and destroyed) must become united, good, wise, wealthy and happy. And I felt that to attain this glorious result, the sacrifices of the character, fortune and life of an individual was not deserving a moment's consideration. And my decision was made to overcome all opposition and to succeed or die in the attempt. "

Robert Owen, the son of a saddler and ironmonger, became one of the most successful mill owners of the Industrial Revolution with a reputation as the producer of fine cotton. However, it was not as a successful and respected businessman that he left his mark on history, but as one of the most prominent social reformers of the period, a pioneer of modern British socialism and a source of inspiration to the co-operative and trade union movements.

An original thinker, a man of imagination, philanthropist, visionary and an idealist, but above all Robert Owen had the strength to try and realise his ideals.

Childhood and Apprenticeship

"I was the best runner and leaper in the school. I had the libraries of the clergyman, physician and lawyer thrown open to me I generally finished a volume daily I read all the lives I could meet with of the philosophers and great men."

Robert Owen was born in Newtown, Mid-Wales, in 1771, the sixth child of the local saddler and ironmonger. A bright and lively boy he enjoyed all the normal childhood activities, playing football, learning to dance and to play the clarinet. At school he was so advanced for his age that he became a "pupil-teacher" when only seven. Robert was an exceptional boy in many ways. Before he was ten he had read many of the popular classics such as Pilgrims Progress and Robinson Crusoe, as well as books on history and theology normally considered much too difficult for a child.

After leaving school at the age of nine and spending a year as an assistant in the local haberdashery shop, Robert was sent to London to join his elder brother. He soon became

apprenticed to James McGuffog, a draper from Stamford in Lincolnshire. His employer was a kind and generous man who encouraged Robert to continue his reading. Robert was happy with the McGuffog family and their liberal views on religion greatly influenced the boy.

The apprenticeship served, Robert returned to London in 1785 to widen his experience and obtain a post as an assistant in a large popular draper's on London Bridge. This was a very different job with long hours and poor conditions. Robert's health began to suffer and after several months he found a new job and moved to Manchester.

From Draper's Assistant to Master Cotton Spinner

"I had not the slightest knowledge of this new machinery. I looked wisely at the men, although I really knew nothing. But by intensely observing everything, I maintained order and regularity throughout the establishment."

In the late 18th Century a major revolution was taking place in the textile industry and Manchester was developing as the centre of the cotton industry. Originally, cloth manufacture had been a cottage industry, but the invention of water powered spinning machines, such as Arkwright's water frame, Hargreave's spinning jenny and later Compton's mule, led to the development of the cotton mills.

In Manchester Robert Owen met Ernest Jones, a young engineer who convinced him that there was a future in the manufacture of new spinning machines. In 1789, he borrowed £100 from his brother and the two men went into business. Jones was a good engineer, but it was Robert Owen who ran the business.

The partnership did not last very long and Robert Owen set up as a cotton spinner with just three employees. This venture prospered and enabled him to obtain a job as manager of a large mill. As a young man of 20, he found himself in charge of a modern steam powered mill employing 500 people. He soon mastered the art of cotton spinning and earned a considerable reputation as a producer of fine cotton. His career prospered and eventually he became a partner in the Chorlton Twist Company.

Robert Owen remained in Manchester for 13 years and became a respected businessman and a well known figure in the city's intellectual circles. In 1793, at the age of 22, he was invited to join the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society. Here he was introduced to new ideas and a different class of society and soon became friends with the leading intellectuals, including Dr. Percival - pioneer in public health reform, the poet Coleridge and John Dalton the chemist.

As an active member of the Society, Robert Owen took part in debates and presented papers on "the improvement of the cotton industry, the utility of learning, universal happiness and industrialisation and social influences on belief". These titles suggest that he was already forming his ideas on social reform and when the Manchester Board of Health was formed in 1796, he was asked to join the committee as a representative of the cotton industry.

New Lanark

"My intention was not merely to be a manager of cotton mills, but to change the conditions of the people who were surrounded by circumstances having an injurious influence upon the character of the entire population The community was a very wretched society and vice and immorality prevailed to a monstrous extent."

Many of the potential customers of the Chorlton Twist Company lived to the north of Manchester, and Robert Owen often travelled as far north as Glasgow to seek orders. On one of these visits he met Caroline Dale (whom he later married), the daughter of David Dale, the important Glasgow businessman and owner of large cotton mills at New Lanark. In 1799 Owen and his partners bought the New Lanark mills and shortly afterwards he moved to New Lanark with his young wife. From the very beginning, Robert Owen resolved to modernise the mill and improve both the working and social conditions of his workers.

