

# Robert Owen and New Lanark



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# Introduction

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Robert Owen (1771–1858) (see [Figure 1](#)) was one of the most important and controversial figures of his generation. He lived through the ages of Enlightenment and Romanticism and was personally touched by the ideas and dramatic changes that characterised that era. Profiting enormously during the first half of his life from the progress of industry and having the financial means, he later devoted himself to publicising and practising his social and economic ideas. Most of these derived from Enlightenment notions and, he thought, could eliminate poverty and crime, contributing to social and moral betterment.

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# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the Enlightenment ideas that underpinned Robert Owen's social reform agenda
- understand how Owen's background and experience at New Lanark fed through into his thinking in the essays in *A New View of Society*
- understand the main proposals in the essays
- understand New Lanark's role as a model for social reform during this period.

# 1 A New View of Society

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Some of Robert Owen's ideas were confirmed by personal experience as a philanthropic employer who strongly emphasised the importance of environment, education and, ultimately, cooperation in improving social conditions. Owen was closely involved with the factory movement (for the improvement of working conditions), Poor Law reform, public education, economic regeneration in post-Napoleonic War Britain, the relief of distress in Ireland, creating what he called 'communities of equality' in Britain and America, and, after 1830, trade unionism and cooperation. He supported religious toleration. He advocated sexual equality, marriage and divorce law reform, and alluded to birth control as a means of regulating population. He thus gained fame, even notoriety, as a social and educational reformer, and long after his death continued to inspire others, notably through the ideas presented in his most important and famous work, the essays in *A New View of Society*.



**Figure 1:** Mary Ann Knight, *Robert Owen*, c.1799, colour pastel drawing, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh. This first-known likeness catches Owen's vitality around the time he arrived at New Lanark

Mary Ann Knight, *Robert Owen*, c.1799, colour pastel drawing, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh. This image may not be subjected to any form of reproduction including transmission, performance, display, rental, or storage in any retrieval system without the written consent of National Galleries of Scotland.

Mary Ann Knight, *Robert Owen*, c.1799, colour pastel drawing, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh. This image may not be subjected to any form of reproduction including transmission, performance, display, rental, or storage in any retrieval system without the written consent of National Galleries of Scotland.

*A New View of Society* is an important text for three reasons. First, it is a brilliant illustration of the notion that there are general, universally applicable rules or principles that we can discover through proper, empirical, use of reason, and which once identified will lead to progress (economic, social) and greater happiness. Apart from the ideals of social progress through the means of reason, and happiness generated by rational means, the essays highlight other key Enlightenment notions too. These include reference to the view that human nature is universal, the use of reason to dispel error and darkness from the human mind, the attack on superstition, the appeal to 'nature' and the natural environment, the importance of self-knowledge, and the reasoned conditioning of people.

Second, it highlights important aspects of economic progress and political and social change in Britain during and after the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. It shows how enlightened ideas could be applied to reform issues, particularly the major social problems of the period: poverty, poor housing, diet and health, and lack of educational opportunity. Owen's brand of rationality and progress may well have been deployed to his own pragmatic, commercial ends, but there is more emphasis on the happiness of the lower orders than in most Enlightenment texts.

Third, while it shows how Owen's ideas relate to wider currents of thought and the problems of his day, *A New View of Society* also serves to emphasise the point that Enlightenment and Romanticism did not necessarily progress neatly and steadily. Owen clearly held, well into the nineteenth century when Romantic ideas were making strong headway, many enlightened notions from the second half of the eighteenth century. Ideas and intellectual movements invariably overlapped.

Although the essays were all written at slightly different times between 1812 and 1814, they have a coherence arising from the subject matter. In turn they explain Owen's views about character formation, how his theories were applied in the context of New Lanark, the potential for further reform and, finally, the application of these ideas nationally and internationally.

Owen was often portrayed as benevolent and kind, a defender of factory children and a patron of the poor, all of which paint an essentially accurate picture of the man. But he also attracted considerable criticism, being described by his detractors as a knave, a charlatan and a speculative, scheming, mischievous individual. He had enormous wealth, much of it spent on his propaganda campaigns and, it has to be admitted, on self-promotion. Yet he disclaimed any self-interest. He had considerable charisma, which won him large audiences, including apparently many women. His flirtations with royal dukes and cabinet ministers made him enemies, particularly among political reformers, who ought to have been his natural allies. Owen evidently believed, however, that he was being propelled by some supernatural force to change society. Perhaps blinded by the strength of this conviction he was utterly single-minded in advocating his views, which, he felt, held the solution to the problems of his time.

Yet I am sure you will enjoy the modernity of Owen's practical measures, from nursery care to pension funds, even if his 'principles' are not always immediately evident. Although I shall guide you through the extracts in the essays, you might like to read them over now to get a sense of their style and content. You may also like to take a preliminary look at the video *New Lanark: A New Moral World?* (given below in three parts), to which you will be referred later in this course. The essays are provided as links below the video clips.

Click play to view the video (Part 1, 11 minutes)

Video content is not available in this format.

[New Lanark: A New Moral World? - Part 1](#)

Click play to view the video (Part 2, 11 minutes)

Video content is not available in this format.

[New Lanark: A New Moral World? - Part 2](#)

Click play to view the video (Part 3, 10 minutes)

Video content is not available in this format.

[New Lanark: A New Moral World? - Part 3](#)

Click document below to open the First Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

Click document below to open the Second Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

Click document below to open the Third Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

Click document below to open the Fourth Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

Before undertaking a closer reading of the essays, let us look at the economic and political situation at the time they were written and say something about Owen's origins and career, as well as the background to the essays.

## 2 Progress and the economy

### 2.1 The cotton industry

Owen personified one of the key Enlightenment notions of belief in progress. Economic progress, as anticipated by Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), arose partly from industrialisation. Britain was the first country to experience an 'Industrial Revolution', which was at its most dynamic during our period. It gradually transformed production from small-scale, craft-based activity to mass manufacture. While many economic activities were subsequently affected, it was in the textile industry, notably cotton spinning, that the 'factory system' was first shaped. Cotton fabric was then in great demand because of its lightness, the fact that it could be printed with fashionable patterns and it was easily washed. The potential for its mass manufacture was unlocked by a series of innovations in spinning machinery, notably the water-frame and the mule, driven by waterpower or steam-engines in specially designed factories.

Owen, first as a spinning machinery builder and later as a cotton spinner in Manchester, in Cheshire and at New Lanark, was familiar with this equipment on a daily basis. Indeed, his technical expertise undoubtedly contributed to his success as a businessman, and possibly also gave him deeper insights into how a workforce could be deployed to improve efficiency and raise productivity on the factory floor.

A significant link to another part of this course lies in the fact that the raw material at the centre of this revolution was produced by slave labour in the plantations of the West Indies and more extensively in the southern American colonies, by then part of the United States. Most raw cotton was imported from source to the ports of Liverpool and Glasgow, cities with hinterlands where textile skills had long been established in either linen or fustian (a coarse cotton fabric) manufacture. Indeed, by the late 1780s, when Owen, still in his teens, migrated there, Manchester had become the commercial centre of the cotton industry in northern England, while Glasgow performed a similar function for the Scottish Lowlands. The Lowlands, like upland Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire, had copious supplies of waterpower which could be harnessed as the prime mover of early industrialisation, notably on the river Clyde 25 miles south of Glasgow. It was there near the old town of Lanark that New Lanark was built (Donnachie and Hewitt, 1999, pp. 17–34).

### 2.2 David Dale and New Lanark 1785–1800

Although New Lanark was not the first, it became one of the largest and most important cotton mills of its period. It was planned and developed near the Falls of Clyde in 1785 by David Dale (1739–1806) (see [Figure 2](#)), a prominent Glasgow merchant banker, and by Richard Arkwright (1732–92), who in the 1780s was actively promoting his patented water-frame both in Scotland and on the Continent. Arkwright soon abandoned his interest, leaving Dale and his managers to build New Lanark on a site feued (leased) from Lord Braxfield (1722–99), who had an estate nearby. (Incidentally, Braxfield, as Lord Justice Clerk, presided in 1793 at the trials of the leading Scottish Friends of the People, a group that advocated moderate parliamentary reform as a means of preserving the British

constitution, including the Radical lawyer and great Scottish patriot Thomas Muir (1765–99.) The large mills, four in all, were constructed by the river's edge, and water to drive a series of massive wheels was diverted from the Clyde by tunnel and aqueduct. Beyond the mill complex Dale created a model industrial community with a planned village providing housing, school, kirk (or church) and other social facilities for its workers. What all this cost is unknown, but when Owen and his partners bought the place in 1799 they paid £60 000, said to be cheap at the price. So Dale's investment was substantial, making New Lanark one of the largest plants of its kind.

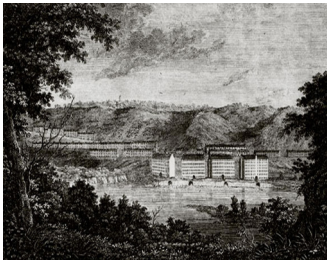


**Figure 2:** James Tassie, *David Dale*, 1791, medallion, Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh. David Dale, merchant-philanthropist, was the founder of New Lanark and

### Owen's future father-in-law

*David Dale*, 1791 by James Tassie, National Portrait Gallery, Scotland. This image may not be subjected to any form of reproduction including transmission, performance, display, rental, or storage in any retrieval system without the written consent of National Galleries of Scotland. Downloading of this image is strictly for private study only.

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**Figure 3:** Robert Scott, *New Lanark*, c.1799, engraving, National Monuments Record of Scotland. This is the earliest representation of New Lanark. It shows, from the west bank of the Clyde, the mills and village as they would have appeared towards the end of the Dale regime.

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#### Exercise 1

Examine [Figure 3](#) above, the earliest representation of New Lanark, then view the introductory section of the video given below. Describe the location and layout of the mills and community.

Click play to view the introduction section of the video (Part 1, 11 minutes)

Video content is not available in this format.

[Introduction - Part 1](#)

Click play to view the introduction section of the video (Part 2, 11 minutes)

Video content is not available in this format.

[Introduction - Part 2](#)

The mills are by the edge of the Clyde at a point where the head of water was at its optimum for driving the machinery. The mill races from four of the wheels can be seen in the engraving. Because of the constricted nature of the site the housing is ranged behind, some stretching uphill to the left and some (the earliest, we think) beyond the mills to the right.

Apart from the costly technical and engineering difficulties involved in such a massive project, assembling a large and suitable labour force (initially perhaps comprising 1000 people) was a difficulty that Dale (and later Owen) shared with many other mill owners. Locals, perhaps understandably, seemed reluctant to seek employment for long hours in a place whose barrack-like appearance resembled a workhouse, and more widely people were said to be 'averse to indoor labour', meaning they did not seem to like the idea of working in 'manufactories', as they were called. Accordingly large families were recruited from other parts of Scotland and, as was the norm, both women and children were employed. In truth a large proportion of the labour force (maybe as much as half) were children, some being orphans apprenticed from the institutions or parishes of Glasgow and Edinburgh. The men worked as tradesmen or overseers, or, if they lacked skills, as labourers. There was also a distinctive and substantial cohort of Gaelic-speaking migrants from the Scottish Highlands, some of whom Dale had rescued from a storm-bound emigrant ship bound for North America, and others he had enticed to New Lanark from localities as far apart as Argyll or Caithness by offers of employment and housing.

By the early 1790s New Lanark, deep in its valley by the Clyde, had a densely packed population of about 2000, half of whom were either children or teenagers, the majority employed in the mills. Apart from assembling and training the labour force, the maintenance of time-discipline in the works and of order in the community must have presented major problems. Although an astute businessman, Dale was also a pious individual, head of a Dissenting Presbyterian sect, and his regime was reported as paternalist. By the standards of the time he and his resident managers provided decent working conditions and seem to have been particularly attentive to the accommodation, clothing, health and diet of the child apprentices (Donnachie and Hewitt, 1999, pp. 40–9). Whoever inherited the community Dale had established would have a sound foundation on which to build, quite apart from the success of the business, by modern values probably a multimillion pound enterprise even before Owen and his Manchester partners assumed management. We shall learn more about the early history of New Lanark and view other features on the video later in the course. But for the moment this brief description of New Lanark highlights some of the major difficulties of industrialisation and the social problems the economic transformation engendered.

## Exercise 2

Review the preceding section and identify some of the key problems that industrialisation seemed to generate.

There were major architectural and engineering problems in building the new factories, but these were soluble with large amounts of capital investment (on which, with good management and luck, substantial returns were possible). Perhaps more acute were the difficulties of assembling, retaining and controlling a large labour force. This often involved in-migration to new localities, over quite long distances and from different linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds (likely to generate tension in the new communities). Housing had to be constructed very quickly. High densities, rudimentary water supply and poor sanitation threatened health and promoted disease. Factory masters were also concerned about preventing immorality, drunkenness and crime among workers.

I would not have expected you to get all of this, or necessarily to put it all in the same order, but you can see that the growth of New Lanark and other factory communities

brought many of the social changes – and problems – that accompanied industrialisation generally. There were already major concerns about a whole host of issues, including population growth, urbanisation, health and disease, crime and policing, children's employment, adult unemployment, poverty and popular education.

Anyone with the answers to these problems was certain to command attention from governments wrestling with the costs of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. These conflicts hit the pockets of the landowners and industrialists through taxation, even though some were profiting handsomely from improved agriculture and the new manufacturing. There were also worries, widespread among the middle and upper classes, about increasing poverty and social unrest. And, as with slavery, many if not all of these issues challenged the enlightened and humane, who believed in social progress.

