

London Mills, London Street

1.0 *The setting and current status*

- 1.1 The London Mills occupy a substantial site on the south side of London Street bounded by Brook Street to the west, and Duke Street to the east. Its immediate setting includes the former workhouse on Broad Street, dating back to 1768, and terraces of early 19th century workers housing on London Street (Listed II).
- 1.2 While the London Mills are unlisted and the area is not a Conservation Area the street scene that they dominate forms the setting for a number of Listed Buildings, and they are a dominant feature in the view out from the Conservation area from Russell Street, and the view into the Conservation Area at the St. Edwards Street / Brook Street junction. *Leek Action Plan* (1992) prepared for the Local Authority shows the northern end of the London Mills as among the elements that contribute to the townscape character of the historic core of Leek.
- 1.3 The London Mills, London Street, should not be confused with London Mill, on the former London (now Ashbourne) Road. This has proved a major hazard in the historical work on the building where continuity of ownership has proved the best guide backed by the occasional reference to the full address.
- 1.4 For convenience the three major elements will be referred to as the lower, middle, and upper mills throughout. No historic evidence is available to back this labelling.

2.0 *The historical background*

- 2.1 Although silk is documented in Leek from the 1670s, the industry remained predominantly domestic or quasi-domestic until well into the 19th century, with the manufacturers giving out raw material to 'undertakers' to be twisted or woven and then receiving back the finished products at their warehouses.
- 2.2 Weaving was organized by undertakers owning a number of looms and employing journeymen and apprentices. The work was carried out on the second floor over groups of two or more houses, the space being lit by elongated 'weavers' windows¹, like the Listed terrace surviving on the northern side of London Street, opposite and to the east of the upper end of the London Mills. Here 3-storey houses dating to the 1830s have 'gothic' windows to the lower floors and the 'weavers' windows characteristic of upper floor 'shades'² on the second floor. Side by side are 2-storey houses in a similar style indicating the terraces were built when the earliest factories were developing, and home working had ceased to be the only option.
- 2.3 The introduction of steam power led to an ever-increasing number of factories, and to a decline in home working, although handloom weaving co-existed with factory weaving throughout the 19th century.³ Steam power had made its appearance in the Leek silk industry by 1816 and by 1835 Leek had seven mills, with 119 powered looms, many housed in the London Mills.

1 of 10

¹ VCH VII, 108.

² The word 'shade' may mean a purpose built industrial building in which silk was twisted or woven, or part of a building used for that purpose, the sense in which it is used for the three storey house on London Street.

³ VCH VII, 108. Sources

- VCH Staffs, ii, p.210.
- SRO D 4645.A/1.30-1