

Sir Richard Arkwright (1732 - 1792)

Arkwright is considered the father of the modern industrial factory system and his inventions were a catalyst for the Industrial Revolution.

Richard Arkwright was born in Preston in 1732, the son of a tailor. Money was not available to send him to school, but his cousin Ellen taught him to read and write.

He began working as an apprentice barber and it was only after the death of his first wife that he became an entrepreneur. His second marriage to Margaret Biggins in 1761 brought a small income that enabled him to expand his barber's business. He acquired a secret method for dyeing hair and travelled around the country purchasing human hair for use in the manufacture of wigs. During this time he was often in contact with weavers and spinners and when the fashion for wearing wigs declined, he looked to mechanical inventions in the field of textiles to make his fortune.



Sir Richard Arkwright ©

By 1767, a machine for carding cotton had been introduced into England and James Hargreaves had invented the spinning jenny. With the help of a clockmaker, John Kay, who had been working on a mechanical spinning machine, Arkwright made improvements that produced a stronger yarn and required less physical labour. His new carding machine was patented in 1775.

Arkwright's fortunes continued to rise and he constructed a horse-driven spinning mill at Preston - the first of many. He developed mills in which the whole process of yarn manufacture was carried on by one machine and this was further complemented by a system in which labour was divided, greatly improving efficiency and increasing profits. Arkwright was also the first to use James Watts' steam engine to power textile machinery, though he only used it to pump water to the millrace of a waterwheel. From the combined use of the steam engine and the machinery, the power loom was eventually developed.

From 1775, a series of court cases challenged Arkwright's patents as copies of others work, and they were revoked in 1785. Nonetheless, Arkwright was knighted in 1786 and by the time of his death on 3 August 1792, Arkwright had established factories in Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Lancashire and Scotland, and was a wealthy man.

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