

# Joseph Wright

## AND THE DERBYSHIRE ENLIGHTENMENT

Paul Elliott

Joseph Wright (1734-1797) was a remarkable painter from Derby, who portrayed the scientific experiments, industrial scenes, portraits and landscapes of his day, from Derbyshire and beyond. His celebrated 'Orrery' painting, chosen for the front cover of this issue of *History West Midlands*, is seen by many as a metaphor for the Age of Enlightenment.



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Reverend d'Ewes Coke, his Wife Hannah, and Daniel Parker Coke, MP. By Joseph Wright, c. 1781-82.

## The Transformation of Eighteenth-century Derbyshire

By the second half of the eighteenth century Derby was a flourishing Georgian county town, which provided opportunities for professionals such as lawyers and medical men. It also served as an agricultural and industrial centre with important brewing, textile and china industries. Manifestations of Georgian urban renaissance prosperity included a late seventeenth-century county court building, a new assembly rooms adjoining the Market Square, improved roads and pavements, fashionable neo-classical townhouses, elegant inns and the magnificent reconstructed parish church of All Saints (designed by James Gibbs), although a growing concentration of poorer folk lived in more overcrowded conditions beside Markeaton Brook.

Other Derbyshire urban centres were also being transformed, albeit on a smaller scale. These included Chesterfield and Ashbourne, which benefited from being on the coaching routes to Manchester and the North-West, and Wirksworth, whose Moot Hall and Georgian mansions were reminders of the wealth flowing into the area from the burgeoning Peak lead mining industry.

The transformation of the urban fabric of Derby and Derbyshire, partly inspired by emulation of the metropolis, helped to foster Enlightenment cultural life.

### Wright: Rooted in Derby

Born in Derby, Joseph Wright always returned to his provincial roots, capitalising upon a local market eager to commission and purchase his paintings and taking advantage of the growing wealth and aspirations of the middling sort and gentry. Despite attempts to develop his career in Liverpool, Bath and London and a stimulating Italian tour, Wright came back to Derby for good from 1777. Wright's father, grandfather and brother were all attorneys, which provided them with a good slice of income, aspirations and a network of contacts which enabled them to succeed in provincial society.

### Portraits and Industry

After serving an apprenticeship in London with the successful portrait painter Thomas Hudson during the 1750s, Wright began producing portraits of the gentry, middling sort, merchant class and their families. Excellent examples on display at the Derby Museum include the beautiful paintings of Sarah Carver, Thomas Borrow, Samuel and Emma Crompton and the group portrait of Rev d'Ewes Coke, his wife Hannah and Daniel Parker Coke MP (c. 1781-2), which demonstrates the elegance and confidence of the landed gentry taking a stroll in the Derbyshire countryside to enjoy the natural (and improved) environment and survey their possessions.

Wright's fascination with the artistic possibilities presented by rural industry is clearly evident in his paintings of iron forges (see article by Peter Jones), which also show the increasing demand for industrial scenes as worthy subjects for artistic representation. The impact of the early Industrial Revolution upon the Derbyshire economy and landscape is indirectly clear in his portraits of members of the Arkwright and Strutt families, who pioneered the industrialisation of the Derwent Valley with their water-powered textile mills.

Wright's paintings of Richard Arkwright senior (1789-90),

Richard Arkwright junior, his wife Mary and daughter Anne (1790) and Jedediah Strutt (c. 1790) show the importance and rapidity of the transition between industrialist and landed gentry. Here Arkwright senior sits proudly with the invention that helped to transform his business prospects and create the first successful water-powered cotton manufactory at Cromford. In partnership with local landowner Peter Nightingale, much of whose wealth came from lead mining, and taking advantage of local mining draining soughs and engineering knowhow, Arkwright created a complex of mills, workshops and superior industrial residential settlements between the 1770s and 1790s, which provided a model that impacted across the globe. With their imposing granite walls and water-powered machinery, Arkwright's mills and those of his sometime partner Jedediah



Self-Portrait wearing a Black Feathered Hat.  
By Joseph Wright, circa 1773-6.

Strutt illustrate the more oppressive aspects of Industrial Enlightenment as much as the potential for economic growth and social progress.

With new and adapted technologies and forms of industrial organisation taking advantage of economies of scale, industrialists and entrepreneurs such as the Strutts and Arkwrights quickly purchased estates and secured titles. As Wright's portrait of Arkwright junior and his family demonstrates, by the 1790s their wealth placed them on a par with the aristocracy and through adroit investments in government stocks as he reduced his industrial interests, Arkwright junior was reckoned to be the wealthiest commoner in Europe by the time of his death in 1844.