At this time, the mill employed between 1,500 and 2,000 people, including 500 children. These children had been removed from parish workhouses and employed as apprentices. The mill owners were responsible for feeding, clothing, housing and educating their apprentices, but very few carried out their responsibilities adequately. As a result the children were small and pale, their growth stunted by bad conditions, and usually illiterate. Safety standards were virtually non-existent and many children were killed or maimed by accidents at work.

In the majority of factories the working conditions were appalling. The workers had to endure long hours in dark poorly ventilated mills for very low wages. Low moral standards and drunkenness were common among the workers. Only a few men, like Robert Owen, realised that these problems were a direct result of poverty and bad conditions.

The New Lanark mills were probably better than most, but nevertheless the conditions were still dreadful by modern standards. They provided an ideal place for Robert Owen to carry out an experiment in social reform. Although his intentions were good, he had to win the trust of his workers. He finally succeeded after continuing to pay his workers for four months when

cotton production stopped at the mills during the 1806 American embargo on cotton exports. From this time he enjoyed their confidence and eventually won their loyalty and affection.

Social Reform at New Lanark

"I was obliged to commence with a combination of vicious and inferior conditions - but conditions to which the population had long been accustomed, and to many of which they were strongly attached. I had to meet the objections of my partners, who were all good commercial men, and looked to a good return on their capital."

Robert Owen faced an uphill battle at New Lanark; at first the workers were suspicious of his new schemes, and his partners, whilst sympathetic, were worried about their investment. Despite these problems, he was determined to proceed with his experiment.

To begin with Robert Owen wanted to shorten the working day from 13 to 10 hours, but under pressure from his partners he had to increase it to 14 hours. This was a major setback, and a working day of 12 hours was not introduced until 1816. In other areas he was more successful; a minimum age of 10 was introduced for apprentices and only local children were employed.

Robert Owen did not limit his interests to the mill; he also wanted to improve the living conditions of his workers. He started by improving the existing houses and building new ones, paving the streets and introducing a system of street cleaning. All private shops were closed and the company store opened by David Dale was improved and profits used to open a free village school.

Not content with improving living and working conditions, Robert Owen also tried to influence their moral standards. A system of local government was introduced and fines were imposed for drunkenness. In the factory the behaviour of the workers was recorded by the supervisors using "silent monitors". A coloured marker was displayed by each person's work place, black for bad behaviour, blue for indifferent, yellow for good and white for excellent. The system was very effective and slowly the number of yellow and white markers increased.

The New Lanark School

"The houses of the poor working classes generally are altogether unfit for the training of young children; the children are therefore spoken to and treated just the reverse of the manner required to well-train and well-educate children."

In the early 19th Century, most working class children received no formal education. Before state schools were introduced, some schools for poor children were provided by the Church of England and non-conformist groups like the Quakers. However, most parents had to send their children to work and could not afford to lose their income and most employers did not provide any education for their apprentices.

Robert Owen believed that education had an important part to play in the formation of character and he had very advanced ideas on the way such education should be provided. He believed that there was more to education than teaching the 3R's, and natural history, music, dancing and games became an important part of school life. In New Lanark schools he pioneered new methods of teaching, involving the use of pictures, maps, and charts. He thought that education should be natural and spontaneous, but most of all enjoyable.

By 1809 Robert Owen had prepared his plans for building new schools, but he was unable to begin until 1813 because of the objections raised by his partners. Later with the support of more sympathetic partners he was able to build his Institute for the Formation of Character (opened in 1816). This imposing building was not only used as a school for the young, but also for evening lectures and concerts for the workers - the first attempt at introducing adult education to the working classes.

Robert Owen was the great pioneer of the Infants school. At New Lanark the school was open to very young children, and in many ways was similar to a pre-school playgroup as formal education did not begin until the children were six years old.

The new school was a great success and attracted a very large number of visitors, not only educational reformers, but foreign ambassadors and royalty, who were unanimous in their admiration for the project. Unfortunately not everyone approved of Robert Owen's liberal ideas and his partners strongly disapproved of the new methods. Eventually, the music and dancing were stopped, formal religious education was introduced and old methods of teaching were used.

Factory Reform

"Children at this time were admitted into cotton, wool, flax and silk mills, at six and sometimes even five years of age. The time of working, winter and summer were unlimited by law, but usually it was fourteen hours per day - in some fifteen, and even, by the most inhuman and avaricious, sixteen hours."

