

# CHANGING PLACES

QUARRY BANK, CHESHIRE

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TEXT BY STEVEN BODE

It is often said that the histories of Britain and India are interwoven. And in the case of the shared and sometimes tangled history of cotton trade and cotton manufacture this is literally and materially so. This way and that way; that way and this way: cotton goods went back and forth between here and the subcontinent like threads across a loom. At first, the movement was all in one direction: Britain was a significant importer of the light cotton fabrics that India had been producing for centuries and which, in the halcyon years of the Mughal empire, were among the most widely coveted and purchased commodities in the world. When a new wave of cheap calico cloth was introduced from India in the seventeenth century, demand was so high that it also unleashed a violent ripple of protest, as British wool merchants and weavers took to the streets, fearing for their livelihood.

Once people in Britain discovered how to mechanise and accelerate cotton textile production, the pattern was reversed. The mill towns and garment factories of England, with their epicentre in the North West of the country, began churning out huge volumes of high-grade, low-cost product which itself became renowned and exported across the globe. With India in its Viceroy grip, economically and militarily, it was no surprise that Britain imposed highly preferential trade terms that allowed it to flood its cotton goods onto the Indian market, thereby decimating the local industry. It is a familiar tale of Empire and its dominions: a stitch-up on one side causes feelings to fray and conditions to unravel on the other. (No wonder that the spinning wheel was such a symbolic emblem of protest for Gandhi. Or that another 'spinning wheel', the Ashoka Chakra or Dharmachakra, became an iconic feature of the flag of independent India; alluding, perhaps, to a time-worn appreciation of how easily fortunes can turn around).

One of the mainstays of Britain's new ascendancy in cotton was established along the banks of the fast-flowing River Bollin near the village of Styal in Cheshire.



Quarry Bank Mill

Quarry Bank Mill prided itself on the quality and quantity of its output, but also on its superior workplace environment, which combined integration of the latest technology with what for the time was an exceptionally enlightened consideration for the well-being of its workforce. Owner and founder, Samuel Greg, had recoiled from the harsh, exploitative regimes of the factories of Manchester and, however paternalistic in intention, Greg and his son, Robert, who later took over the business, went out of their way to provide decent accommodation and amenities for the mill workers and their families. Like Robert Owen's New Lanark, Quarry Bank aspired to the status of a model village, with the benefits of clean air, vegetable gardens, and regular worship in the on-site chapel. It was a noisy, hazardous and exhausting place to work, but it was a far better alternative to many others.

This loyal, diligent and productive workforce contributed hugely to the mill's success and may have counted towards its relative longevity. Booming through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British cotton's days were numbered after the Second World War, and Quarry Bank was one of the last of the big mills to close, finally winding down its waterwheels and

its cacophonous regiment of spinning and weaving machinery in 1959. The place lay silent for several decades, and passed fully into the ownership of the National Trust in 1986. The mill buildings and the surrounding gardens and outhouses have been lovingly restored and impeccably maintained. An historic time capsule of a self-contained industrial community, the site also offers working demonstrations of the industrial technology that powered it. As its multiple contraptions are cranked into action, and the click-clack sounds of their different rhythms interweave and interlock, the mill is a far cry from the haven of peace and tranquillity offered by many National Trust attractions, but instead provides a resounding reminder of a pivotal moment from Britain's past.

Quarry Bank's recent history (once semi-derelict, now restored) adds further pathos to the film *Residue* by Desire Machine Collective that is one of the first things all visitors see upon entering the mill. Slow, lingering shots of the rusting, mouldering surfaces of a former power station in Northern India anatomise a remnant of industrial infrastructure that has had a very different fate from Quarry Bank. Elsewhere in this first gallery, two other videos, which, like *Residue*, have been seen earlier on the *Changing Places* tour, bring extra nuance to the Quarry Bank story – in the same way that the Quarry Bank narrative draws out deeper elements in them. Omar Chowdhury's *Locus, Temple* illuminates the 'world-within-a-world' of a highly ordered religious



Above: *Locus, Temple*, Omar Chowdhury, installed at Quarry Bank

community, whereas Yasmin Jahan Nupur's *Away from Home* captures the state of forced exile and cramped co-existence that migrant workers from so-called non-developed countries (in this case Bangladesh) often have to endure when gaining employment abroad. Side by side, the two works comment on the Greg family's aspirations to build their own kind of model community at Quarry Bank, in contrast to the awful conditions of labour that predominated elsewhere. The videos are thoughtfully interwoven (that word again) with artefacts and anecdotes from the Quarry Bank archive that deftly press the point home.



*Residue*, Desire Machine Collective, installed at Quarry Bank  
Photo: Michael Pollard



Stills from *Machine*, Ravi Agarwal

The final video, *Machine*, by Ravi Agarwal resonated all the more strongly for me after I had left the gallery space and wandered outside to where the small river that passes through the Quarry Bank grounds feeds the giant waterwheels that power the machinery inside the mill. *Machine* lifts the lid on the plastic bottle industry, another highly automated production line, with an end-product that, like the recent arc of textile manufacture, favours lightness, emphasises portability, makes a virtue of disposability. Except that it is never really disposable. It is a bitter irony that so much water goes into the manufacture of plastic: a material that, in bottle form, ferries water around – as if protecting it, purifying it, sanctifying it – but is actually its polar opposite; even, in ecological terms, its nemesis. Irresistible life force (as Indian cosmology might have it) meets non-biodegradable object. An existential face-off that is a salutary parable for our times.



The piece resonated even further when I read one of the many text panels scattered around the mill building, which explained the derivation of the much-used phrase 'carrying the can'. Apparently it originates from the unwanted job (often given to children or apprentices) of lugging the large quantities of processed cotton that materialised at the end of the production line. As Agarwal's video suggests, at a moment when the oceans are becoming clogged with plastic, even as they are rising through the effects of CO<sub>2</sub>, every time we carry a plastic bottle of water with us, we are obliging someone, further down the line in the future, to carry the can for the environmental consequences it will bring. People's onward fate, it seems, is, like people's histories, inextricably interwoven.

Find out more at [fvu.co.uk](http://fvu.co.uk)

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