Lumsdale Valley Mills

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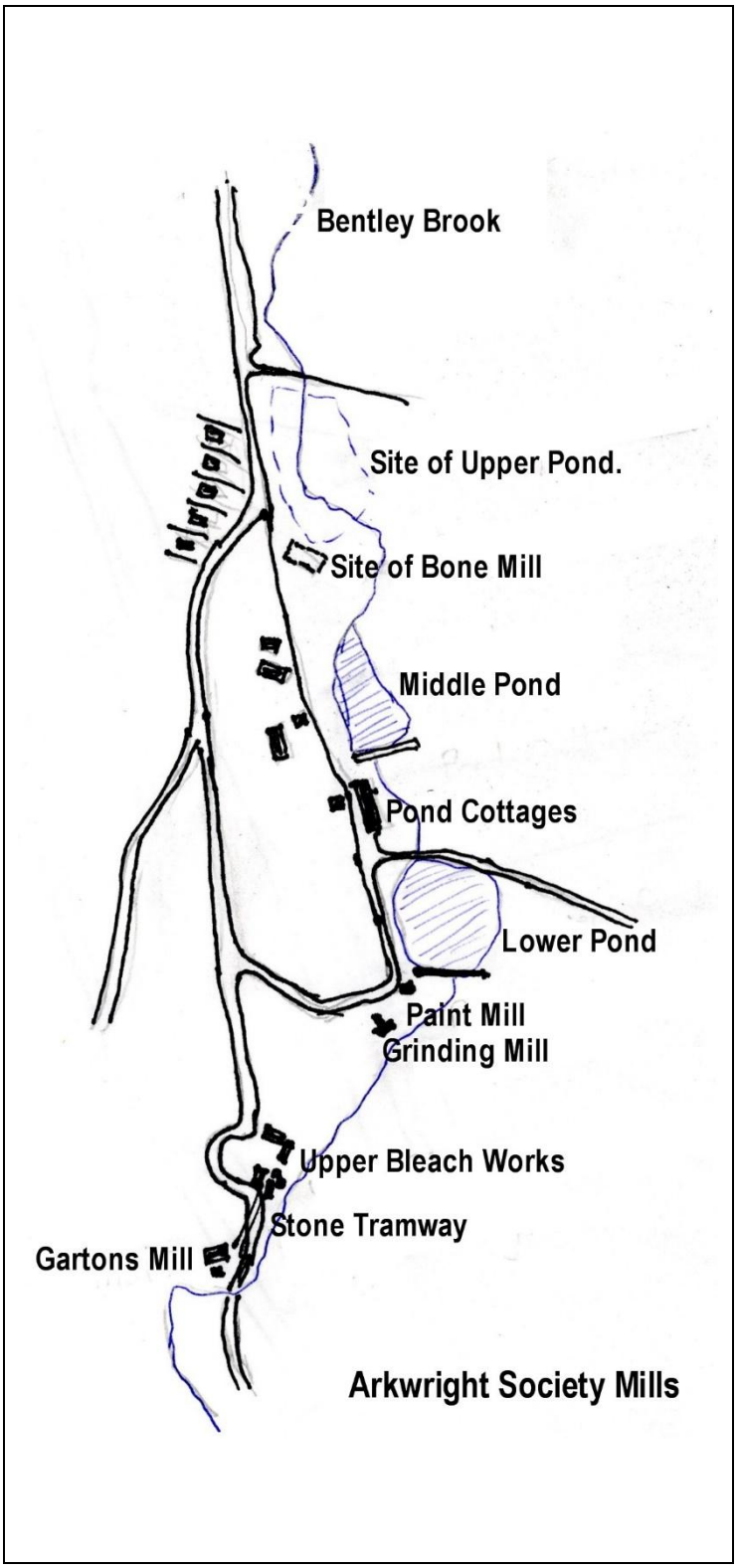
Photos by Keith and Ruth Andrews, taken in 2017 and 2020

I have had some information for this article since Keith and I visited it in 2017, but I have only just found out enough to write about the whole area. Lumsdale is a fascinating example of how a fairly insignificant stream tumbling down a rocky valley near Matlock became arguably one of the 'best' water-powered industrial sites in England.

It provided power for a sawmill, corn milling, fulling, lead smelting, bone grinding, grinding minerals for paints, cotton spinning, and most recently bleaching, through a complicated series of watercourses, leats, culverts, and so on which used water from **Bentley Brook**.

The mills and ponds in the **Lumsdale Valley** are in a listed conservation area. The Arkwright Society owns the upper part of the valley and the site was scheduled as an ancient monument by Historic England in 2014. The upper part is only accessible on foot and seems to mostly attract photographers drawn to the wild waterfalls and tumbled vegetation-covered ruins. Bentley Brook, the power source for all the mills, rises on Matlock Moor and has never been known to dry up.