### Landscapes

From the 1770s, Wright increasingly turned to landscapes including portrayals of local watercourses, rocky outcrops and trees.

Wright and his friends John Whitehurst (1713-1788) and Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802) gained considerable knowledge from local industrialists, manufacturers, landowners, lead miners, mineralogists and geologists, which informed their portrayals of Derbyshire landscapes. Wright married into a lead mining family whilst Darwin's developmental geology was founded upon close observations of landscape and topography, which included tours of lead mines conducted by miners. Wright and Darwin were attracted in particular to the rocky outcrops, dramatic gorges, valleys, edges, rivers and



## THE WONDERS OF THE PEAK

By the mid-eighteenth century the Derbyshire Peak was celebrated for its sublime and wonderful scenery in the widely disseminated work of artists such as Thomas Smith of Derby and the accounts of poets and authors. These helped to foster the growth of tourism and demand for landscape art. Fascination with the topography and landscapes of Derbyshire was stimulated by the development of travel, the mining business, the thriving trade in Derbyshire fossils and minerals, and the rise of a greater Romantic aestheticism, which placed new value on landscapes previously dismissed as inhospitable wilderness.

The Survey of Derbyshire produced by Peter Perez Burdett (1734-93) during the 1760s in its various incarnations encapsulates some of these trends and helped to stimulate travelling and study within the county.

The 'Wonders of the Peak' tradition already drew travellers such as Daniel Defoe to the county, whilst the mineral waters of Buxton and Matlock were appreciated for their alleged medicinal value and began to be subjected to study.

The Midland lexicographer and wit Dr Samuel Johnson admired the Peak Dales and Manifold Valley on his visits to Ashbourne, whilst locals and travellers from across Britain, Europe and North America came to experience the beauties of the Peak and Derwent Valley.

The Cavendish family, the most powerful and influential in the county, whose main seat was Chatsworth, developed Buxton as a fashionable spa town to be the Bath of the North, complete with a magnificent new Crescent adorned with a giant Cavendish coat of arms and a gigantic stables complex.

raging torrents of the Peak because of their sublime, picturesque and beautiful qualities. Darwin was moved to sublime ecstasy by the organic origins of the innumerable limestone rock layers composed of numerous fossilised sea shells which were 'monuments of past delight'. Whitehurst published his theory on geological strata in *An Inquiry into the Original State and Formation of the Earth* in 1778.

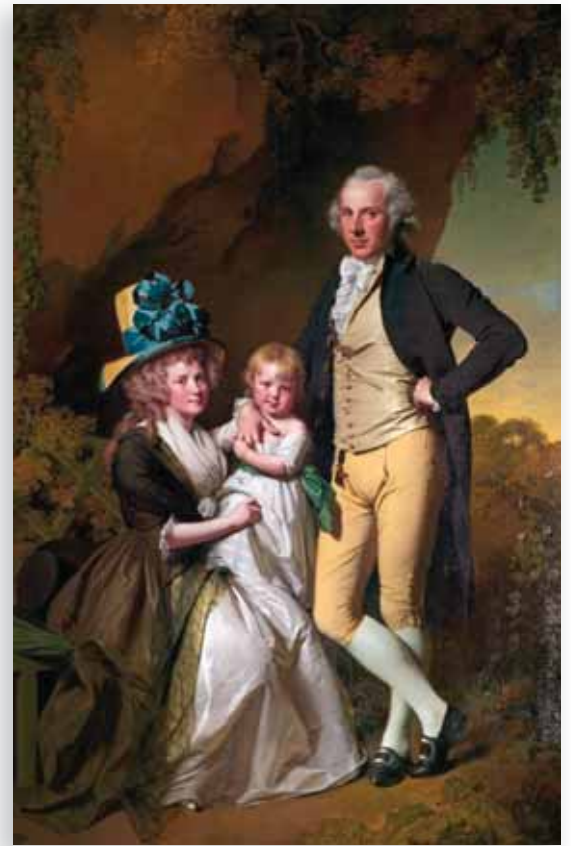
Wright's Italian tour also provided him with much inspiration for landscape studies. The bright Mediterranean light conditions and new subject opportunities presented by antiquities, historic towns and the Italian countryside impacted upon his Derbyshire landscapes. He was absorbed by patterns of light and shade provided by the moon and play of moonlight.