At New Lanark, Robert Owen had successfully improved both the working and living conditions of all his workers and especially his apprentices. The New Lanark mills remained a rare exception, and Robert Owen was anxious to see similar reforms at other mills. In 1802 Sir Robert Peel (the father of the Prime Minister) had introduced regulations to improve the working conditions for apprentices in cotton mills, but these were generally ignored. Robert Owen managed to convince Peel that the children employed in the textile industry needed protection and that new laws were required.

New regulations were drafted by Robert Owen, raising the age of employment to 10, limiting the working day to 10 hours until the age of 18, providing half-time education until 12 years and introducing a system of factory inspection. Sir Robert Peel persuaded Parliament to set up a committee to enquire into factory conditions, and Robert Owen and many other mill owners were asked to give evidence.

The reforms suggested by Robert Owen were too advanced for his supporters in Parliament. New regulations were introduced in the Factory Act of 1819, but they were restricted to cotton mills. They increased the minimum working age to 9 and working hours were reduced to 12 hours a day, but this only applied to children under 16 and there were no rules for the education of apprentices. It was not until 1833 that a system of factory inspection was introduced to enforce the regulations.

Robert Owen was very disappointed and gave up trying to change the law and decided to appeal directly to public opinion.

A New View of Society

"I had done all I could to enlighten the evils of those whom I employed; yet with all I could do under our most irrational system for creating wealth, forming character, and conducting all human affairs, I could only to a limited extent alleviate the wretchedness of their conditions, while I knew society possessed the ample means to educate, employ, place and govern the population."

Robert Owen's experiments in social reform at New Lanark were extremely successful and attracted a great deal of attention. He published his ideas on educational reform and the influence of social environment on character, in a series of essays which were collected and published as a *New View of Society*. In this major work he outlined his vision of the ideal community - a system run on a co-operative basis involving both factories and agriculture.

At this time Britain had been plunged into severe economic depression following the Napoleonic wars. There was mass unemployment, widespread poverty and hunger riots. In a series of public lectures, in pamphlets and letters to newspapers, Robert Owen proposed the formulation of communities based on New Lanark but run on a co-operative basis as a solution to the employment problem.

At first the new ideas attracted some influential supporters, including the Duke of Kent, but later his attacks on the Church did great damage to his campaign. By many he was seen as a challenger of the established order of society and lost some of the respect he had gained for his pioneering work in factory and educational reform.

After an extensive European tour in 1818, he was asked to prepare a report for the County of Lanark on his ideas for model communities as a solution for unemployment. This report, submitted in 1820, aroused considerable interest, and an influential committee was formed to consider his plans. Eventually it was suggested that funds should be raised for an experimental community, although the committee did not support his plans for widespread social reform.

New Harmony

" I left this country in 1824 to go to the United States to sow the seeds in that new fertile soil - new for material and mental growth - the cradle of the future liberty of the human race."

As the years passed Robert Owen grew more disillusioned as his plans for model communities failed to make any progress. Even in New Lanark, an outstanding success in social reform, he was encountering problems with his partners over his liberal views on religion and education.

In 1824 Robert Owen heard that a settlement called Harmony in Indiana in the United States was for sale. That winter he sailed for America to inspect the estate believing that the New World might provide the right environment for establishing an experimental co-operative community. Harmony proved ideally suited to his needs, with agricultural land, small industries and community buildings and the estate was purchased for one hundred and twenty five thousand dollars.

Owen's ideas for social reform and co-operative communities had been well received in America, and shortly after his arrival he was invited to speak to Congress. He travelled widely, publicising his scheme and inviting people to join his New Harmony community.

Meanwhile, the settlement was left in the care of his son, William. Settlers flocked to New Harmony, but most were unsuited to community life and very few had the necessary skills to farm the land or run small industries. As the settlement became overcrowded the chaos developed, William had to write to his father urging him to send no more settlers.

Eventually, order was restored and the community became organised using a system based entirely on co-operation. This state of affairs did not last long, and without continuous guidance from Robert Owen, a feeling of dissatisfaction grew in the community. This resulted in the community splitting into independent but co-operative groups. Some of these still used an entirely co-operative system, but others confined their co-operation to religion, education, recreation and work in the natural sciences, which was encouraged by Owen's partner in the venture, William Maclure, a Scottish philanthropist from Philadelphia.

By 1828 it was clear that Robert Owen's New Harmony model co-operative community experiment had failed. In June that year he handed over the estate to his sons and returned to Britain.