## 3 Politics: Radicalism and reaction

Although ambiguous in his political views, Robert Owen could hardly avoid politics. As we shall see, he assiduously cultivated politicians or anyone else in authority who might be persuaded to support his plans for social reform.

The political background to Owen's essays is extremely important and complex, but on the international front the key features were undoubtedly the ideas underpinning the French Revolution, and the subsequent French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, which had considerable impact on the domestic politics of the major European powers, including Britain.

### Exercise 3

Consider the major historical events of the period roughly spanning 1795–1815. What key events or movements do you know of on (a) the international front and (b) the domestic scene that might form the political background to Owen's ideas?

You might have been able to pick out the major developments and dates around which the following more detailed responses to (a) and (b) are constructed.

The major items internationally, apart from the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, were the introduction of Napoleon's Continental System (1806) and the War of 1812 with the United States (1812–15). Domestically, the Industrial Revolution proceeded apace, but economic progress was accompanied by widespread social and political protest, the latter partially inspired by Jacobin and French revolutionary ideas.

The fall-out from the French Revolution touched many parts of Europe and sucked all the major powers into long-term conflict lasting, with several short spells of peace, from 1793 to 1815. Britain was involved throughout, with one brief break (of a year) during the peace of Amiens, 1802. The expansionist aims carried the Revolution well beyond the frontiers of France – to the Netherlands, for example – but subsequently, as you have seen, Napoleon as consul and then as emperor set out to conquer much of the Continent. The fight back was led by Britain, Prussia, Austria and Russia, in what became by the 1800s virtually a global war. By the time Owen was writing the First Essay Britain was also drawn into direct conflict with the United States in the War of 1812, which jeopardised the economy, trade and, specifically, the cotton industry as long as it continued. However, as Owen himself demonstrated by judicious management at New Lanark, raw materials could still be obtained from alternative sources, for example in the West Indies, and new markets could be profitably exploited in the Baltic and Russia. Napoleon's earlier Continental blockade (1806–9) did temporarily reduce Britain's exports to Europe, though Owen seems to have maintained his Russian markets. Indeed, Russia's reluctance to enforce the Continental System was one cause of Napoleon's invasion of that country. High demand for military supplies and in the domestic market meant that industry and agriculture generally expanded rapidly during much of the war.

Britain was unusual among the great European powers because it was a constitutional monarchy with representational government in the House of Commons, albeit on a very limited franchise, mainly controlled by landowners. The governments of the time had to face not only the wars but increasing domestic problems. These included the Irish Rising (1798), the activities of Radicals advocating political reform (but rarely revolution on French lines), and waves of industrial unrest provoked by organised

labour, including the Luddites (who, in protest against the mechanisation that was costing them jobs, broke into mills and wrecked machinery), at their most active in 1812–13. Protest was thus partly economic. The economy expanded rapidly during the war, but even before its conclusion there was a decline in trade, creating unemployment and social distress. These in turn exacerbated the growing problem of the poor, whose numbers were rising due to the economic turmoil in countryside and town.

Suppression was the government's first response to protest, and this found expression in the raising of local militia, censorship or gagging of the press, vigorous prosecution of troublemakers, forcing the Radicals and other political associations underground, and establishing an espionage network to monitor all anti-government activities. The government also passed a raft of legislation against organised labour including the Combination Acts (1799, 1800), designed to outlaw trade unions and at the same time prevent the emigration of skilled labour, particularly to the United States. So despite long-term success in the wars and rapid progress in the economy, the authorities faced enormous problems. Worse was to come in the post-war depression, which lasted until 1820.

We shall refer in greater detail to the events and political personalities of 1812, the year Owen started work on the essays, in due course. But for now we turn our attention to Owen's background and early career in order to identify major influences on his ideas.

## 4 The making of a social reformer

### 4.1 Environment and education: Wales 1771–c.1782

Owen had a remarkable career even before he reached New Lanark. His kin and upbringing at Newtown in mid-Wales were highly influential. His parents were shopkeepers and his father was also the postmaster and a churchwarden. So the Owens possessed practical retailing and administrative skills, which they passed on to their offspring, including Robert, a precocious and clever boy. Newtown was located in one of the most profoundly rural parts of southern Britain, yet beginning to be touched by economic change radiating out from Shropshire to the east and Cheshire and Lancashire to the north. Set in the beautiful surroundings of the upper Severn valley, it was a small market town with a woollen industry and other crafts, a role model for a self-contained community of its time. People were highly religious and the Owens were no exception, though they seem to have adhered to Anglicanism rather than embracing Methodism, which had made a big impact (and caused sectarian bitterness) throughout this part of Wales. Newtown was also at something of a linguistic and cultural divide, a bilingual town surrounded by a Welsh-speaking hinterland. Owen was probably bilingual and later deployed his Welsh eloquence to good effect in writing and on public platforms. He evidently made such good progress at school that when he was eight or nine years old the master made him his 'assistant and usher' in return for free education for the rest of his schooling.

Robert seems to have played the role of monitor, created in early nineteenth-century schools modelling themselves on the ideas of educational reformers like the Quaker, Joseph Lancaster (1778–1838), and the Scot, Dr Andrew Bell (1753–1832), later adopted by Owen himself in the schools at New Lanark. This was mass production applied to education, where specially selected senior pupils passed on learning by rote to their juniors, sometimes in large numbers, in what became known in France as 'mutual instruction'. So Robert 'acquired the habit of teaching others what [he] knew' (Owen, 1971, p. 3), and this experience probably gave him early responsibilities for the care, supervision and education of others. He also gained some knowledge of the elementary school curriculum, which he would revisit in his later career.

At the same time his education was carried beyond the schoolroom. 'At this period', he says, 'I was fond of and had a strong passion for reading everything which fell in my way', and his family's position in the community opened up to him the libraries of the learned – the clergyman, doctor and lawyer – 'with permission to take home any volume' that he liked. His reading matter, as a result, included many classics like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe* and accounts of Captain Cook's voyages (Owen, 1971, p. 3).

Robert apparently believed every word in the books to be true, which in the examples of *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Robinson Crusoe* may have proved significant in shaping his views about religion and enterprise. Certainly as an adult he identified closely with the famous shipwrecked hero cast up on his desert island. *Robinson Crusoe*, of course, was more than just a romantic adventure likely to capture young Robert's imagination, for it

was also a highly moral tale, with strong religious, environmental and economic messages. 'We do not read it', the literary scholar Angus Ross has observed,

only in order to escape into an exciting world of danger and triumph. We read it rather in order to follow with meticulous interest and constant self-identification the hero's success in building up, step by step, out of whatever materials came to hand, a physical and moral replica of the world he had left behind him.

(Ross, 1985, p. 7)

New Lanark, the place Owen was later to make internationally famous, became, in a sense, his 'island', much like Crusoe's. There, like his hero, he used what came to hand, both in the physical environment and in an apparently less than efficient labour force. Nor, given Robert's first-hand experience of shopkeeping, were Crusoe's financial and commercial dealings likely to have gone unnoted. Accounts of exploration, like those of Captain Cook, would also prove attractive, but whether or not the actual ideas of the Enlightenment, which underpinned such works, had any impact on his thinking at that age is impossible to determine.

We might just note in passing that Owen, who learned to play the clarinet, enjoyed music and dancing. Both ultimately featured strongly in his social and educational thinking and were given a prominent place in the curriculum at New Lanark and later Owenite communities in Britain and the United States.

## 4.2 Apprenticeship in retailing c.1782–c.1789

Owen's apprenticeship coincided roughly with the initial development of New Lanark. Leaving home when he was ten or eleven years old, by his late teens he had already gained extensive experience in textile retailing. He started work at Stamford apprenticed to James McGuffog, a successful draper. McGuffog, a canny Scot, dealt in fine garments for well-to-do customers, to whom Owen no doubt learned to defer, and possibly also to emulate them when he was older. After completing his apprenticeship Owen moved to London where, thanks to McGuffog's recommendation, he was taken on as an assistant with Flint and Palmer, haberdashers, a large establishment, more like a department store. The clientele, because of their lower class, bought at cut prices for cash only. This was an altogether different environment from the gentility of Stamford and gave Owen experience of working in a large business with a rapid turnover. His next move in 1788 took him to Manchester, where he joined Sattersfield & Co., a firm of silk merchants and drapers catering to the middle class of the rapidly expanding town.

## 4.3 Business and enlightenment: Manchester 1789–99

Manchester's dynamic business environment, particularly that of the new cotton industry, presented many opportunities for enterprise, even to those with modest capital. By 1790 Owen had joined John Jones, probably another Welshman, making spinning machinery. The next logical move was into cotton spinning itself, and very quickly Owen had established a reputation as a manufacturer of fine yarn, selling as far afield as London and Scotland. When in 1792 one of the town's leading merchant capitalists, Peter Drinkwater

(whose career replicated that of Dale), was looking for a new manager for his Bank Top Mill, Owen applied for and got the job. Others in the trade were incredulous when they heard that someone of the age of 21 had been appointed and at the huge salary of £300 per annum, comparable to a middle-class income (Owen, 1971, p. 29).

He may have joined the mercantile elite but Owen had enormous responsibilities: he was taken aback when he saw 500 workers, men, women and children, and all the new machines in Drinkwater's large modern factory. Not only was it one of the first to be driven by steam-power using a Boulton & Watt engine, but also its overall design had taken account of the latest thinking on fire-proofing, ventilation, light and hygiene (see [Figure 4](#)). While Drinkwater was no supporter of political reform he evidently took a paternal interest in the health and morals of his workforce, and this outlook must have influenced Owen, who had to implement his employer's orders. Owen was also to oversee Drinkwater's other mill, a water-powered factory housing Arkwright-type machinery at Northwich in Cheshire. He proved highly successful as a production and personnel manager, with a reputation for efficiency and innovation.

Owen's career in Manchester was further enhanced in 1795 when he left Drinkwater and joined the much larger Chorlton Twist Company. This had several other influential Manchester and London partners, substantial capital and potentially wide connections in the trade.



**Figure 4:** Thomas Slack, Pollard and Kennedy Mills, Ancoats Lane, Manchester, c.1830, Chethams Library, Manchester. This early nineteenth-century engraving shows two large steam-powered cotton mills of the type and scale managed in the 1790s by Owen for Peter Drinkwater and for the Chorlton Twist Company.

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Photo: reproduced by courtesy of Chethams Library, Manchester

#### Exercise 4

Review the account of Owen's career to date. What skills could he highlight on his CV by 1795?

In boyhood he accumulated a good all-round knowledge of the textile retail trade, some basic business skills and, perhaps most important, the necessary social skills to deal with people from a wide range of backgrounds. He subsequently proved highly entrepreneurial in his business dealings, embracing new technology and opportunities first in machine building and then in cotton spinning, in which he excelled. He gained considerable experience in personnel management and industrial relations in a factory environment. He progressed rapidly and although only in his mid-twenties was a partner in one of the leading spinning companies.

## 4.4 Manchester Literary & Philosophical Society and Board of Health

In the meantime Owen joined the town's social and intellectual elite, which like its politics was largely dominated by Dissenters. They were prominent in the Manchester Literary & Philosophical Society which Owen joined in 1793. There he associated with some significant reformers, heard papers on a wide range of intellectual, industrial and social topics, and himself presented papers dealing with such issues, including one on education.

The society was founded in 1781, the co-founders being Thomas Percival, Thomas Barnes and Thomas Henry. These and other leading members, such as John Ferriar, president when Owen joined, and John Dalton, a chemist and physicist, were in their different ways true sons of the Enlightenment. Percival (1740–1804), a physician and reformer, studied medicine at Edinburgh, associating with Scottish Enlightenment figures like David Hume and William Robertson, later completing his studies at Leiden, the Dutch university famed for its medical teaching. Interested in social conditions and public health, he probably first met Owen when inspecting new sanitary arrangements in Drinkwater's factory. Barnes (1747–1810), a distinguished scholar and Unitarian minister at Manchester's Cross Street Chapel, which Owen evidently attended, was also an educational reformer. Henry (1734–1816), an apothecary and chemist, helped pioneer the teaching of science and medicine in Manchester. Although Dalton (1766–1844) achieved greater fame, Ferriar (1761–1815) was the most interesting of the leading figures in the society. A physician at the infirmary, he was also interested in public health and factory conditions. His *Medical Histories and Reflections* (1792–8) clearly linked the spread of disease to social conditions. He was interested in literature and philosophy too, publishing in 1798 a study of the novelist Laurence Sterne (whom Owen had evidently read as a youth). If Owen was to learn more about social reform he could hardly have chosen better company.

The society covered a wide range of subjects: literary, philosophical, scientific, medical and humanitarian. It also took a great interest in the town's staple industry. Indeed, the first paper Owen heard was on 'The nature and culture of Persian cotton', to which he responded at Percival's prompting. Soon after joining in November 1793 he was precocious enough to turn the knowledge he possessed of the town's main industry to good account, reading a paper entitled 'Remarks on the improvement of the cotton trade'. This went well, generating some interesting discussion; Percival was encouraging, and complimented him on his paper.

