

# A model of innovation

A workers’ village boasting light-filled houses and green parks set a new standard for urban planning in the 19th century. **CONNIE ROUT** takes a tour of Sir Titus Salt’s trailblazing industrial-age project

What springs to mind when you picture a Victorian mill town? Probably not the green parks, neoclassical architecture and Turkish bath of Saltaire – the model village built by Sir Titus Salt for his workers in the mid-19th century.

Today, Saltaire – just outside Bradford, the 2025 UK City of Culture – is characterised by its charming terraced houses and quirky independent shops. Thanks to information boards dotted around the streets and a free heritage trail, anyone can explore the story of this trailblazing industrial-age project.

In 1851, when building commenced at Saltaire, Bradford’s population had ballooned to more than 103,000. It was the UK’s fastest-growing city, and its crowded, unsanitary streets told a particularly Dickensian tale.

Seeing these problems, Titus Salt – a self-made Bradford industrialist – had a novel idea. He wanted to move his textile production from the stinking city to the surrounding countryside, and bring his workers with it. The result was Saltaire, built across from Salts Mill. It’s one of the finest examples of philanthropic paternalism in the world.

Recognising the importance of a healthy workforce (and, as a fervent Congregationalist, a clean moral conscience), Salt envisaged a village in which families could live comfortably, and hired the architecture firm Lockwood and Mawson to build it. Once completed, Saltaire was noted for its innovative approach to town planning, and set the benchmark for other model villages such as George Cadbury’s Bournville in Birmingham.


The architects, steered by Salt’s vision, could never have guessed that their creation would still be celebrated 150 years later. In 2001, Saltaire was named a Unesco World Heritage Site for its contribution to industrial

social welfare and urban planning. Exploring the orderly streets and cobbled terraces today, there are a few hints at the perks of 19th-century life in Saltaire. The abundance of public amenities is one: there was a school, a hospital, public greens and an ‘institute’ containing a gymnasium and lecture hall, among other facilities.

Then there are the considerate extras you have to know about to appreciate. For example, Lockwood and Mawson designed the streets to be just the right width and the houses just the right height to ensure that plenty of light flooded into every home. Salts Mill itself was purposefully built downwind of the houses to avoid harmful smoke pollution wafting into the village.

Even more astounding for the time, each house had running water, gas lights and a toilet (albeit outside), no matter the status of its tenants. Almshouses overlooking a public green provided elderly and infirm individuals with a place to live free of rent; they also received a weekly pension, 41 years before the first state pension was issued.

On a sunny day, modern visitors can enjoy a picnic by the river Aire in Roberts Park, or a stroll down the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. You can also step off the village heritage trail and into the mill itself. Here, the heat and noise of wool production have long died away, but the People and Process exhibition makes sure the story of Saltaire lives on in its fascinating museum collection.

Elsewhere in the mill, art enthusiasts will appreciate a permanent display of work by Bradford-born David Hockney, alongside thriving independent shops and the UK’s only Peace Museum. Clearly, the merging of creativity, industry and social advocacy continues to characterise Bradford’s one-of-a-kind model village. 

Connie Rout is a freelance writer specialising in heritage and tourism. She also runs a lighthearted blog, [historicalallsorts.wordpress.com](https://historicalallsorts.wordpress.com)

 For more information, head to [visitbradford.com](https://visitbradford.com)

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Salts Mill is now home to the 1853 Gallery, housing a large collection of David Hockney’s art



Titus Salt was a devout Christian, so it was important to him that the Saltaire United Reformed Church was at the heart of the village



Founded in 1851, Saltaire and its textile mill were located on the Leeds and Liverpool canal, which was a useful transport link

RIGHT: British industrialist Sir Titus Salt (1803–76) made his fortune from alpaca wool and built Salts Mill  
BELOW: All of the millworkers’ houses in Saltaire had running water, gas lighting and an outside toilet