New Harmony and the Owen Family

The links between Owen and New Harmony did not cease when the experiment was wound up. Five of his children became US citizens and either lived in New Harmony or retained a strong link with the settlement. They were all committed to their father's ideas on education and social improvement. They were also influenced by Owen's partner, William Maclure (1763-1840) "the father of American geology".

New Harmony became a centre of excellence for education and the natural sciences. David Dale Owen (1809-1860) became a noted scientist and was appointed a United States geologist. Congress published his geological surveys of the North West. His brother Richard (1810-1890) continued his work and was a noted geologist in his own right. He held a number of academic posts, including the professorship at Nashville University. He is, however, best remembered as a compassionate colonel in the Civil War. He had charge of 4000 confederate prisoners who so respected him that a statue was later erected in his honour.

The education experiment was continued, not least by Jane Owen, who came to New Harmony in the 1830s after the sad death of her mother and two sisters. She had always been a great supporter of her father and the Museum has a scrapbook of cuttings about her father from the British press. She opened a kindergarten like the one her father had set up in New Lanark. Joseph Neef, the famous educator, spent time in New Harmony and two of his daughters married David Dale Owen and Richard Owen.

Robert Dale Owen (1801-1877) became famous in his own right. He continued to propound his father's socialist and radical doctrines. But he is most famous for his career in American politics. As congressman for Indiana, in the US House of Representatives (1843-1847) he drafted the bill for the founding of the Smithsonian Institute. Later he drafted an open letter to Abraham Lincoln (September 7th 1862) in which he argued for the immediate cessation of slavery. A few days later Lincoln read the Emancipation Proclamation. (Abraham Lincoln had fond memories of Indiana from his youth. He said he had seen boats going up the Wabash to New Harmony and asked his father to let him go too. Sadly his father declined.)

In the 20th century two people have done much to make New Harmony a new utopia. Richard's great grandson Kenneth Dale Owen, met and married Jane Blaffer, while working as a geologist for Humble Oil (now Exxon Mobil). Like Robert Owen, Kenneth's wife, Jane, was an heiress. Jane was a woman of great education and vision in her own right. They married in 1941 and had their honeymoon in New Harmony. Jane fell in love with the town and this "magical place" was soon transformed by a trust set up in her father's name, Robert Lee Blaffer. Parks, sculptures, art works, beautifully laid out gardens and a hotel bring visitors to the town from all parts of the globe. Kenneth died in 2002 aged 98 and in June 2010 Jane died, aged 95. Their happy marriage had left a wonderful legacy in New Harmony. And for those privileged to meet her she remained a committed Robert Owen fan right to the end.

The Grand National Consolidated Trades Union

"National arrangements shall be formed to include all the working classes in the great organisation."

Robert Owen had returned home a poor man, having sold his shares in New Lanark to finance New Harmony, but his faith in the co-operative ideal remained strong. Moreover, he discovered that his ideas which had been ignored by the upper and middle classes were spreading amongst the workers through the new trade unions.

At this time, in the early 1830's, the trade union movement was growing and a number of co-operative societies had opened shops and workshops. In 1832 Robert Owen started his own newspaper, "The Crisis", but he was gradually drawn into the co-operative and labour movement. He opened the National Equitable Labour Exchange in London for the exchange of goods between co-operative societies and issued Labour Notes valued in hours in exchange for merchandise.

The new unions were growing rapidly and fighting for shorter hours, the end of child labour, co-operative action and labour exchanges, reforms which Robert Owen had been

campaigning for over the last 20 years. In 1832 he proposed that the unions should unite and in 1834 the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union was formed. Within a week it had over half a million members and the government were alarmed by this new mass labour movement. The government reacted by arresting six agricultural workers from Tolpuddle in Dorset, who were members of the new union, under the Illegal Oaths Act, and sentenced them to seven years transportation.

Robert Owen led a protest of 30,000 union members, but the Home Office refused their petition. The union was slowly financially weakened by strikes and lock-outs by the employers and while Robert Owen called for co-operation between the employers and the union, the employees believed in fighting for their rights. In August 1834 the union collapsed dragging down hundreds of small co-operative shops and Owen's newspaper and labour exchange. This marked the end of the popular mass labour movement which had grown around Robert Owen.

However, the idea of the co-operative movement did not die completely, for in 1844 the Rochdale Pioneers started a co-operative venture in Lancashire which eventually grew into the modern Co-operative Movement

Religious Controversy

There is "an eternal, uncaused Existence, omnipresent and possessing attributes whereby the world is governed, but no man has yet been able to comprehend God."

