

Farfield Mill, Sedbergh

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Photos by Ruth and Keith Andrews

The restoration of Farfield Mill is another successful venture, but this time largely undertaken as a community project by an army of determined volunteers. Its restoration is the subject of an extremely well-written and inspiring book written by Maureen Lamb and published in 2008 entitled *The Story of Farfield Mill Restoration*.



The first mill at Farfield was built by Joseph Dover in 1837 for wool spinning and weaving. It is not of itself much different from the hundreds of similar mills which have not had such a determined band of saviours. Before 1937 the mill was run by the Dover family, but it was then sold.

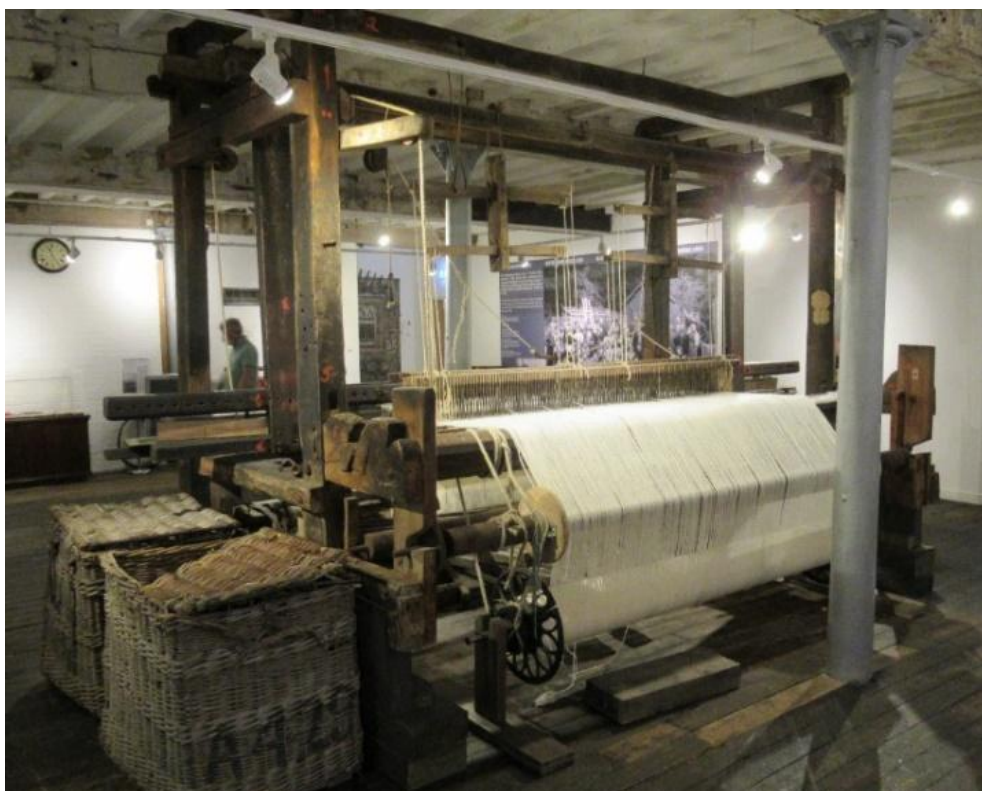
Spinning gradually declined, although it was also used for storing wool and making cheese, as well as making aircraft parts in the second world war. Between the 1960s and 1980s it had a revival when David Douglas started weaving again under the name Pennine Tweeds. He trained Bryan Hinton to use the remaining Dobcross looms, and he subsequently took over the business, but the end came in 1992 when he gave it up. Soon after, a local resident visited the mill to find Bryan about to dismantle the loom for sale as scrap. A public meeting followed to see if the mill could be saved, and the Sedbergh & District Buildings Preservation Trust was formed.

Sedbergh in Cumbria is the largest settlement within Yorkshire Dales National Park but it is not a tourist destination and its Dales Tourist Information Centre had recorded fewer visitors than any other before it closed in 2004. So the restoration of the mill was an attempt to attract visitors and improve the fortunes of the whole town. The project started in 1994 and the building was bought in 2000. It opened to the public in 2001 as an arts, craft, and heritage centre. That was the year of the foot and mouth crisis; the local breed of sheep, Kendal Rough Fell, were felt to be in danger of extinction so the mill helped by buying about 1000 fleeces. They set up a trust to provide post-graduate weaver-designers with studios and the equipment to weave a traditional heavy cloth called 'ingrain', which it was hoped would become a high value niche product.

When we visited the mill post-Covid-19 it was just beginning to recover from a forced period of stagnation. The popular and successful café had not yet got back to its full capacity and the entrance fee for the mill was not being charged, but the shop was once again in operation, and selling products made in the mill.



A separate dustproof room houses the two automatic working looms, one the 1936 Dobcross loom (*above*) made by Hutchinson & Hollingworth of Diggle, Saddleworth, the other an AC2 Somet loom from Italy bought in 2016 from a mill in the Scottish Borders, to work alongside the Dobcross loom to speed up production. Also on display is a Witney blanket loom (*below*). Standing over 9ft high, it is a timber framed 4 heddle hand loom dating from 1702; a flying shuttle was added around 1800, so it is an important survival.



Around the mill, there are several different types of hand-operated modern looms (*right*) in use in the studios.

In addition to the textile studios, there are workshops which accommodate various other design and craft artists, whose products are on sale in the mill and the town.



Finally I should mention the Vortex turbine (*left*) with a fall of 21ft, a suction of 14ft, and a rated power of 20hp (15Kw), supplied by Gilkes of Kendal in 1896, which occupies the original wheelpit.

The whole mill is built on a sloping site, so the front, seen in the first picture, and the back (*below*) look very different. The lower picture is an unrestored warehouse on the site, which is awaiting reuse.



I didn't realise quite what a remarkable community effort had been involved in the revival of the mill until I read Maureen's inspiring account of the hopes and setbacks involved. It is a huge contrast to the way that Gayle mill was funded and restored, and it relies heavily on the mill earning its keep as a working space, rather than just a museum.

Information from
www.farieldmill.org
and Maureen Lamb's book.