Owen delivered a second paper on 'The utility of learning' a month after the first. The title of the third, given in March 1795, was 'Thoughts on the connection between universal happiness and practical mechanics', the fourth, read in January 1796, being 'On the origin of opinions, with a view to the improvement of social virtues'. These contributions all had some relevance to his subsequent philosophy and social psychology, especially his emphasis on the influence of environment in shaping character. Unfortunately none of his papers was printed and this may indicate that they were little more than commonplace. However, it seems highly likely that Owen carried some of the more important ideas he was then contemplating into his later work (Donnachie, 2000, pp. 61–2).

He may well have been influenced by other lectures and discussions on public health and on the growing problem of the poor, especially in an urban-industrial context. On 13 December 1793 he heard a paper by James Percival, Dr Percival's son, on 'A philosophic enquiry into the nature and causes of contagion', while on 19 April 1794 Samuel Bardsley, another physician, who later gave evidence in support of Robert Peel the Elder's factory bill (which became the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act 1802, the first to promote better conditions for children employed in factories), spoke on 'Party prejudice, moral and political'. On 1 April 1796 Bardsley addressed himself to 'Cursory observations, moral and political, on the state of the poor and lower classes in society', a subject of great concern to the authorities and one underpinning much of Owen's later views on society.

The reforming instincts of these individuals, including Owen, found expression in another important organisation, the Board of Health, established in 1796. Because of its interests in factory conditions, and in child labour in particular, its influence ranged far beyond Manchester. Anticipating the campaign that ultimately led to Peel's bill, it gathered evidence from masters about the treatment and condition of apprentices in their mills. The Board solicited information on prevailing conditions from far and wide, Dale being one who responded in detail to its questionnaire. It is an interesting speculation that Owen might have learned for the first time about the regime at New Lanark when he scrutinised Dale's replies to questions about the treatment of his apprentices. Moreover, Owen perhaps already knew about the large Scottish mills, including Dale's. He could have read about them in the early volumes of Sir John Sinclair's *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1791–9), a major text of the Scottish Enlightenment, possessed by libraries like that of the Manchester society.

### Exercise 5

Can you suggest what impact on Owen's intellectual development and ideas his participation in the Manchester Literary & Philosophical Society and the Board of Health might have had?

First, he had the opportunity to extend his education through discussion, debate, reading Enlightenment thinkers and associating with other members. Second, his involvement helped formulate his own ideas about education and its role in society. Third, he gained an awareness of wider social issues, such as health and welfare, in and beyond the workplace.

Owen's activities on behalf of the Chorlton Twist Company involved travelling to see customers in Scotland, and it was during one of his visits to Glasgow, probably in 1797 or 1798, that he met Dale and inspected New Lanark for the first time. He was evidently impressed and given his knowledge of the industry could see that with better management it might prove highly profitable. He says that he also recognised its potential

as a test-bed for his social ideas, but this may have been hindsight after the event (Owen, 1971, p. 46).

On subsequent visits he not only met Caroline, Dale's eldest daughter, but discovered that her father was anxious to dispose of some of his assets, including New Lanark. By 1799 Owen had negotiated the sale of the mills to his company on highly favourable terms, installed himself as managing partner, and married Caroline into the bargain. Although previously successful and financially secure Owen, as effective business heir and adviser to the now ailing Dale, was likely to rise still further and prosper greatly. As in Manchester Owen joined the Glasgow elite, identifying himself with social reform and associating with Scottish Enlightenment figures in the university and intellectual society of the city.

## 4.5 Owen at New Lanark 1800–c.1812

At New Lanark Owen quickly initiated changes, some of which he describes in the Second Essay. As in Manchester he placed much emphasis on environmental improvements such as street cleansing, better domestic hygiene, sanitation and water supply. Those designed to enhance efficiency and productivity included new rules and regulations about factory discipline and in 1803–4 installing new machinery. By 1806, and partly on the grounds of cost, he was abandoning the system of pauper apprentices (who had to be housed, clothed and fed) and instead switching to employing families with large numbers of children. At the same time he was also reviewing the merits of hiring children under the age of ten and enhancing the community's social and educational provision. The expense of the higher wages paid to older children and the cost of what they saw as unnecessary welfare caused several of the Manchester partners to withdraw. The partnership was reconstructed in 1810 and allowed Owen to proceed, perhaps more cautiously, with further innovations, possibly starting the buildings which were ultimately to serve as the 'New Institution' and school.

It may have been the expense involved, coupled with Owen's growing public profile, that caused the second group of partners to press for his dismissal as manager in 1812. Owen, as a major shareholder and the only one with the necessary expertise to run the enterprise, was in a strong position. But he also realised that to make further improvements he needed partners sympathetic to reform and had to publicise his ideas more widely. So, in moves designed to promote his own views about how New Lanark should be run, he initiated a propaganda exercise with the mills and community as its focus.

## 4.6 New Lanark and the Falls of Clyde

Let us take a moment to consider another aspect of New Lanark that was potentially of great importance to any propaganda campaign built around it. Big factories employing large numbers of youngsters were still unusual and so objects of curiosity. But New Lanark was unique given its proximity to the Falls of Clyde, the most spectacular waterfalls in Britain. By our period, the falls (see [Figure 5](#)) were celebrated in the works of leading artists and engravers (including Turner – see Plate 1, linked below), and set as they were in the romantic scenery then becoming fashionable were already a major tourist attraction visited by hundreds each year. As the roads were improved, more visitors came, often from Edinburgh or Glasgow, but also persons on tours from England or abroad, stopping off en route from the Lakes to the Trossachs or other more accessible parts of

the southern Highlands. Literary visitors included William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey and many others, who visited both the falls and the village in the course of Scottish tours. The publicity value for the marketing of New Lanark was clearly considerable, as Owen must have realised, and he was to generate an upturn in visitor numbers from hundreds to thousands following the publication of *A New View of Society*.

[Click to open Plate 1](#), J.M.W. Turner, *The Falls of Clyde*, c.1844–6, oil on canvas, 89 × 119.5 cm, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight.



Figure 5 Paul Sandby, *View of Boniton Lin*, 1778, engraving, 13.3 x 18.3 cm. Donnachie-Owen Collection. Bonnington Linn (to use the modern spelling) is the uppermost of the Falls of Clyde. Other notable artists of the falls include Jacob More, Alexander Nasmyth, Francis Nicholson and J.M.W. Turner.

Donnachie-Owen collection

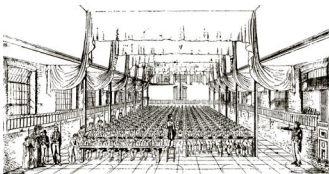
Donnachie-Owen collection

## 5 The background to the essays

### 5.1 The essays in context

Owen's public career effectively began in 1812, when he started to promote his ideas about popular education. He may have been thinking about this for some time. In 1810 he had evidently contacted Lord Liverpool (1770–1828), recently home secretary and by then secretary for war, about a proposed 'Bill for the Formation of Character among the Poor and Working Classes', aimed at establishing a national system of education. This object was a logical extension of Owen's experience among the workers at New Lanark, aligned to the possibilities of mass education under the monitorial system, which figures prominently in *A New View of Society*. Liverpool, understandably, was more concerned with defeating Napoleon than with popular education, and nothing came of the proposal. Owen may have been disappointed, concluding that his thoughts needed further clarification if they were to get anywhere in Parliament. But even in its wording the proposal provided the idea central to the essays on the formation of character (Donnachie, 2000, p. 115).

Another important development was Owen's involvement with Lancaster, whom he invited to visit Scotland in 1812. Lancaster had developed a method of schooling for working-class children based around rote learning and a system of badges and rewards (possibly the model for Owen's 'silent monitor', discussed in [Section 6.4](#), used in the mills at New Lanark). By applying this system large numbers of pupils could be instructed simultaneously, with minimal expense on textbooks, something publishers must have regarded with alarm (see Figures 6a and 6b). Owen, flanked by professors from the university (Enlightenment Scotland having no fewer than four such seats of learning, compared with England's two) and by churchmen, chaired a dinner in Glasgow at which Lancaster explained his system, introducing one of his assistants to help demonstrate its key features. Owen's reply to Lancaster again emphasised the importance of working-class education as a means of social control and improved efficiency.

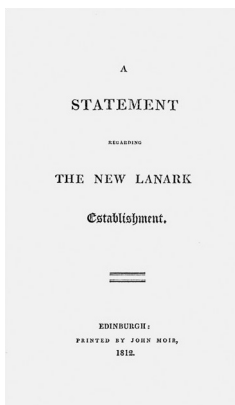


**Figure 6a:** 'The monitorial system in action', Interior of the Central School of the British and Foreign School Society, London, from Paul Monroe, *A Cyclopedia of Education*, New York, Macmillan, 1913.



**Figure 6b:** 'A monitorial school in operation', from Paul Monroe, *A Cyclopedia of Education*, New York, Macmillan, 1913.

Owen's *A Statement Regarding the New Lanark Establishment*, published in 1812, was an important prelude to *A New View of Society* (see [Figure 7](#)). Partly a business prospectus and partly a summary of what he visualised for social provision at New Lanark, it describes his early management of the community. It also articulates his aspirations for the future and gives some indication of the way his thoughts were developing, many of which fed through to the essays. The extract in [Exercise 6](#), below, will give you a flavour of what Owen was advocating for the community at this stage.



**Figure 7:** Frontispiece of *A Statement Regarding the New Lanark Establishment*, 1812, Donnachie-Owen Collection. This pamphlet was written by Owen to attract prospective partners and was a forerunner of his essays on the formation of character.

Donnachie-Owen Collection

Donnachie-Owen Collection

### Exercise 6

Read the following extract from Owen's *Statement*. What, briefly, are his main proposals? What do they suggest about his proposals for social development and plans for communities?

It may be necessary to explain more particularly what I mean by those plans which I had in progress, for the further improvement of the community, and ultimate profit to the concern.

They were intended to *increase* the population, diminish its expense, add to its domestic comforts, and greatly improve its character. Towards effecting these purposes, a building has been erected, which may be termed the '*New Institution*', situated in the centre of the establishment, with an enclosed area before it.

The objects intended to be accomplished by which are, *first*, To obtain for the children, from the age of two to five, a playground, in which they may be easily superintended, and their young minds properly directed, while the time of the parents will be much more usefully occupied, both for themselves and the establishment. This part of the plan arose from observing, that the tempers of children among the lower orders are generally spoiled, and vicious habits strongly formed, previous to the time when they are usually sent to school; and, to create the characters desired, these must be prevented, or as much as possible counteracted.

*Secondly*, To procure a large store-cellar, which was much wanted, and, by this arrangement, has been placed in the most advantageous situation for both the works and village; and it will be found to be of much use to the establishment.

*Thirdly*, A kitchen upon a large scale, in which food may be prepared of a better quality, and at a much lower rate, than individual families can now obtain it.

*Fourthly*, An eating room immediately adjoining the kitchen, one hundred and ten feet by forty within, in which those to whom it may be convenient may take all their regular meals.

*Fifthly*, The eating room, by an immediate removal of the tables to the ceiling, will afford space in which the younger part of the adults of the establishment may dance three nights in a week during winter, one hour each night; and which, under proper regulations, is expected to contribute essentially to their health.

*Sixthly*, Another room, the whole length of the building, being 140 feet long, 40 wide, and 20 high, which is to be the general education-room and church for the village, and those who attend the works.

*Seventhly*, This room was intended to be arranged, not only in the most convenient manner for the several branches of useful education enumerated, but also to serve for a lecture-room and church. The lectures were to be given in winter three nights in the week, alternately with dancing, and to be familiar discourses to instruct the population in their domestic economy, particularly in the methods they should adopt in training up their children, and forming their habits from their earliest infancy, in which, at present, they are deplorably ignorant.

And *lastly*, The plan also included the improvement of the road from the works and village to the old town of Lanark, which is now almost impassable for young children in winter, and in such a state as to prevent in a great measure the population of the latter from being available for the manufacturing purposes of the former, and from deriving any benefit from its institutions, which are calculated to educate the whole of the children in the

neighbourhood, as well as the works are to give them employment afterwards.

Beneficial as these arrangements, connecting with the *New Institution*, must be to the individuals employed at the works, they will be at least equally advantageous, in a pecuniary view, to the proprietors of the establishment; for the whole expense of these combined operations will not exceed six thousand pounds, three thousand of which have been already expended; and, so far as my former experience enables me to judge of the consequences to arise from them, they cannot save less to the establishment than as many thousand pounds per annum, but probably much more.

(Owen, 1973, pp. 10–16)

Owen says he wants to increase the population, reduce expense, enhance domestic arrangements and improve character. This will be done by developing the facilities of the 'New Institution', building a village store, establishing communal cooking and dining facilities, providing a dance hall, school and lecture rooms (doubling as a church), and improving communications with the neighbourhood. On a point of information, quite fascinating really, the 'immediate removal of the tables to the ceiling' was to be accomplished by means of hoists. This method of saving space was actually used elsewhere and it can be observed in the schoolroom scene (see Plate 2, linked below) where the 'visual aids' have been lifted off the floor.

[Click to open Plate 2](#), G. Hunt, Dancing Class, The Institute, New Lanark, c.1820, coloured engraving, New Lanark Conservation Trust.

These proposals suggest that as early as 1812 Owen was already thinking in terms of social improvement driven by education and training. The communal arrangements for the supply of provisions and for cooking, dining and leisure activities are extremely interesting and might well have had wider application. There is also a hint of this in the penultimate paragraph, where Owen suggests these benefits will, in any case, be extended to the wider community beyond the confines of New Lanark.