He also created many landscape scenes of Vesuvius in different states of eruption, and this seems to have fascinated him more than anything else that he observed in Italy. He included a depiction of Vesuvius in his portrait of Whitehurst (c. 1782-3) which was inspired by his Italian experiences, but also alluded to the Derby geologist's belief in the operation of 'central fires' as an active agent in shaping the geology and landscape.

### Wright and the Enlightenment

Whilst the Enlightenment has frequently been characterised as the age of reason, much of Wright's work demonstrates that the artists, writers and philosophers of the time also strove to encapsulate a heightened sense of feeling and emotion in their work and to explore the relationship between the aesthetic grammar of neo-classicism and the apparent rationality of Newtonian science.

Just as Wright found natural philosophy, industry and sublime landscapes to be suitable subjects for his art, his work also shows the impact of other manifestations of Enlightenment ideas, including the most characterful portraits and studies based upon fashionable literary subjects.



Richard Arkwright (junior), his wife Mary, and child.  
By Joseph Wright, 1790.

Wright's growing propensity towards melancholia and depression also provided him with insights into the power and representation of moods, feelings and emotions and impacted upon the character of some of his paintings. In *Maria* (1777), for instance, a painting of a character from Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768), Wright strove to depict her sense of solitude and even distress. Similarly, Wright's large painting of *Romeo and Juliet* was prompted by the renewed fascination with Shakespeare which was encapsulated by the success of David Garrick as an expressive actor on the London stage, the Shakespeare festival at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1769 and Samuel Johnson's new edition of the works of Shakespeare.

A feeling of melancholy and depression also pervades other of Wright's works and is evident in the sense of darkness and gloom in the *Earthstopper on the Banks of the Derwent* (exhibited 1773), where the workman toils valiantly and forlornly in a dark landscape of sharp crags, twisted vegetation, broken trees and ever-impending darkness. Here and in Wright's darkest moods, the fragile flame of Enlightenment was barely able to dispel the darkness of irrationality. ●



Jedediah Strutt.  
By Joseph Wright,  
c. 1790.

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#### Further Reading

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Sarah Carver  
and her daughter  
Sarah. By Joseph  
Wright, c. 1767-70.

## COVER STORY

**A Philosopher Giving that Lecture on the Orrery in which a Lamp is put in the Place of the Sun**, by Joseph Wright of Derby, exhibited in 1766.

**Lucy Bamford**

**J**oseph Wright of Derby's celebrated 'Orrery' is an undisputed masterpiece of British art. It depicts a contemporary scene of a scientific lecture. A red-gowned philosopher demonstrates the workings of the solar system using a clockwork model known as an Orrery. At its centre an oil lamp is carefully placed to replicate the sun's bright rays. A young girl points to Saturn and the shadow of a moon cast upon its surface, indicating the subject of the demonstration to be on the effects of eclipses.

Scientific lectures and demonstrations presented by travelling scientists were a popular form of public entertainment during Wright's lifetime (1734-1797). As an artist who showed an early interest in mechanics and science, Wright may have attended lectures on astronomy and pneumatics, at the Town Hall in Derby during the 1750s and 1760s. These events may have inspired the subject of this painting as well as his later, equally famous, 'Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump', first exhibited in 1768, and now in the National Gallery.

Wright's 'Orrery' engages with the ideas presented in such lectures. Isaac Newton's theory of the universe formed the foundation of eighteenth-century lectures on astronomy. His discovery of the force of gravity explained how the planets moved around the sun. This confirmation that the Earth was not the centre of the solar system changed the way people viewed themselves, their relationship to God and the world around them. Wright's figures appear to reflect Newton's theory, their illuminated faces recalling the faces of the planets as they orbit the sun. Light unites them in an understanding of their place within this larger, ordered system.

Nourished by his upbringing and residence in Derby, and through his contact with some of the leading figures of the time, Wright was perfectly placed to capture the spirit and excitement of this transformative age.

Initially painted on a speculative basis, 'The Orrery' was later purchased by Washington Shirley, 5th Earl Ferrers, an amateur astronomer whose observations on the Transit of Venus of 1761 earned him a Fellowship with the Royal Society. The painting was acquired by Derby Museum and Art Gallery in 1884, forming the foundation of what is now the world's largest collection of works by Wright (see Places to Visit).

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<http://www.derbymuseums.org>