

SALT OF THE EARTH

Words: Tim Locke

Sir Titus Salt created the utopian “Model Village” of Saltaire just outside Bradford in the 19th century to house his millworkers. Today, it’s home to the world’s largest private collection of works by artist and former Bradford boy David Hockney, who turns 70 this month

IF YOU WERE TRYING to identify an inspiring Victorian utopia of a town, the western fringes of Bradford just a few miles from Leeds Bradford Airport probably wouldn’t be the first place to spring to mind. But that’s precisely what Saltaire is. And, as it happens, it’s now also home to the world’s largest private collection of works by former Bradford boy David Hockney, who celebrates his 70th birthday on 9 July. The career of the tousled-haired, bespectacled artist that began by epitomising the Swinging Sixties is still evolving today. Arguable, his creations have a wider appeal than those of any other living British artist.

So it’s rather fitting that they are such a central part of Saltaire. Now a designated UNESCO World

Heritage Site, Saltaire remains one of the finest examples anywhere of an industrial village. Created by textile magnate Sir Titus Salt for his millworkers from 1853, it’s often referred to as the Model Village. For no dark satanic mill scene was this: all was sanitation, wellbeing and neat order set in a green valley, a paradise light years away from the polluted, overcrowded, disease-ridden Bradford that existed in the early 19th century.

Bradford, of course, has improved and changed immeasurably with the times, but Saltaire remains an almost miraculous survival, embodying an industrial magnate’s good intentions towards his workers. He housed them in cottages that were far superior to the back-to-backs of Bradford – with running water for instance – and provided a library, a billiard room, a laboratory, a concert hall, a gymnasium, allotments, a park but no pubs (which he saw as potential centres for social unrest). A stroll around the grid of streets takes you past the ornate Gothic almshouses, the Victoria Hall with its astonishing collection of dozens of Victorian harmoniums and reed organs – visitors are encouraged to play these – then around the imposing United Reformed Church, where Salt was buried in 1876, and to the vast, almost palatial Salts Mill, overlooking the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. The towpath now doubles as National Cycle Network Route 69.

SALTS MILL IS THE heart and soul of the village. Evoking an Italian renaissance palace in many of its details, it opened in 1853, and its austerity and

Opposite page: David Hockney, who moved to California in 1964; Below: Victoria Hall, now home to a collection of Victorian harmoniums



Photography: Mike Kipling/Alamy, Godfrey Argent/Camera Press



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“ Most good artists work all the time... What else is there to do? ”

Left: Sir Titus' vast textile factory, Salt Mill; Right: Salts Diner, Salt Mill, where some "local snaps by David Hockney" are on display



scale can appear intimidating from the outside. Step inside though and it's a different world – a joyously busy place. Hockney grew up in nearby Bradford and attended the Bradford School of Art. Local businessman Jonathan Silver, a good friend of his, bought the empty mill back in 1987 and began to fill it with Hockney's art. The two had attended the same Bradford Grammar School and first met in the 1960s, when the 14-year-old Silver asked Hockney to design a cover for the school magazine, given that he was an old boy.

Downstairs, the 1853 Gallery reveals iron pillars supporting a vaulted brick ceiling: it's hugely long, filled not only with Hockney pictures but also books on art and design, paints and brushes, interspersed with the odd anvil and dentist's chair. Hockney is a man who sketches constantly: "Most artists work all the time... especially the good artists... What else is

there to do?" It's the simple which interests him, and he experiments with different mediums. His photo collages made up of normal-sized snaps subtly distort the perspective and make something extra out of an ordinary scene, like his mother in a room in Los Angeles against a background of shag-pile carpet and a poinsettia, with Hockney's feet in paint-stained plimsolls just in view to the fore. Just off the main 1853 Gallery is an exhibition about the development of Saltaire, with Sir Titus' silver tea set and a display of family letters. In fact, Hockneys are everywhere in this building, dotted between sales areas for outdoor equipment, antiques and home furnishings. This isn't a hushed gallery but more of a space which melds art displays and meeting, eating and shopping.

Gallery Two, on the second floor, off Salts Diner, has some of the most personal Hockneys: drawings ▶

Below: *Salt Mills, Saltaire Yorks, 1997, oil on canvas* by David Hockney

Photography: Salts Mill, 1853 Gallery, Mike Kipling/Alamy, Michael Hatfield/Alamy





Left: the magnificent interior of Saltaire's United Reform Church

The walls of Salts Diner are crammed with, as the poster nicely understates: "Some local snaps by David Hockney, a local artist", his 35mm shots of the surrounding area and people enlarged and pasted together, displayed informally among the plastic high chairs and other café paraphernalia. A life-sized photo of Hockney, in well-worn cords, cotton jacket and pullover, bears his handwritten message: "Welcome to the new show. Sorry I'm not here – I'm busy in LA. Much love, David H." The paper napkins and sugar sachets bear the trademark line drawing of Hockney's dachshund Boodge.

Hockney moved to California in 1964: seeing the sun-drenched landscape of swimming pools and freeways, he declared: "My God, this place needs its Piranesi [referring to the 18th-century Italian engraver who depicted the glories of Ancient Rome] – so here I am." In this new environment he could express his homosexuality, about which he was reticent during his youth in Bradford, and famously depicted gay life in relaxed, domestic settings.

"YOU CAN TAKE the man out of Yorkshire, but you can't take Yorkshire out of the man," Jonathan Silver's brother Robin notes about Hockney's attachment to his roots. He observes that for Hockney growing up in Bradford in the 1950s it would have been like living in a Lowry painting: it was then much darker and dominated by big, smoke-blackened mills.

Hockney still paints scenes of Yorkshire, but recent paintings of his home county, it should be mentioned, are full of colour and peace. ●

Below: David Hockney at the Royal Academy in London, in front of one of a series of his paintings of the Grand Canyon, 1999

of his mother, Laura, in extreme old age, a glowing recreation of Salts Mill and the allotments and houses of Saltaire that Silver asked for when dying of cancer in 1997, a brilliantly coloured landscape of the route between Bradford and Bridlington that Hockney takes to see his family and – in black-and-white contrast – the faxed picture *Tennis*, transmitted to Salts Mill from his home in California at an artistic "happening" one evening in 1989 in the mill. Silver put up a stepladder and assembled the 144 panels according to Hockney's instructions as the fax machine spewed them out downstairs. Each A4 sheet has the transmission details along the top, just like any office fax.

Up on the third floor Hockney's opera set designs include scaled-down versions of his sets for the Glyndebourne productions of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*. *The Rake* was brilliantly conceived loosely around Hogarth's satirical engravings, and each successive scene had less and less colour as the Rake's soul was gradually drained out of him by the Devil.



Photography: Mike Kipling/Alamy, Michael Crabtree/Corbis