We have no idea how many copies of the *Statement* he circulated, apart from those that ended up in the hands of potential partners. Possibly the work found its way into political circles, where anyone reading it would have been impressed by the idea that New Lanark under Owen's management

might be a model and example to the manufacturing community, which without some essential change in the formation of their characters, threatened, and now still more threatens, to revolutionise and ruin the empire.

(Owen, 1973, p. 4)

The idea that the character of the labouring class could be suitably moulded by these modest proposals, including whatever educational provision was required to make it more efficient (and thereby boost profits), was likely to have had considerable appeal in the increasingly volatile atmosphere of the time. As we have seen, political Radicalism in all its various forms was an anathema to the government, and the Luddites represented a direct physical threat to mill masters – or, worse, perhaps to the government itself. Riot and disorder threatened everywhere, but had not apparently reached the gates of New

Lanark, another strong selling point. Equipped with copies of his statement Owen set out for London, hoping to put together a new partnership and secure control of the mills.

## 5.2 Owen in London 1812–14

Owen's visits to London, where he worked on the essays, coincided with the vital closing years of the Napoleonic Wars. He arrived in the metropolis to find it seething with news of momentous events on the Continent, especially Wellington's victories in the Peninsula and Napoleon's retreat from Moscow, of the course of the war in the United States, and, closer to home, of a series of political crises made more acute by the growing unrest in the country. While the international situation remained perilous and world events were to exercise a growing influence on Owen's later life, it was the prevailing politics and the personalities with whom he now associated which affected his reception.

As well as corresponding with ministers, Owen's activities in Manchester and Glasgow, and his successful management of New Lanark, meant that his ideas about social reform had almost certainly reached the government of Lord Liverpool. Liverpool by then headed a Tory administration, appointed by the Prince Regent following the assassination of the previous prime minister, Spencer Perceval, in May 1812. Liverpool, who had been present at the fall of the Bastille, was no great enthusiast for parliamentary reform. The essentially reactionary regime that prevailed during the first eight years of his government was to be counterbalanced by Liverpool's pragmatic approach to politics and the economy. Although the landed class still dominated Parliament, commercial and manufacturing interests were becoming increasingly important as industrialisation gained momentum.

Apart from Liverpool, Owen knew other members of the government, notably Viscount Sidmouth (1757–1844), the home secretary; Nicholas Vansittart (1766–1851), chancellor of the exchequer; and Robert Stewart, later Viscount Castlereagh (1769–1822), foreign secretary. Sidmouth, previously prime minister 1801–4, was charged with maintaining public order. Although much of the legislation under which he operated had been in place since the 1790s, he himself became identified with implementing further repressive measures. These included censorship of the press and pamphleteering, laws against meetings and demonstrations, and ultimately a raft of repressive legislation known as the 'Six Acts'. This legislation, designed, among other objects, to prevent assembly that might lead to riot, was passed in 1819 following Peterloo (a Radical demonstration at St Peter's Field, Manchester, brutally attacked by militia after the Riot Act had been read), the bloodiest popular disturbance of the Regency. Vansittart was concerned about the economic impact of the war, increasing unemployment and the costs of the poor. Like Sidmouth, he was prepared to give tacit support to Owen's ideas. Owen came to know Castlereagh during his propaganda campaigns and was possibly assisted by him when he presented memorials on social reform to delegates at the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) in 1818.

After the publication of the essays and his later plan for communities, many other prominent figures in politics, the churches and reforming circles were also willing to give Owen's views a hearing, though whether or not this was a commitment to action seemed to be one of the questions Owen consistently refused to address.

## 5.3 Further enlightened influences: Godwin, Place and Mill

What transpired during the first of many visits to London helps to explain the background to Owen's writing of the essays and shows how he set the concept of character formation into a larger frame, drawing extensively on the ideas and help of others. Ostensibly seeking new partners, he naturally sought out those likely to be sympathetic and rich enough to invest in New Lanark when it came on the market. Quite whom he contacted initially we do not know, but Lancaster and his rich Quaker supporters were prominent. At a dinner given for him in January 1813 by Daniel Stuart, a newspaper proprietor, Owen met William Godwin, the famous social philosopher and author of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, which had been published in 1793. Godwin's work was a skilful summary of ideas generated during the Enlightenment and argued for a new social order stressing justice, freedom and equality for the individual. Education, private and public, figured prominently in Godwin's thinking, as did character formation and happiness. As Owen worked on the Second, Third and Fourth Essays, he was frequently at Godwin's house for breakfast, tea or dinner. Between January and May Owen met Godwin at least twice a week. Godwin later recorded that on one occasion he converted Owen from 'self-love' to 'benevolence', although the next time they met Owen claimed that he had been too hasty in altering his opinion. However, Owen's attempt to derive benevolence from a desire for happiness was not very different from Godwin's. Of course this does not prove that Owen's work owed much to Godwin's, but it probably exercised a great deal of influence, especially when allied to the ideas Owen himself had gleaned from his reading, through his association with enlightened thinkers in Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh, and from discussions with visiting reformers at New Lanark.

Owen was to list Godwin among his main literary companions, and some of the early socialist writers described the philosopher as his master. He certainly never acknowledged a direct debt to *Political Justice*, perhaps because he never properly read it. Yet many of the fundamental ideas and sometimes the actual phrasing of Owen's works resemble the doctrines of *Political Justice*. Like Godwin, Owen constructed his theory of progress on the Enlightenment premises that characters are formed by their circumstances, that vice is ignorance and that truth will ultimately prevail over error. Both individuals equated happiness with knowledge and spoke in the language of utility (meaning the capacity to satisfy human wants). Other features in common were the moral regeneration of humankind and the importance of economic reform in advance of political reform. They argued that the best way of eradicating the evils that beset society at the time was not the system of punishments and rewards advocated by the philosopher and reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), Owen's future partner, but by rational education and universal enlightenment. Both condemned political agitation, but favoured instead a voluntary redistribution of wealth, which Owen later hoped would be achieved through cooperation. Their ultimate social ideal was that of a decentralised society of small self-governing communities of the kind that Owen was to propose in his village scheme (Marshall, 1984, pp. 310–11). Since Godwin had fallen out of fashion Owen could be seen as his replacement for the new century (Locke, 1980, p. 262).

Moreover, Godwin introduced Owen to Francis Place (1751–1854), one of the most influential of the philosophic Radicals. Owen, Place recalled, was 'a man of kind manners and good intentions, of an imperturbable temper, and an enthusiastic desire to promote the happiness of mankind'. 'A few interviews made us friends', said Place, 'and he told me

he possessed the means, and was resolved to produce a great change in the manners and habits of the whole of the people, from the exalted to the most depressed'. (Owen often spoke about 'possessing the means' or 'holding a secret', possibly allusions to birth control.) He also told Place that most of the existing institutions prejudiced welfare and happiness, but that his proposals were so simple and so obviously beneficial that any thinking person could understand them. Owen evidently presented Place with a manuscript, asking if he would read and correct it for him, but whether this consisted of the first two essays or all four is unclear. Friendship apart, Place was incredulous that Owen believed he was the first to observe that 'man was a creature of circumstances' and that 'on this supposed discovery he founded his system' (quoted in Donnachie, 2000, p. 116). Place was another early advocate of birth control, which he linked to the ideas of the demographer and economist the Reverend Thomas Malthus (1763–1834). Malthus's pessimistic predictions of over-population (also noted in Owen's essays) helped fuel the debate about the future of the Poor Law. This traditional system of parish relief, Malthus thought, misguidedly increased the misery of the poor by providing doles which encouraged procreation, larger families, and hence still more pressure on food and subsistence goods that were already in short supply. Malthus's economic thinking may also have had some impact on Owen. Unlike the followers of the economist David Ricardo (1772–1823), Malthus saw agriculture as intrinsically more productive than manufactures, and Owen's later community plan placed great emphasis on intensive farming as a means of self-sufficiency.

Among other intellectuals with whom Owen associated during 1813–14 was James Mill (1773–1836), economist, philosopher and close associate of Owen's prospective partner, Bentham. Although Owen never acknowledged the fact, it was probably Place and Mill who edited *A New View of Society* and gave the essays the clarity that is missing from some of his later works. Even his supporters thought much of his writing was very woolly. Place was greatly offended not only by the second comprehensive edition of the essays, published in 1816, which contained material he had earlier read and rejected, but also by Owen's apparent arrogance in the face of reasoned criticism. Moreover, as far as Place was concerned, practical politics were clearly not Owen's strong point. Owen steered well clear of suggesting, far less articulating, any agenda for political as opposed to social reform. Perhaps he did not want to prejudice his immediate plans, realising that the authorities were unlikely to look with much favour on anything that remotely whiffed of Radicalism. Pragmatism, as in his financial and business affairs, was the watchword.

## 6 The essays

### 6.1 Overview

Having looked at the contexts and background, let us turn now to the essays themselves. I have used the edition of 1837, which was based on the second edition of the complete work, dating from 1816. However, it is worth noting that Owen made revisions and additions to subsequent English, French and American versions, so the reader will come across occasional references and allusions to developments which are out of context with the period when the essays were first written. I shall draw to your attention any that affect your reading of the shortened version of the essays. I also want to convey directly the flavour of the whole work, which has been edited to this end by Alison Hiley.

### 6.2 The dedications

Let us start with the dedications, which are both intriguing and of considerable interest.

#### Exercise 7

Read Owen's dedications heading each essay. To whom are the essays dedicated and can you suggest why?

Click document below to open the First Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

Click document below to open the Second Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

Click document below to open the Third Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

Click document below to open the Fourth Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

The essays are dedicated in turn to William Wilberforce, the British public, the 'Superintendents of Manufactories' and the Prince Regent. Obviously Owen's appeals were directed at reformers like Wilberforce, the public generally, mill owners or other employers like himself who might be persuaded to support his principles, and lastly not just the prime minister or other senior figures in the government but the constitutional head of state, the Prince Regent himself. Owen may well have cited the last with a view to royal patronage (which he subsequently enjoyed for a time).

#### Exercise 8

Does anything strike you as strange about dedicating the essays to *both* William Wilberforce and the Prince Regent?

Wilberforce was a well-known supporter of reform, while the Prince Regent might be regarded as conservative, if not reactionary in his views, certainly about political (if not social) reform.

Wilberforce, the Evangelical Christian MP, was reckoned to be one of the greatest humanitarians of his generation, a reputation by that time well established through his leading role in the anti-slavery movement. His reforming instincts extended to a whole range of other issues, including the condition of the poor and of factory workers, especially children. So Owen's appeal to him is interesting and highly relevant. It suggests a close association between them even at this early date, especially if Wilberforce had given permission for the dedication (but we don't know positively, since so little of Owen's correspondence before 1820 survives).

*Note:* For more information on Wilberforce, see OpenLearn course A207\_9.

As far as that to the Prince Regent goes, this is another intriguing dedication and quite a cachet if it had been obtained with official permission, possibly via Sidmouth or even Liverpool himself. George, having previously consorted with the Whig opposition, but now retaining a Tory administration, could hardly be described as a reformer. However, two of his brothers, the Dukes of Sussex and Kent, both identified themselves with social reform, supporting some of Owen's ideas for easing distress and poverty and Owenite organisations promoting these objects.

We might just note that when the essays were assembled for publication as a book in 1816, Owen dropped Wilberforce from the dedication. Had he complained, perhaps, because he did not want to be associated with the anti-religious views that appeared in the essays and that Owen was beginning to voice on public platforms? On the other hand, perhaps Owen felt uncomfortable with the thought that his fortune and those of his partners at New Lanark had been built, even indirectly, on slavery. The Prince Regent, prior to ascending the throne in 1820, headed the dedication in subsequent editions.

## 6.3 First Essay

The earliest essay, written under the *nom de plume* of 'one of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace for the County of Lanark' (if intended to provide Owen with anonymity this was a thin disguise, given the content) and entitled 'On the Formation of Character', is prefixed by the famous precept, central to the 'New View', that:

Any general character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by the application of proper means; which means are to a great extent at the command and under the control of those who have influence in the affairs of men.

A variant of this central theme stresses the individual rather than the community or society at large by emphasising, as Owen does in the [Third Essay](#), that 'the character of man is formed FOR – not BY himself'. We might also note that despite the apparent gender bias here and in the essays themselves, in the context of his time Owen was no male chauvinist; indeed, he held radical views on gender relationships, marriage, birth control and divorce (mostly kept to himself, but to which he would sometimes allude publicly). We can take it that by 'men' he was inclusive of women, and point out that at the same time he

attached great importance to women's role as homemakers and educators and to equality generally. Indeed, equality (including uniformity of dress) was to become one of the foundations of later Owenite communities.