In 1835, although Robert Owen was sixty-four he remained both energetic and hard working. His wife had died ,in 1831 and he now lived a simple frugal life on a small annuity from his sons, devoting his time to the promotion of his New View of Society.

The period 1835 to 1845 saw the rise of the "Owenites" and the development of "Rational Religion", a sectarian organisation for the promotion of Robert Owen's ideals, which held services in "Halls of Science" throughout the country. In 1839 the Owenites, supported by Owen himself, set up an experimental community at Queenswood in Hampshire. This co-operative community also failed because of its lavish scale.

Since his youth Robert Owen had opposed orthodox religion and his critical pamphlets incurred violent opposition from the Established Church. In his later years he continued to criticise the Church and a fierce battle developed between the bishops and strict Anglicans, and Owen and his followers , known as socialists. The government reluctantly agreed to hold an enquiry and as a result a few socialists were prosecuted for blasphemy. Some of the

socialists, although not Owen himself, were violent in their counter-attacks and both sides were responsible for causing bad feeling, which was to persist for a number of years. Meanwhile, Robert Owen continued to lecture and write, publishing the *New Moral World* in 1837.

The Last Years

"I will lay my bones whence I derived them."

By 1845, Robert Owen was an old man, although he remained active. He visited the United States and France and continued to write, publishing his autobiography in 1857. Somewhat surprisingly, he turned to spiritualism in his last years.

In 1858, although a very sick man, he insisted on attending the Social Science Congress in Liverpool, but he was unable to complete his speech. Shortly afterwards he travelled to Newtown accompanied by his faithful secretary, Rigby. Robert Owen stayed at the Bear Hotel, and because he was now very ill, his eldest son was summoned from London. Owen asked the Rector to call a meeting which he would address on the reform of the schools. He died peacefully the following morning. Despite protests he was given a Christian burial and laid to rest, according to his wishes, by his parents in St. Mary's old churchyard. The grave became a place of pilgrimage and in 1902 the Co-operative Union erected the handsome railing around the grave.

A bare chronicle of dates and brief biographical details do not do justice to this remarkable man,. His epitaph on the Owen Memorial in Kensal Green Cemetery London reads:

"He organised infants schools. He secured the reduction of the hours of labour for women and children in factories. He was a liberal supporter of the earliest efforts to obtain national education. He laboured to promote international arbitration. He was one of the foremost Britons who taught men to aspire to a higher social state by reconciling the interests of capital and labour. He spent his life and a large fortune in seeking to improve his fellowmen by giving them education, self-reliance, and moral worth. His life was sanctified by human affection and lofty effort".

Owen and the Co-op

Robert Owen is known around the world and the Robert Owen Museum is dedicated to making known the continuing impact of his ideas today. The Co-operative Society been committed, through the years, to maintaining the memory of Owen in Newtown, giving grants to keep the museum going. Over time, these grants have reduced in size, so the Museum is reliant on public donations and grants from other local bodies such as The Davies Trust and the Mid Counties Co-op group.

Robert Owen's vision was of a co-operative world and it has been mistakenly assumed that the early shops were not central to his ideas. His friend, William Lovett in his autobiography, indicates that this simplifies the truth:

"On returning from America he looked somewhat coolly at these 'trading associations' But when a great number amongst them were disposed to entertain many of his views, he took them more into favour, and ultimately took an active part amongst them."

Toad Lane, Rochdale was founded by Owenites and their aims were far more substantial than setting up co-op shops. The rules of the Rochdale Pioneers could have been drafted by Owen himself and included the ambition "...to arrange the powers of production, distribution, education and government... to establish a self-supporting home colony of united interests."

The respect and affection for Robert Owen from these Owenites and co-operators lasted long after his death. In 1858 Robert Owen's body was interred near his parents in the parish church. G H Holyoake and other co-operators, concerned that this modest grave was an inadequate memorial to the great man, arranged for a beautiful memorial to be erected. In 1902 it was opened on behalf of the Co-operative Society, by Holyoake and his funeral oration on the Co-op Archive website is a generous and loving account of Owen's life and work.

The building now occupied by the Museum has this plaque outside:

"THIS PART OF THE BUILDING WAS ERECTED BY THE CO-OPERATIVE UNION ACTING ON BEHALF OF THE CO-OPERATORS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM TO THE MEMORY OF ROBERT OWEN, FOUNDER OF CO-OPERATION."

The ground floor was formerly occupied by the lending library until the museum moved here in 1983 - a very appropriate home.