

What was the motive behind the founding of Saltaire? MIKE PRIESTLEY investigates



A COMMUNITY CREATED: The early days of Salt's Mill with the Congregational Church (right centre) and the hospital (top right), which were built for his workers by Sir Titus Salt in the late 19th century

# Titus the tyrant or Salt of the earth?

**S**ALTAIRE is a remarkable place even today.

So what an impact it must have made when it grew from the green fields of Alfedale in the 1850s, a model village created alongside a massive mill in a countryside setting to provide working and living conditions which were worlds away from those endured by most wool-textile workers in the soot-blackened, disease-ridden streets of Bradford.

But why did Sir Titus Salt build and equip it with a school, two churches, an institute, a hospital, almshouses and a park?

Was it pure philanthropy, a genuine desire to improve the lot of working men and women?

Or was it to create a "soft prison" where the political militancy of the Chartist movement which was causing no end of strife in West Yorkshire could be bought off by good housing and other amenities?

There has long been a suspicion that Sir Titus's motives were not entirely altruistic. That was acknowledged even at his funeral by the Rev J. Robertson Campbell, who said: "Soiled whispers may hint, no doubt, that the great undertaking in which he was engaged brought to him a harvest of honour and reputation."

When Salt stood for Parliament, the word was spread by his opponents that he had moved out of Bradford to avoid paying taxes.

However, as local historian Dorothy White pointed out in the book *Titus of Salts*, published in 1976 to mark the centenary of Sir Titus's death: "Whispers and accusations are attracted by any man in a public position . . . A man employing as many workpeople as Titus Salt is just wide open to charges of profiteering at the expense of his workers and taking all the credit for their labours".

**J**ohn Styles confronts the same controversial matter of motivation in a highly readable new book, *Titus Salt and Saltaire - Industry and Virtue*, published by Salts Estates Ltd to sell initially at the 1853 Gallery at the mill.

Styles, lecturer in social history at the University of Bristol, was at Bradford Grammar School with Jonathan Silver, the current owner of the mill, many of whose photographs of the village are used in the book.

He asks, rhetorically, if Salt's paternalism was a device for securing a captive workforce which could be indoctrinated into disciplined behaviour that ensured continued profits?

"These pejorative ways of characterising Saltaire may have an element of truth, but they are far from being the whole story," he declares.

"Salt did not have to move to Saltaire to control disciplined



SIR TITUS SALT: "Believed he should use the power and wealth God had given him to intervene in public affairs"

have prospered in the 1850s and 1860s even if amenities had not been provided there on such a lavish scale.

"Moreover, it is not clear that the disciplined, regulated tenor of life in Saltaire was something foisted on reluctant workers in order to shackle and constrain them.

"Rather it was something in which they colluded. Indeed, Salt was probably giving many of them what they wanted.

"In spending to improve conditions for his workers, Salt was doing what the working-class radicals of the 1840s had criticised employers for failing to do.

"Indeed, he was doing what they

never do. He was acknowledging that the relationship between master and men amounted to more than simply the performance of a task for the payment of a wage."

John Styles points out the gap which existed at that time between the attitude of workers to their bosses and the socialist egalitarianism which was to lead to the founding of the Labour Party.

Most working people wanted their employers to acknowledge mutual obligations above and beyond the wage contract.

From the other side of the social fence, Titus Salt saw life in much the same terms. He combined great personal ambition with an overwhelming sense of duty and a vision of Saltaire as (in John Styles's words) "more than simply a har-

Salt, a deeply religious man, credited God with his entrepreneurial success. Mr Styles writes: "If amassing a great fortune was a sign of divine favour, it also imposed great obligations . . . He believed he should use the wealth and power God had given him to intervene in public affairs. Thereby he could help create the kind of environment in which others would lead virtuous, harmonious and godly lives."

Bradford and his social and environmental efforts to put his dreams into practice.

At the end of the 1840s, Titus Salt hit his mid-life crisis. Should he retire, which at the age of 50 he could well afford to do? Or should he found his model village at Saltaire?

"It was not just business considerations that drew Salt there," writes John Styles.

"At Saltaire he could pursue his reforming objectives on a scale he could manage himself, unhindered by the setbacks, limitations and compromises that were inevitable in a large, growing town with problems as intractable as Bradford's."

**S**alt was an authoritarian. He wanted to improve the moral, intellectual and social status of the working class and bring about a harmonious society — but with people like himself still firmly in charge.

"Nevertheless, it would be wrong to dismiss his approach as entirely autocratic," warns Mr Styles. "Although he was guided by a sense of personal mission, a belief that he was doing God's work, his chosen

role was that of facilitator, helping working people to help themselves. He was a paternalist, not a tyrant."

Anyone seeking to understand Titus Salt's personality gets little help from the man himself. Although he was very active in civic life, and served as an MP for many years, he was a poor and unenthusiastic public speaker. Nor was he a diarist or letter writer.

He was, in Dorothy White's delightful description, "a man of perhaps as few words as could carry a human being through life."

Yet he did leave a clue to himself in a written reply to Lord Harewood's 1853 inquiry as to why he had created Saltaire instead of retiring to enjoy his wealth.

"As a landed proprietor, I felt I should be out of my element," he explained. "You are a nobleman with all the influence that rank and large estates can bring. Consequently you have power and influence in the country.

"But outside of my business I am nothing. In it, I have considerable influence. By the opening of Saltaire, I also hope to do good to my fellow men."

• *Titus Salt and Saltaire - Industry and Virtue* is available from the 1853 Gallery at