### Exercise 9

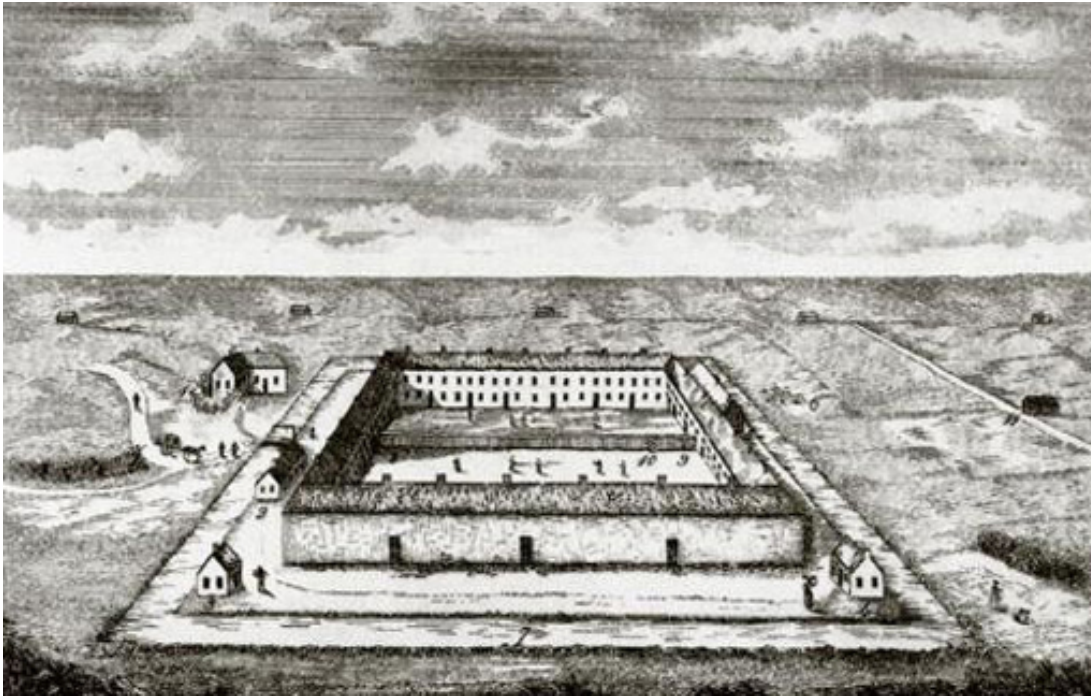
Now read the extracts from the First Essay, linked below, and in doing so consider the following questions:

1. What are Owen's views about the social structure and class divisions? And what, in his opinion, characterises the main social classes?
2. Which Enlightenment ideal does he refer to at this juncture and how is it to be achieved?
3. Are there examples of good practice which Owen says might be followed? Do they seem appropriate comparisons with New Lanark?

Click document below to open the First Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

1. In his analysis of the social order Owen identifies the poor and working classes as his major category, at over 15 million, or 'nearly three-fourths' of the total population (he refers to the latest census of 1811, which recorded 18 million persons in Britain and Ireland; in fact a group of more than 15 million would have represented over 80 per cent of the total). He reckons that the great majority have character defects due to lack of 'proper guidance or direction' (p. 108). The worst are the poor and uneducated, who are effectively trained to form a criminal class, while the rest of the population are educated to a system of society with the wrong values – as evidenced, for example, by the vicious punishment of criminals raised in the system.
2. The Enlightenment notion to which Owen refers is social progress through the use of reason. His aims are improved 'character formation' and the happiness of individuals and of society at large through rational education.
3. Owen identifies several interesting examples of how his ideas could be applied, including through the educational innovations of Bell and Lancaster and, at the community level, his own experiments at New Lanark. He alludes to other establishments on the Continent which have been visited by British reformers, in Bavaria (which as a Napoleonic satellite-kingdom could have been regarded, albeit briefly, as a model of enlightened rule) and the Netherlands. The last had always been a country where the underprivileged had been treated sympathetically. During the Batavian Republic (1795–1806), when French revolutionary ideas prevailed, the poor were described as 'children of the state' – surely a liberal view even in a modern democracy. Note, however, that the 'Pauper Colonies' to which Owen refers were not established until later (see [Figure 8](#)). While the examples Owen cites here are interesting instances of how the poor could be employed, these are not really appropriate comparisons. New Lanark was a large capitalist enterprise in a rapidly developing industry, whereas the European examples were essentially agricultural or urban workhouses. This might have raised problems for public perceptions of any future Owenite community scheme.



**Figure 8:** The agricultural workhouse at Veenhuisen, from *An Account of the Poor-Colonies, and Agricultural Workhouses, of the Benevolent Society of Holland*, by a member of the Highland Society of Scotland, 1828. This establishment in the Netherlands was one of several agricultural workhouses, including Fredericks-Oord, set up from c.1818 onwards. If it was a prototype for Owen's proposed communities, the Owenite architect Stedman Whitwell produced altogether more fanciful designs – see Figure 10.

Photo: by permission of the British Library, London

Photo: by permission of the British Library, London

We might just note that among the many visual aids Owen produced to accompany his lectures were nine cubes based on a table in Patrick Colquhoun's *Treatise on the Population, Wealth, Power and Resources of the British Empire* (1814), eight representing volumetrically eight classes of society, while the ninth represented the total population. The largest of the eight was almost four inches square, while that representing royalty, the lords and bishops was just a quarter of an inch square. The royal dukes who were patrons of Owen's plan were apparently fascinated by the cubes, which, should this have been necessary, vividly demonstrated their position in society relative to the working and pauper classes.

The closing section of the essay is certainly a powerful critique of the prevailing distress and the condition of the poor and a vindication of the strategies Owen is proposing for improvement.

### Exercise 10

Take a moment now to reflect on what Owen is trying to say in his First Essay and how Enlightenment ideas underpin it, summarising your thoughts in a few sentences.

Click document below to open the First Essay

[Robert Owen, A New View of Society](#)

To summarise the First Essay, Owen believes that environmental planning and education hold the key to the formation of character. So suitably moulded characters can produce a pacific and harmonious working class. The social problems created by industrialisation and the oppressive working conditions and long hours in factories ought to be addressed by the authorities, otherwise 'general disorder must ensue' (p.108). 'Happiness', however, can even be equated with 'pecuniary profits', as Owen himself would presently demonstrate (pp.112–13). Much of this argument derived from the Enlightenment ideals of reason dispelling darkness from the human mind, the reasoned conditioning of people, and happiness generated by rational means.

Little of this, as Place observed, was really new. The influences of environment on individuals and society came from Rousseau and other thinkers of the Enlightenment era, whose ideas Owen had probably first read in Manchester. According to Owen, the fundamental concept that character and environment are mutually related could readily be applied in an industrial context. There paternalistic methods might produce a humanitarian regime and generate greater productivity and profit, in which, theoretically, all could share. Unity and mutual cooperation, however, were concepts for the future. At this time too Owen's thoughts on education were probably still being formulated, but, expanding on his earlier statement of 1812, he duly acknowledges his debt to Lancaster and to Bell – who, as we have seen, pioneered the simultaneous instruction of large numbers of children. This was likely to appeal in the first instance to other educational reformers, including Owen's Quaker associates. They were involved with a body known as the British and Foreign School Society (established as the Royal Lancasterian Society in 1808) to promote non-denominational popular education, and were anxious to encourage the development of schools applying Lancaster's principles.

## 6.4 Second Essay

As a preliminary to the Second Essay, Owen says that he will enhance further his discussion of his underlying principles and then begin to explain to his readers how they can be applied in practice. Notice too the prologue for the Second Essay (p. 113) , quoting Vansittart's view that 'if we cannot *reconcile, all opinions*, let us endeavour to unite all hearts', a ringing phrase often quoted by Owen in later publications and widely adopted as one of the most popular Owenite homilies.

The Second Essay is important because in it Owen expands further on the defects of society as he sees them, especially as regards the neglect of education in the making of individuals and society at large, the perverse or negative attitudes to charity, and crime and punishment. The central concern, however, is to provide the reader with a detailed description of New Lanark as he found it and the reforms his management has introduced.

### Exercise 11

Read over the Second Essay, linked below, and think about the following questions:

1. What is rational instruction designed to promote?
2. Why, in Owen's opinion, has the present system failed society?
3. What, according to Owen, promotes crime and how does he view the law and system of punishment?

Click document below to open the Second Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

1. Children the world over are creatures of their environment and their circumstances, and attitudes of parents and teachers will shape their characters. From infancy, they have no control over their education and the resulting characters with which they are endowed. Society needs to take responsibility for rational instruction which with 'perseverance under judicious management' (p. 114) will inculcate sound sentiments and manners in infancy and later life.
2. The system has failed partly due to the ignorance of previous generations (which Owen finds odd because the printing press has long provided the means of disseminating rational, enlightened ideas) and partly because existing moral and religious instruction cannot counteract such unfavourable circumstances.
3. Poverty explains high levels of crime (which, as we have seen, was a growing concern of the time). According to Owen, the poor are trapped in a spiral of crime, much of the legislation is punitive, and (in another remarkably modern critique) the law is administered by those who have no real understanding of the environment and circumstances in which crimes are committed. Judges could well be in the dock, says Owen, if they had been raised among the poor!

Much of Owen's critique of the law, to which he returned at public meetings in 1817, seems to come from Bentham. As you can see, Owen also urges us to visit London's gaols, where we shall find plenty more evidence of the adverse circumstances which have shaped the characters of the luckless prisoners incarcerated there (p. 116).

Now we come to Owen's account of New Lanark under his management, which is really the core of the Second Essay.

### Exercise 12

Read Owen's description of New Lanark in its entirety, and as you do so think about the following questions:

1. What is Owen's aim in providing this account, and how do you think this affects his treatment?
  2. What were the conditions Owen found on assuming management at New Lanark?
  3. How did he set about improving matters, and what sorts of response did he meet from management, workers and villagers?
1. This is an interesting question, as Owen must have realised that he had to provide evidence that his ideas, so far as he had been able to apply them up to that point, actually worked in practice. While his account can be taken at face value as an accurate picture of the works and community, I think it is highly likely that Owen deliberately downplayed his father-in-law's achievements and talked up his own.
  2. A great deal could be said here about the conditions at New Lanark before Owen took over, and summarising it all is far from easy. First, Owen gives a history of the community, which pretty much replicates the brief account above, but places a great deal more emphasis on the negative aspects of the story. The workforce

included the orphans and the families, apparently assembled at random, and all accommodated in a makeshift way either in parts of the factory or in the village built nearby. Because Dale had many other interests he seldom visited the works, management being entrusted to 'servants with more or less power' (p. 117).

In the next paragraph follows another famous passage which ultimately entered the annals of Owenism by stating that at New Lanark the 'population lived in idleness, in poverty, in almost every kind of crime; consequently, in debt, out of health, and in misery' (p. 117). To make matters worse there was also a strong sectarian influence, probably disputes between members of the Established Church of Scotland and Dissenting sects (Dale's included?), which had a highly negative effect on the community (this is Owen's earliest attack on religious sectarianism and an enlightened plea for toleration, as it happens).

Second, and more positively, Dale is praised for his benevolence in providing for the pauper apprentices accommodation, food, clothing, medical care and education. However, in Owen's opinion, many were too young to work in the mills for long hours, and the regime largely negated the good it might have done. Further, when the apprenticeships had been completed those who could not be kept on sometimes took to the streets in either Edinburgh or Glasgow (like other cities, these were notorious for criminality). If this is the best that can be done, says Owen, what must the worse be like by comparison?

At this point Owen, cloaked as the 'stranger' (p. 119), comes on the scene, deploying his Manchester experience to clean the place up. After appraising the situation he launches a major programme of reform in both the workplace and the community.

3. In the mills Owen introduced inspections to cut down petty pilfering (which was widespread in factories), and improved work practices and workflows, poor time-keeping and absenteeism. These improvements generated mixed responses. Some of the managers resented Owen's style (and were either side-stepped or dismissed). But Owen eventually convinced the workers of his good intentions through philanthropy. During a lay-off caused by the US embargo on trade with Britain he continued paying wages to his workers, a generous gesture by the standard of most mill owners.

Although not described in the extract, the most interesting innovation (possibly adapted from Lancaster's badge system of credits and rewards in the classroom) was the 'silent monitor' or 'telegraph', a wooden block hung above each machine, which showed at a glance by colour-coding the previous day's performance and was also duly noted by overseers in 'books of character' (part of the supervisory system, as you will see in the video). The 'silent monitor' was coloured either white (denoting excellent), yellow (good), blue (indifferent), or black (bad). You may wonder how workers would have reacted to this device and the recording of their conduct, and also what Owen was trying to achieve by this.

These are interesting questions, as we have little direct testimony from workers themselves. Some would have resented it, much as they did Owen's other reforms, though they would not have had much option about accepting it. Given that it was probably tied to some sort of system of rewards, which we don't know much about in detail, the device may have been less punitive than it seems. But clearly Owen was trying to do more than record productivity, as the 'silent monitor' was essentially a means of

measuring 'character' or 'behaviour'. Of course, good behaviour could be equated with efficiency and hence enhanced profits. So Owen's motives are not entirely clear.

Meanwhile, to combat absenteeism Owen clamped down on alcohol and drunkenness – not by any means a solely Scottish trait but widespread in new industrial communities everywhere. Owen, while not personally averse to alcohol, seems to have had a lifelong dislike of drunkenness.

The most significant reform on the factory floor was abolishing the employment of pauper apprentices and later of all children under the age of ten (which pragmatically made a good deal of sense on the grounds of cost and efficiency, though in fairness Owen subsequently played a major role in the campaign to outlaw child labour in all mills and mines).

There were also some dramatic improvements in the community at large. The major items Owen identifies include more and better housing, making good-quality provisions, clothing and fuel available at competitive prices in a company store, and introducing rules and regulations about conduct generally. This included the vexed issue of sexual relations, New Lanark, like most factory villages of the time, being crammed with young people. Note that Owen links penalties for misbehaviour to the welfare fund (itself quite an innovation), but there is no allusion at this stage to birth control, later rumoured to be practised at New Lanark. Owen also draws attention to education, where Dale's provision has been continued and enhanced with all 'the modern improvements'. (Although it's hard to determine exactly what Owen means here, his ideas are explained in greater detail in subsequent essays. It could be that he had already introduced some of Lancaster's methods.)