Starting at the top of the site, a water-powered lead smelter may have been in operation as early as the 16th century. When the lead industry declined this oldest building became a **bone mill**, used to grind bones for use in making pottery and fertilisers; its site is now lost in the undergrowth, along with that of the 1780s **upper pond**, whose dam collapsed in 1947. This pond was built to provide power for an early cotton-spinning mill (Gartons Mill) lower down the valley.



A short distance downhill is the **middle pond** *(right)* which was also constructed in the 1780s to provide power for Gartons Mill. It had become completely silted up and was restored by the Arkwright Society in 2014 with a grant from the HLF.

Below its weir, **Pond Cottages** *(below left)* occupy the site of two lead smelting cupolas built in 1749. Buildings on the opposite side of the lane were a **counting house** *(below right)* and ore house. Lead smelting finished in the 1780s and the buildings were later converted to workers cottages for the mills further down the valley.

Lower Pond was the site of a quarry until the 1850s when it was converted into a reservoir, contained by a **large stone dam** *(below left)* which overlooks the steep and intensively built-on part of the site. Here can be found the **paint mill** *(next page)*, which is one of the earliest structures in the valley, and probably dates from the 1600s when it was also a lead smelting mill. It later became a bleaching mill and finally a mill grinding barytes for the paint industry. There is a single **French burr stone** *(next page)* lying abandoned outside the ruined walls and a beautifully carved **circular stone trough** *(below right)* for bleaching hanks of yarn.

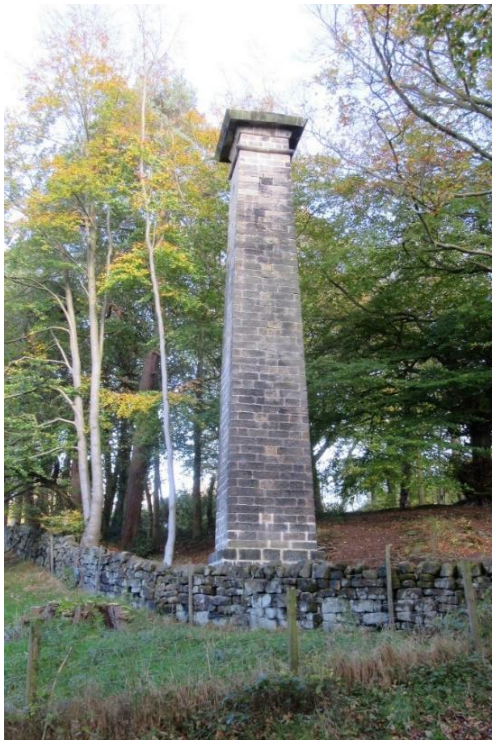
It is hard to separate the ruins of the paint mill from those of the **grinding mill** *(left)*, built into the rock beside a natural waterfall around 1770, probably as a corn mill, but it also ground red lead! It has a spectacular **wheel pit** *(below)* which once housed an immense wheel fed by a cast iron pipe.

Below these rocky ruins the valley becomes steeper before opening out into flatter land in the valley bottom.

As those who have visited the Cromford Mill World Heritage Site may remember, Richard Arkwright helped to trigger the mechanisation of cotton spinning when he invented his famous 'water frame'. He had the foresight to patent it. The patent was due to run out in 1775 so Watts Lowe & Co anticipated this and built a 3-storey cotton-spinning mill, **Gartons Mill,** to take advantage of the newly available technology. It was they who constructed the upper and middle ponds to provide a constant water supply. Two storeys of this first mill have survived and their construction is very much like that of the slightly newer mills lower down the valley.

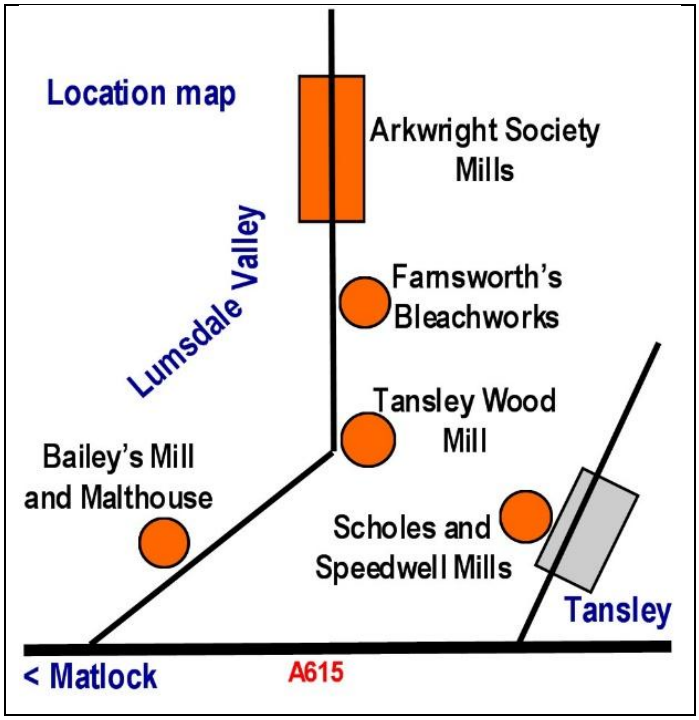
After Watts Lowe & Co went bankrupt in 1813 John Garton bought the land in the valley and converted the spinning mill to a bleach works, which became known as the **Lower Bleach Works** *(right)***.** It was connected to the **Upper Bleach Works** *(below)* by a **stone tramway** which hauled wagons of wet yarn to a drying floor.