In sum, replace much of the existing behaviour with 'rational habits in the rising generation' and the result is order, regularity, temperance and industry (p.123). What more could an enlightened employer hope for, especially if such philanthropy could be seen to raise profits?

### Exercise 13

Now reflect on what Owen is saying in the Second Essay. Summarise your findings and identify some of the key Enlightenment ideas that underpin his thinking.

Click document below to open the Second Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

The Second Essay describes the progress Owen has made at New Lanark since assuming management. In order to boost his own contribution since that event, he may well be exaggerating the poor state of things before he arrived, even if he is telling the truth about the hours worked by the child apprentices. He provides a glowing picture of the numerous improvements, environmental, moral and social, which his paternalistic methods have effected – showing the ‘incalculable advantages’ brought to both workers and proprietors. Inevitably considerable attention is again devoted to the role of education and training, which has proved vital in removing ‘unfavourable circumstances’. New Lanark, by the ‘steady application of certain general principles’, has been made a test-bed for the ‘New System’, as he was soon to call it. Owen is also able to claim that because there is constant communication between Old Lanark on the hill and New Lanark in the valley below, his experiment has not occurred in isolation and that if expanded his ideas could have unlimited potential nationally and internationally. The key enlightened ideals seem to be the light of reason to dispel error and darkness, the reasoned conditioning of people, and the potential universality of progress. In sum, the total, rational solutions in which the Enlightenment showed such faith underpin his ideas.

## 6.5 Third Essay

By the time Owen got round to writing Essays Three and Four, probably at the end of 1813 or the beginning of 1814, events had moved on, particularly the success of his new partnership in purchasing the mills and placing him again in full control. But his presentation increasingly leaves much to be desired, and here I have tried to focus on Owen's key proposals. Notice another homily, again derived from Enlightenment notions, and widely adopted by Owen's followers, that ‘truth must ultimately prevail over error’ (p. 125). This precept may well have sustained Owen's optimism about changing society in spite of the criticism the essays attracted.

The Third Essay starts with a statement on the ‘progress of improvement’. This refers to the empirical study of human nature, helping to identify the universal principles explaining its operations and the possibility of rational reform based on this knowledge. Much of the essay is devoted to further detail about educational and social provision that is either in place or proposed for New Lanark. This should be seen in the context of the further development of Owen's ideas about education, character formation, the role of relaxation in people's lives, and the vexed question of religion and the role of the Church. Much of Owen's educational thinking was borrowed from others, but in his views on child development and the school curriculum he was certainly original and pioneering.

### Exercise 14

Read the Third Essay, linked below, and as you do consider the following sets of questions, looking in turn at education, the role of religion, other social provisions and their application nationally:

First on education:

1. What does Owen say about the role of play and how is the New Institution designed to develop this in infants and children?

2. What other functions are to be carried out in the New Institution and how will they promote the well-being of the individual and the community?
3. Does this feed through to Owen's views on relaxation more generally?

Click document below to open the Third Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

1. Play is a means of promoting happiness, and to this end the Institution is equipped with a secure playground where infants can be supervised. The superintendents will teach socially acceptable behaviour and older children will lead by example. So 'rational conduct' will result. The infant school and its playground have many advantages in terms of security and supervision. The playground can also be used by older pupils and for military drill (including the use of firearms: highly appropriate in wartime, if not to combat possible attacks on the mills by machine-breakers). Note too that this facility also saves parents time, hence contributing to greater efficiency on the factory floor.
2. The Institution has a range of functions, as infant school, a school for older pupils, an adult institute, a church and a venue for recreation, notably dancing. Much of what Owen proposes amounts to what is now called lifelong learning, including improving lectures, known as 'familiar discourses' (alternating with the dances), designed to reinforce in adults the importance of character formation and to promote improved domestic economy (pp. 130–1).
3. Owen sees relaxation as vital to the promotion of rounded individuals. Careful provision needs to be made for amusement and recreation, avoiding immorality and insobriety.

We shall return to the Institution, the schools and their curricula in due course.

### Exercise 15

Owen's attitude to leisure has some relevance to his critique of religion. Read his views on religion in the Third Essay, pp.127–8 and 131–2, considering the following questions and briefly summarising your views:

1. Why, in Owen's opinion, is the Sabbath in Scotland as currently observed not conducive to relaxation?
2. What is the basis for Owen's attack on religion in this context?

Click document below to open the Third Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

1. Under 'Relaxation and the Sabbath' (pp. 127–8) Owen presents a typical Enlightenment onslaught on superstition and bigotry and a rational focus on increasing happiness, a problem the Enlightenment, with its characteristic confidence, thought it could solve. He attacks the Scots Sabbath as being a day of extremes: on the one hand 'superstitious gloom and tyranny over the mind', on the other 'of the most destructive intemperance and licentiousness'. This is certainly a side-swipe at Scottish Presbyterianism, or at least at the moral control exercised over the community by the kirk and its ministry (and locally there was

much ill-feeling between Owen and the parish minister about the kirk's interference in the New Lanark schools).

2. Owen's main attack, in line with Enlightenment views, is on religious sectarianism and sectarian prejudices which generate ill-feeling, hatred and misery. Irrational instruction compounds the problems that sectarianism creates, so that 'God-given inclinations and mental faculties' are turned away from peace and happiness to evil and misery.

Owen's anti-sectarian views were to prove controversial, not on theological grounds alone (although these were clearly important since Owen himself, having rejected Anglicanism and Unitarianism, was probably by this time agnostic) but also because the Church occupied such an important place in people's lives, through its schools and through overseeing people's moral conduct and dispensing charity to the poor. Here Owen is indirectly challenging the Church's social and moral functions. His anti-religious views could possibly prejudice his various campaigns for reform, even in spheres beyond the authority of the Church.

### Exercise 16

Now consider the following questions:

1. What other social provisions are to be made in the community?
  2. How are these ideas to be more widely applied, and what danger can you discern here?
1. Several provisions are suggested, including an improved sickness and superannuation fund, retirement housing and, turning to nature, garden plots and public walkways.
  2. All classes need to consider his agenda, Owen says. Indeed, the closing section on 'The Audience' reads like a manifesto of the Enlightenment, with the light of reason dispelling the darkness of ignorance, superstition and prejudice. Here he appeals to those who can take a dispassionate view, who can see the relationship between the individual and society and between what he calls 'private and public good' (p. 134). This might suggest that he is already thinking that social and moral reform could only be promoted successfully by partnerships between reform organisations and the state. However, the danger is that some of the people Owen dismisses might have helped to promote his ideas, and, I think, suggests a certain arrogance on his part.

The theme of Owen's Third Essay, again in line with Enlightenment thinking, is thus the general application of his principles, mixed with an attack on human error and how truth might prevail in matters of social reform. There is further exemplification of his initiatives at New Lanark, though more about the future rather than the past and present. He describes the central educational role to be played by his New Institution, also highlighting the importance of relaxation to his workforce. There follows a description of other social measures, notably the sick and pension fund (again not an original idea, but clearly well conceived) and other communal facilities.

Although the Third Essay clearly shows Owen's advanced thinking about educational, community and environmental issues, which were controversial enough, his views about the Church were radical and potentially damaging. Whether or not he realised it at the time, they set a dangerous precedent for the future in his relationship with his partners and the clergy (though, interestingly, reaction was divided on sectarian lines, with Anglicans, especially in Ireland, and Dissenters being most supportive). He clearly tolerated and even encouraged church attendance among the (mainly) Presbyterian villagers, probably as another means of promoting order and morality. Indeed, he even made special arrangements for the Gaelic-speaking population by engaging preachers in the language. For many years the summer communion at Lanark parish church was celebrated – at the invitation of Owen's neighbour, Lady Mary Ross – by Dr John Macdonald, the famous 'Apostle of the North' and the most popular Gaelic Evangelical preacher in the Highlands. On these occasions tables were actually set apart for New Lanark's Highland population and Macdonald 'gave the addresses in their own native Gaelic'. Owen's actions locally in *support* of worship seemed to conflict with his public pronouncements, so on the matter of religion he laid himself open to criticism (Donnachie, 2000, p. 118).

## 6.6 Fourth Essay

Having discussed the relationship between environment and character formation in individuals and in society, shown the application of these principles using New Lanark as a test-bed, and described future plans, Owen turns finally to explaining how his reforms can be applied nationally and universally. Much of what follows shows how government might adopt his ideas, highly practical for the most part, but increasingly described in millennialist tones, anticipating a coming golden (or more enlightened) age.

### Exercise 17

Read the Fourth Essay, linked below, and as you do so address the following questions:

1. What Enlightenment ideal is the principal aim of government, in Owen's opinion?
2. Can you suggest what ethical theory he is referring to in this context?

Click document below to open the Fourth Essay

[Robert Owen, \*A New View of Society\*](#)

1. What Owen refers to here is again the enlightened notion of happiness generated by rational means. Owen's goal is the greatest happiness of the greatest number, and without poverty, crime or punishment. He shows enormous confidence in the Enlightenment notion that human nature is universal (in the laws governing its causes and effects) but modifiable through environmental factors.
2. This is classic Utilitarianism, which takes the ultimate good to be the greatest happiness of the greatest number and defines the rightness of actions in terms of their contribution to the general happiness. It follows that no specific moral principle is absolutely certain and necessary, since the relation between actions and their happy or unhappy consequences varies according to circumstances.

The theory had earlier been made fully explicit by Owen's new partner, Bentham, in *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789). Here he argues that morality is based on the French philosopher Helvetius's democratic principle that the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the highest good. Bentham reinforced this by devising a quantitative measure of individual pleasure and pain, concluding that the pursuit of personal happiness led society to a state of general harmony and welfare.

You can see the obvious appeal to Owen. Since people do not form their own characters and character is formed by environment and education, as well as all the other attributes Owen prefers, they can also be *taught* how to be happy and happiness can be promoted in society at large.

### Exercise 18

In a series of bullet points, identify the key policies Owen advocates.

The key policies centre around:

- happiness without poverty, crime or punishment
- legal and Church reform
- control of alcohol and gambling
- revision of the Poor Laws (a major preoccupation of the time)
- a national system of education
- the establishment of national seminaries
- a comprehensive employment policy and direction of labour.

Again generalising from his experience at New Lanark, and probably influenced by the views of Godwin and Bentham, Owen argues in his Fourth Essay for government intervention to develop a national system of education, to counter increasing problems of poverty and unemployment, and to generate greater 'happiness'. This seems to be a return to the earlier proposals he submitted to Lord Liverpool, but how could Owen now implement these much more comprehensive ideas? For a start he could put more of his 'principles' in place at New Lanark and raise still further the profile of the community as a test-bed for the New System. This brings us to a more detailed discussion of our second 'text', New Lanark itself, and the role it played in Owen's propaganda campaign in 1816–24.

## 7 New Lanark as showpiece and text

Owen's partnership of 1814, consisting of Bentham and other enlightened individuals, mainly wealthy Quakers, paved the way for the rapid implementation of the innovations spelled out in the *Statement* of 1812 and subsequently in the essays. Two of the partners, William Allen (1770–1843), a chemist and businessman, and the wealthy and philanthropic John Walker (1767–1824), Owen's closest associate, were interested in education and had encouraged the establishment of schools adopting methods developed by Lancaster and others. Given their religious inclinations, they seemed strange allies, but Owen was able to deliver high returns on their investment, and for much of the time this may have counterbalanced worries about his views and propaganda campaigns.

The major developments took place in the mills, the community, the Institute and schools, with the last being the focus of attention for droves of visitors attracted to the place by Owen's publicity and the proximity to the Falls of Clyde. We can now see and hear discussed some of Owen's reforms for ourselves.

### Exercise 19

Now view the rest of the video, below, and answer the following questions:

1. The mills: what were the major reforms on the factory floor and how was discipline enforced?
2. The community: what changes did Owen initiate in the community and what were the checks on people's conduct?
3. The Institute and schools: what were the main functions of these buildings and how were they organised? What curricula were followed in the various departments?

Click play to view the video (Part 3, 10 minutes)

Video content is not available in this format.

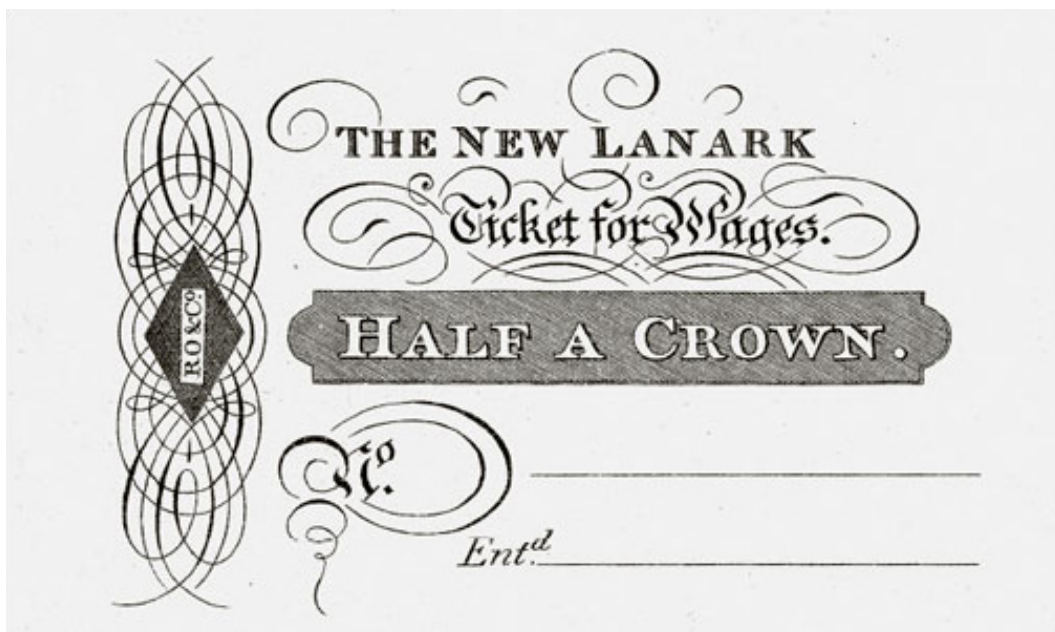
[Introduction - Part 3](#)

1. On the factory floor the major reforms included (as we saw in the essays) phasing out the employment of children under the age of ten and introducing strict rules and regulations and a rigorous monitoring and reporting system. These actions greatly improved efficiency, productivity and profits. Owen also rebuilt on more modern lines one of the mills that had been destroyed by fire.
2. In the community a whole set of rules and regulations was issued governing everything from street cleaning to personal behaviour. Environmental improvements were undertaken, mainly to improve sanitation and water supply, but also including gardens, allotments and public walkways. Owen built more housing and housing stock generally was upgraded. A company store provided good-quality provisions at competitive prices, though workers were sometimes paid by cheque, the 'ticket for wages' (see [Figure 9](#)), exchangeable for purchases. The profits went towards subsidising the schools and the sick fund. (This looks distinctly devious, because in some instances no money changed hands and folk

would be obliged to spend their wages at the store, enhancing Owen's profits twice over! But petty cash was in short supply at the time, so it was a neat solution to that problem.)

3. The Institute served as the main educational and social centre of the community. At first all the facilities were concentrated in the Institute, until the opening of a separate building for the school in about 1818 or 1819. As far as we know there was an infant department on the ground floor with a playground adjoining, and schoolrooms for older children on the upper floor. The Institute also provided facilities for evening instruction, lectures, concerts and dances, as well as for religious services.

The curricula, apart from the 'three Rs' designed to promote literacy and numeracy, embraced ancient and modern history, geography, natural history and what we might call civics or citizenship. All these subjects were promoted by the famous Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), whom Owen visited during his European tour in 1818. Numerous aids were deployed for the teaching of grammar, arithmetic and other subjects. There was considerable emphasis in the infant curriculum on play and the stimulation provided by the environment, with, apparently, a limited role for book learning. Again much of this probably came from Pestalozzi, who is thought to have been influenced by Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), another key text of the Enlightenment. At New Lanark children were also taught the 'polite accomplishments' of dancing (see Plate 2, below), singing and playing musical instruments, while boys, to the strains of the village band, engaged in military drill.



**Figure 9:** Ticket for wages, c.1815, Donnachie-Owen Collection. The ticket for wages was one of several denominations exchangeable for goods at the community store. It may have been a model for the time-notes issued by later 'time-stores' in the United States and Owenite labour exchanges in Britain during the early 1830s.

Donnachie-Owen Collection

Donnachie-Owen Collection

[Click to open Plate 2](#), G. Hunt, Dancing Class, The Institute, New Lanark, c.1820, coloured engraving, New Lanark Conservation Trust.

Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen (1801–77), who as a US citizen was also to become a reformer of distinction, wrote a book entitled *An Outline of the System of Education at New Lanark*, first published in 1824, where he describes the schools and curricula. We can catch the flavour of this in a brief extract and by examining a picture of one of the schoolrooms and dancing children.

### Exercise 20

Read the extract below and examine Plate 2, linked above. Comment on the scene. Does the extract give an accurate picture?

The 'New Institution', or School, which is open for the instruction of the children and young people connected with the establishment, to the number of 600, consists of two stories. The upper story, which is furnished with a double range of windows, one above the other, all round, is divided into two apartments.

The principal school-room, fitted up with desks and forms on the Lancasterian plan, having a free passage down the centre of the room, is about 90 ft long, 40 ft broad, and 20 ft high. It is surrounded, except at one end where a pulpit stands, with galleries, which are convenient when this room is used, as it frequently is, either as a lecture-room or place of worship.

The other apartment on the second floor has the walls hung round with representations of the most striking zoological and mineralogical specimens, including quadrupeds, birds, fishes, reptiles, insects, shells, minerals etc. At one end there is a gallery, adapted for the purpose of an orchestra, and at the other end are hung very large representations of the two hemispheres; each separate country, as well as the various seas, islands etc. being differently coloured, but without any names attached to them. This room is used as a lecture- and ball-room, and it is here that the dancing and singing lessons are daily given. It is likewise occasionally used as a reading-room for some of the classes.

The lower story is divided into three apartments, of nearly equal dimensions, 12 ft high, and supported by hollow iron pillars, serving at the same time as conductors in winter for heated air, which issues through the floor of the upper story, and by which means the whole building may, with care, be kept at any required temperature. It is in these three apartments that the younger classes are taught reading, natural history, and geography.

(R.D. Owen, 1972, pp. 28–30)

We are in the schoolroom described by Dale Owen where three troupes of girls in uniform dresses dance (Scottish quadrilles?) to the music of a fiddle trio. On two walls are murals or visual aids (mounted on rollers) showing exotic beasts and a large map of Europe, described by Dale Owen. Parties of visitors, women predominating, look on, as do two persons clearly in supervisory capacities, at the lower right (possibly the benevolent Mr Owen and his son?). The extract certainly seems to describe the arrangements accurately and adds a great deal more detail about other facilities. (Dale Owen's book, incidentally, helped boost his father's reputation as an educational reformer.)

As pointed out in the video, the Institute and schools were the main items of interest for visitors. The nursery school was certainly pioneering and the subject of considerable comment in numerous accounts. John Griscon (1774–1852), an American scientist, educationist and reformer, visiting in 1819, described it as the 'baby school', pointing out its value to mothers working in the mills secure in the knowledge their infants were in safe keeping. So the promotion of nursery education could be seen as another simple device to promote efficiency. Another notable enlightened American, William Maclure (1763–1840), a founder of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia and Owen's later associate in the New Harmony community, also praised this initiative. Seeing the many female visitors brought Maclure to the conclusion that women were more interested in education than men.

Of course, the use of New Lanark as a showpiece raises almost as many questions as its function as a test-bed for Owen's 'New Society'. What were visitors shown and why? Just as significant, what were they not shown? Industrial espionage was a problem, so visitors were unlikely to be conducted round the mills, apart from the disruption this would have caused. There was much in the systems of policing, supervision and control, the regimentation in work and home, the communal activities and the indoctrination of children that was widely criticised. What did Owen mean when he talked of 'happiness'? Was it not really 'docility'? And while acknowledging some of Dale's achievements, Owen tried to deny New Lanark a history before his arrival as managing partner. These are some of the issues which might well have influenced the success or failure of the ideas set out in *A New View of Society*.

## 8 Impact of the essays

While there was much in the essays that enlightened persons could endorse, Owen's publication attracted considerable criticism. William Hazlitt, the essayist and critic, for one, abhorred the style and pretended revelation, especially Owen's use in the title of his favourite word, a *new* view of society. 'It may be true but it is not new', wrote Hazlitt.

It is not coeval whatever the author and proprietor may think, with the New Lanark mills, but it is as old as the royal borough of Lanark; or as the county of Lanark itself. It is as old as the Political Justice of Mr Godwin, as the Oceana of Harrington, as the Utopia of Sir Thomas More, as the Republic of Plato.

(Hazlitt, 1931, pp. 97–8)

He dismissed Owen's principles because they implied the efficiency of a deterministic system of control over human behaviour, assumed a new philosophy was older than the creative human spirit, and aimed at substituting benevolent direction for the dignity of freedom, with all its potential dangers (Jones, 1991, p. 244).

Nevertheless, the essays positioned Owen on the national stage and provided a springboard for more ambitious plans, which he was soon calling the 'New System of Society'. Despite the criticisms of Hazlitt and others, Owen commanded an audience because his ideas addressed some of the major concerns of the Regency era. Apart from popular education, these included the impact of the factory system on working conditions, especially the employment of children, the condition of the working class, Poor Law reform and economic regeneration in the post-war years. He was not alone in realising how closely all these issues were related, but went further than most in explaining in practical terms how New Lanark might provide lessons for universal problems, the central theme of the Third and Fourth Essays. Moreover, and again emphasising his universal vision, he took his campaigns of reform to Europe in 1818, to Ireland in 1822–3 and finally to the United States in 1824. I shall briefly review the highlights of this remarkable story, concentrating on factory conditions and social reform, before setting out some conclusions about Owen and his essays.

## 9 The factory reform movement

Owen's participation in the movement for factory reform was clearly much influenced by views expressed in the essays. This showed his continuing concern, first evidenced in Manchester, about the impact of industrialisation on society, a theme to which he consistently returned. His personal record on the employment of children at New Lanark was certainly an example of good practice in the cotton industry, which in Owen's words was invariably 'destructive of health, morals, and social comforts of the mass of the people engaged in it'. His campaign for improved conditions began in 1815 with a speech to fellow cotton barons in Glasgow, and the substance was subsequently elaborated into a pamphlet, *Observations on the Effects of the Manufacturing System*, which he distributed to MPs. This contained the draft of a bill calling for a limit on working hours to 12 a day, including one and a half hours for meals; preventing the employment of children under the age of ten; limiting the hours of those aged under 12 to six hours per day; and providing basic education for children employed (Donnachie, 2000, pp. 122–6).

After lobbying senior members of the government, Owen succeeded in persuading some MPs that a bill on the lines he proposed should be introduced. Sir Robert Peel, father of the future prime minister and a wealthy calico printer, would act as sponsor. Peel was an appropriate choice since he had been partly responsible for the first piece of factory legislation, to which reference has already been made, the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act, passed in 1802. The new bill was introduced in June 1815, but with the intervention of Waterloo made no progress till 1816, when a select committee was appointed to take evidence. While this could be seen as a delaying tactic, Owen could speak optimistically about the intentions of the country's rulers in an address delivered at the opening of the Institute at New Lanark in January that year. Before the committee met, Owen and his son Robert Dale, then just 14 years old, set off on a tour of inspection to gather evidence. Later the younger Owen was to describe the conditions they found in many mills as 'utterly disgraceful to a civilised nation' (R.D. Owen, 1874, p. 101).

Appearing before the committee, Owen was closely questioned on what he had seen and what had been enacted at New Lanark. He explained that his reduction of factory hours and other reforms were partly humanitarian and partly made on the grounds of improved efficiency; he thought that they had not increased costs or reduced family income. He was able to produce school registers showing increased attendance as a result of shorter working hours. The arguments of the other mill masters, supported in some cases by medical evidence, sought to prove that the measures were unnecessary because they were already being implemented, that cotton mills were perfectly healthy places, and that children would be better put to work than becoming a burden on the parish or taking to a life of crime. Owen issued two further statements on the employment of children (one addressed directly to the prime minister), but the bill was shelved until 1818 and after much modification became law in 1819. Although Owen regarded it as partial it owed much to his drive, brought improvements for factory children, and was the basis of more comprehensive legislation on working conditions in 1825 and 1833 (Donnachie, 2000, pp. 129–31).

## 10 Working-class distress and planned communities

Meanwhile Owen's views on the problem of poverty were also much influenced by his experience at New Lanark and had particular relevance to the difficult era that opened up after the Napoleonic Wars. Economic depression exacerbated growing problems of poverty and unemployment, and Lord Liverpool's government struggled against a rising tide of disorder, which was manifest in protests and riots. The relief of poverty, which had been a problem before, became a nightmare. While he may have had no personal objection to this, Owen could see that the contribution he and other property owners had to make to poor relief was bound to increase. Again he disseminated his views widely in a flurry of pamphlets published soon after the second edition of the essays.

In 1817 Owen first proposed his 'Village Scheme', a plan that drew quite specifically on arrangements at New Lanark and the key ideas about social organisation set out in the essays. But unlike New Lanark the physical appearance of the proposed villages had a symmetry that more resembled military barracks built around a square located in plots of between 1000 and 1500 acres, which with careful husbandry would result in self-sufficiency. However, the new communities might combine agriculture and industry, rather like some planned estate villages of the period. The population was to be much as New Lanark's, comprising 1200 to 1500 persons, educated and employed according to their abilities and skills, and the scheme was to run at a potential profit once the capital cost of building had been recovered, an arrangement that has resonance today in public-private partnerships. You might be excused for thinking that this sounded like a workhouse, though this was not Owen's intention. However, sceptics were not long in voicing criticisms, as the following extracts show.

### Exercise 21

Read the following extracts from Radical periodicals of the day. What is the tone conveyed and the writers' objections to Owen's scheme?

(a) [Owen] is for establishing innumerable *communities* of paupers. Each is to be resident in an *inclosure*, somewhat resembling a barrack establishment, only more extensive. I do not clearly understand whether the sisterhoods and brotherhoods are to form distinct communities, like the nuns and friars, or whether they are to mix together promiscuously; but I perceive that they are all to be under a very *regular discipline*; and that wonderful peace, happiness, and national benefit are to be the result.