Flues led to a large **stone chimney** opposite the lower pond. This part of the site is not currently accessible, and as you can see from the photo of Upper Bleach Works it is not in a safe condition



Further down the valley and outside the ancient monument site *(see sketch map on next page)* is **Farnsworth's Bleachworks** *(right)***,** established in 1792. The walls of the standing buildings and retaining walls which line the lane date from the 1900s. The main building, with its gable frontage and central oculus (round window) was a bleaching croft.

The next mill down the valley is **Tansley Wood Mill** *(see below).* The oldest buildings date from 1783, and were used for spinning candlewick yarn from flax waste. The mill was enlarged in 1794 and the early 19th century, when the square-based chimney in the mill yard was added, but the whole site is now derelict. It had an external 7.5m diameter breastshot waterwheel which was replaced by a 10m suspension wheel, and then a turbine, plus steam and gas engines and electricity. It became the most extensive group of buildings in the valley. Permission for conversion to residential use was granted in 2016, and in 2017 it appeared to be being cleared out, but it looked exactly the same in 2020 when we visited it again, right down to the same pile of rubbish in the yard.



This sketch map shows the locations of mills in the lower valley and in Tansley, all of which date from the late 1700s, unlike the much older ruined mills in the upper valley.

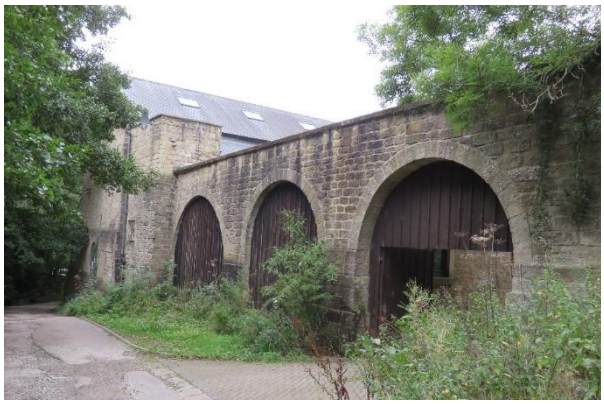
In contrast, **Bailey's Mill**, also known as **Matlock Green Corn Mill** *(below),* has been converted for residential use. Formerly Gartons & E H Bailey Ltd, it was built for Samuel Unwin in 1799. It is also on the Bentley Brook and had a central internal waterwheel. The building was greatly enlarged when a steam engine was added in the late 19th century and roller milling was introduced at about the same time.

It was probably lack of competition and the relative isolation of Bailey's Mill which led to the expansion of the complex in the 18th century to include a **malthouse** *(left).* This grade 2 listed building had holes in its roof when the area was recorded in 2010, and it was deemed to be a building at risk. It had bigger holes in 2017 when we saw it!

Not in the Lumsdale Valley, but still in the conservation area in the nearby village of **Tansley**, are two more mills built by Samuel Unwin in the late 1700s. They are very similar in appearance to the original spinning mill on the Bentley Brook, but both have their own separate ponds.

Scholes Mill *(right)* was built in 1797 as a cotton-spinning mill, but was later used for 'smallware' – the 19th century name given to narrow textiles such as tape and bindings made of a variety of fabrics such as cotton, linen, silk, and wool – rather than for spinning. It was fed by two large ponds and like Bailey's Mill as originally built it had a central internal waterwheel. The building is still in use (so I couldn't get nearer to photograph it) but none of its internal structures are original, and although the brick chimney stack remains the associated steam engine house has been demolished.

Speedwell Mill *(below)* of 1783 was half the size of Scholes Mill, and had a separate pond, an internal waterwheel on one end of the building, and a monumental stone arched aqueduct from the pond.



Information from the display boards provided by the Arkwright Society, Lumsdale Conservation Area Character Appraisal by Derbyshire Dales District Council, Historic England, and other sources.