(William Cobbett, Political Register, 2 August 1817)

(b) 'Let Us Alone, Mr Owen'

Robert Owen, Esq, a benevolent cotton spinner, and one of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace for the county of Lanark, having seen the world, and afterwards cast his eye over his very well regulated manufactory in the said county imagines he has taken a New View of Society, and conceives that all human beings are so many plants, which have been out of the earth for a few thousand years and require to be reset. He accordingly determines to

dibble them in squares after a new fashion; and to make due provision for removing the offsets. I do not know a gentleman in England better satisfied with himself than Mr Robert Owen. Everybody, I believe, is convinced of Mr Owen's benevolence, and that he purposes to do us much good. I ask him to *leave us alone*, lest he do us much mischief.

(William Hone, Reformist's Register, 23 and 30 August 1817)

The tone is biting and satirical and the objections centre on the regimentation proposed in the new communities; whether or not discipline and good order will necessarily produce happiness; whether or not the well-regulated conditions of a factory can be replicated in the community at large; and, echoing Hazlitt, the claims that Owen had discovered new truths about human conduct.

The extracts exemplify the scepticism with which the Radicals greeted Owen's proposals. Of the two cited, William Cobbett (1762–1835), journalist and reformer, was the most scathing (elsewhere denouncing the proposed villages as 'parallelograms of paupers'). Like Cobbett, Hone, a political satirist, concluded that Owen's scheme aimed to turn the country into a giant workhouse.

It is clear from the periodical press and from newspaper reports that Owen's schemes were equally mistrusted by the Radicals, Whigs and Tories, but thanks to his wealth and energy for self-promotion they received widespread publicity. He used his influence in places of power to advantage, especially among MPs, government ministers and wealthy people known to be of a humanitarian disposition, like his Quaker partners and their reforming friends. Both Sidmouth and Vansittart remained sympathetic and this encouraged others to look favourably on Owen's ideas. His views even attracted a measure of support from the upper levels of the British aristocracy, notably the royal Dukes of Kent and Sussex. It has to be said that Owen naively took the politeness of such persons as a commitment to act, when they were simply prepared to listen to a rich man who had some interesting solutions to the daunting social problems that threatened the established order and possibly their own class.

Nevertheless, in August 1817 many of his supporters turned out for a series of public meetings held in London when Owen explained his plan. But, showing an amazing lack of tact in the circumstances, he complicated his campaign by again attacking sectarianism in religion, a move which provoked further criticism and in the longer term alienated him from some potentially useful allies.

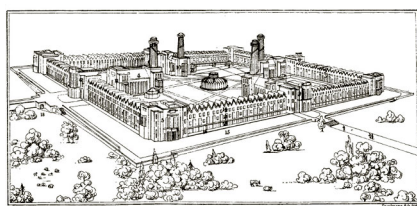
Soon a more millennialist tone expressed in the language of religion began to creep into the propaganda, and the communities proposed by Owen's plan were transformed into 'Villages of Unity and Mutual Cooperation'. Competition was to be replaced by cooperation. However, he was careful to emphasise that equality could not immediately prevail and that social class (in four divisions), sectarian or religious affiliation and appropriate skills would be important criteria in the selection of personnel. He even appended a complex table showing all the possible combinations of religious and political sects to which future communitarians might conceivably adhere (Owen, 1972, pp.234–7).

Although there was no immediate prospect of the plan being taken up officially, Owen maintained a relentless campaign in which his success at New Lanark was continuously highlighted. The many visitors had spread its fame abroad and in 1818 he himself carried his message of his New System to Europe. He was preceded by 200 copies of *A New View of Society*, which (at least Owen says) Sidmouth had sent to the governments,

universities and leading thinkers on the Continent, apparently inviting comments. Owen even claimed that Napoleon, exiled to Elba, had studiously read the essays and if given the opportunity would have devoted his life to implementing the New System. After staying in Paris, where he met senior members of the Bourbon government, had an audience with the Duc d'Orleans (later King Louis Philippe) and attended the French Academy, he moved on to Switzerland. Basing himself in Geneva he inspected several experimental schools, including Pestalozzi's, whose methods, as we have seen, were practised at New Lanark. Owen then headed for Frankfurt and later to Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen), where two 'Memorials on Behalf of the Working Classes' that he had prepared and had translated into French and German were duly presented to participants at the Congress of the Great Powers, assembled to settle Europe's problems and neutralise the virus of revolution before it led to further war.

Owen refined his plan in further publications, notably his letters on the distressed working classes of 1819 addressed to David Ricardo, the political economist and MP, in which he spelled out the social and economic arrangements he thought would govern his villages. He also drew on examples from the United States where Moravians, Shakers and other religious sects had established successful communities. He specifically cited the example of Harmonie, Indiana, where a band of German Lutherans had built an apparently profitable cooperative enterprise, trading farm products and simple manufactures down the Wabash and Mississippi rivers as far as New Orleans.

These ideas were developed in later publications, notably the *Report to the County of Lanark* of 1820 (published 1821), where the principles of the essays were again restated and further details of plans for a trial of a community given. The report was followed by unsuccessful efforts to raise private capital and gain government support, both in Britain and in Ireland, which Owen toured in 1822–3, visiting places suffering hardship and holding packed meetings in Cork, Limerick and Dublin. These were attended by large numbers of women, some of whom evidently either swooned in his presence or were so overcome by heat that they had to be lifted through open windows to regain their composure. As elsewhere, he was accorded respect by the elite, including landowners and clergy (apparently of all denominations), but, as on the mainland, support was not strong enough to proceed. One final effort in 1824 to gain government support also failed, and by this time Owen had come to the conclusion that the New System stood a better chance of success in the New World (see Figure 10). Although British Owenites in the later 1820s made several attempts to establish communities based on the New System, Owen himself was not directly involved. Instead he crossed the Atlantic to inspect, and in 1825 finally purchase, what became known as New Harmony. The story of Owen's activities in the United States generally (1824–8) and Mexico (1829) takes us well beyond the texts of the essays and of New Lanark, but serves our present purposes in emphasising the international dimensions of Owenism and the strength of Owen's reforming mission and belief in his principles.



DESIGN  
for a Community of 2000 Persons founded upon a principle  
Commended by Plato, Lord Bacon and Sir Thomas More

EXPLANATION OF THE PARTS NUMBERED ON THE PLATE

- 1 Gymnasiums or Covered Places for Exercise, attached to the Schools and Infirmary.
- 2 Conservatory, in the midst of Gardens botanically arranged.
- 3 Baths, warm and cold, of which there are four for the Males, and four for the Females.
- 4 Dining Hall, with Kitchens, &c. beneath them.
- 5 Angle buildings, occupied by the Schools for Infants, Children, and Youths, and the Infirmary; on the ground floors are Conversation-rooms for Adults.
- 6 Library, Detached Reading Rooms, Bookbindery, Printing Office, &c.
- 7 Ballroom and Music rooms.
- 8 Theatre for Lectures, Exhibitions, Discussions, &c. with Laboratory, Small Library, &c.
- 9 Museum, with Library of Description and Reference, Rooms for preparing Specimens, &c.
- 10 The Brew-houses, Balchouses, Wash-houses, Laundries, &c. arranged round the Bases of the Towers.
- 11 The Refectories for the infants and children are on each side of the Vestibules of the Dining halls.
- 12 The Illuminators of the Establishments, Clock-towers, and Observatories, and from the elevated summits of which all the smoke and vitiated air of the buildings is discharged into the atmosphere.
- 13 Suites of adult sitting rooms and chambers.
- 14 Suites of Chambers, which may be easily and quickly made of any dimensions required; Dormitories for the Unmarried and Children.
- 15 Esplanade one hundred feet wide, about twelve feet above the natural surface.
- 16 Paved Footpath.
- 17 The Arcade and its Terrace, giving both a covered and an open communication with every part of the building.
- 18 Sub-way leading to the Kitchens, &c. and along which meat, vegetables, coals, &c. are conveyed to the Stores, and dust and refuse brought out.

**Figure 10:** Stedman Whitwell, *Design for a Community*, c.1825. The Owenite architect Stedman Whitwell (1784–1840) produced different versions and several models of community designs, the largest of which was transported to the United States to be displayed to President John Quincy Adams and the American public in 1825.

From Harrison, 1969, Plate 16, opp. p. 116

From Harrison, 1969, Plate 16, opp. p. 116

Reviewing the discussion in this course, we can see the relationship between the main ideas in Owen's essays and his plans for social regeneration. In particular, he focused on the strong links between people's environment, their education and social improvement. The problem of poverty was to be addressed through communities, whether agricultural, industrial or both, where mutual cooperation rather than individualism would prevail. This was sound enough so far as it went, but the major contradiction in Owen's use of New Lanark as a model lay in the fact that it was a business enterprise where profit was the driving force, albeit with model working and social conditions.

# 11 Conclusion

Any assessment of Robert Owen is bound to be partial, because there are some gaps in our knowledge about both the man and his agenda. But we have seen the close links between his personal experience as an enlightened employer and the social philosophy presented in the essays, which found its ultimate expression in the community scheme and mutual cooperation.

Owen's most important ideas about character formation underpinned much of this philosophy. He has rightly been condemned for much woolly thinking, but was at least consistent in articulating the key role that education would play in his New Society.

Packed into this were controversial ideas about the influence of environment on individuals and how they would relate to each other in communities, where some of the precepts of 'Old Society' regarding the role of women, sexual relations, marriage and religion would be left behind. A few of the ideas that he picked up, like birth control which, apart from its obvious function, empowered women, were so contentious they could not be articulated, though it seems that population levels in the new communities were to be regulated in that way.

Although Owen had given insufficient attention to the economics of his scheme, this could be explained by his failure to realise that the success of New Lanark as a dynamic capitalist enterprise under his management could hardly be replicated in multifunctional villages where the profit motive was secondary to cooperation, social and moral improvement.

Despite the many contradictions in his own life and thought, some of which I have mentioned, Owen's ideological legacy was profound. Some of his ideas did not transmit too well in time or space, but the lessons of the Enlightenment Owen learned in his early career certainly had a profound impact on his most tangible legacy, the remarkable community of New Lanark. Owen's experiment there may have lasted only 25 years, but subsequently it provided inspiration for later educators, public health reformers, trade unionists and cooperators.

Many of the ideas set out in *A New View of Society* were too progressive for their time, and were only beginning to be implemented in the early twentieth century. Some are still part of ongoing debates about education, citizenship, welfare, cooperation and the environment, which suggests that Owen may indeed have been something of a visionary.

Meanwhile, the place Owen had made internationally famous continued for another 130 years as a working factory village, still attracting visitors from as far afield as Japan (where there remains considerable interest in Owen's management psychology), until the mills ultimately closed in 1968. Thereafter, although the visitors kept coming to honour Owen's memory and ideals, the community declined and decay was rapid. But, thanks to a major restoration project initiated in the 1970s, culminating in New Lanark's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, we can now see the community, with all its 'arrangements', much as it was in Owen's day. At New Lanark the UNESCO rubric appears in three languages, English, Gaelic and French – further proof, if needed, of the community's international status.

Finally, while there is much that is puzzling about Robert Owen, there is one question that intrigues me more than any other. Given the importance Owen attached to the role of the environment on character, did New Lanark not influence him more than he did the place itself? I believe that it did, and that it is the key to understanding his essays.

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## Glossary

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Millennialism (or Millenarianism):

the belief and practices, religious and/or political, which seek a comprehensive, salvatory solution for social, political, economic and personal issues. Although originally pre-Christian, the term became identified with the myth of Christ's return after a thousand years. Millenialism, which appealed to some Dissenting sects and other non-religious groups in Britain and the US, played a part in Owen's thinking after 1816. From time to time he announced the commencement of the millennium, and later Owenism itself acquired many of the characteristics of a religious sect.

#### Presbyterianism:

the system of government in the Church of Scotland (kirk) devolved substantial authority to local presbyteries (assemblies of ministers representing a number of parishes), ministers and elders. Historically the kirk had a substantial role in education, poor relief and social control at parish level, hence the animosity Owen generated about his reforms among some kirk ministers.

#### Utilitarianism:

a doctrine advocating the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people, regarding an action as 'right' if it is likely to produce greater happiness than any other. Jeremy Bentham thought actions should be compared solely on the amounts of pleasure they produced, whereas John Stuart Mill argued that one quantity of pleasure might be of higher quality than another.

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Figure 3 New Lanark, c. 1799, engraving of National Monuments of Scotland by Robert Scott; Crown Copyright: RCAHMS.

Figure 4 Pollard and Kennedy Mills, Ancoats Lane, Manchester, c. 1830, by Thomas Slack. Chethams Library Manchester.

Figure 5 View of Boniton Lin by Paul Sandby. Donnachie-Owen Collection.

Figure 6 A monitorial school in operation from Paul Monroe. A Cyclopedia of Education, New York, Macmillan, 1913.

Figure 7 Frontispiece of A Statement Regarding the New Lanark Establishment, 1812, Donnachie-Owen Collection.

Figure 8 The agricultural workhouse at Veenhuisen, 1828. The British Library.

Figure 9 Ticket for wages. Donnachie-Owen Collection.

Figure 10 Design for a Community, Stedman Whitwell, c.1825. From Harrison, 1969, Plate 16, opp. p. 116.

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