

WORLD HERITAGE IN THE MIDLANDS

Anna Woodham

Few people realise that the West Midlands' rich heritage includes two internationally designated World Heritage Sites, the Ironbridge Gorge in Shropshire and the Derwent Valley Mills in Derbyshire.

The two sites, or 'properties' as they are known, were inscribed on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)'s World Heritage List. They are considered as internationally significant as sites such as the Taj Mahal, the Pyramids at Giza and the Great Barrier Reef.

Becoming a World Heritage Site

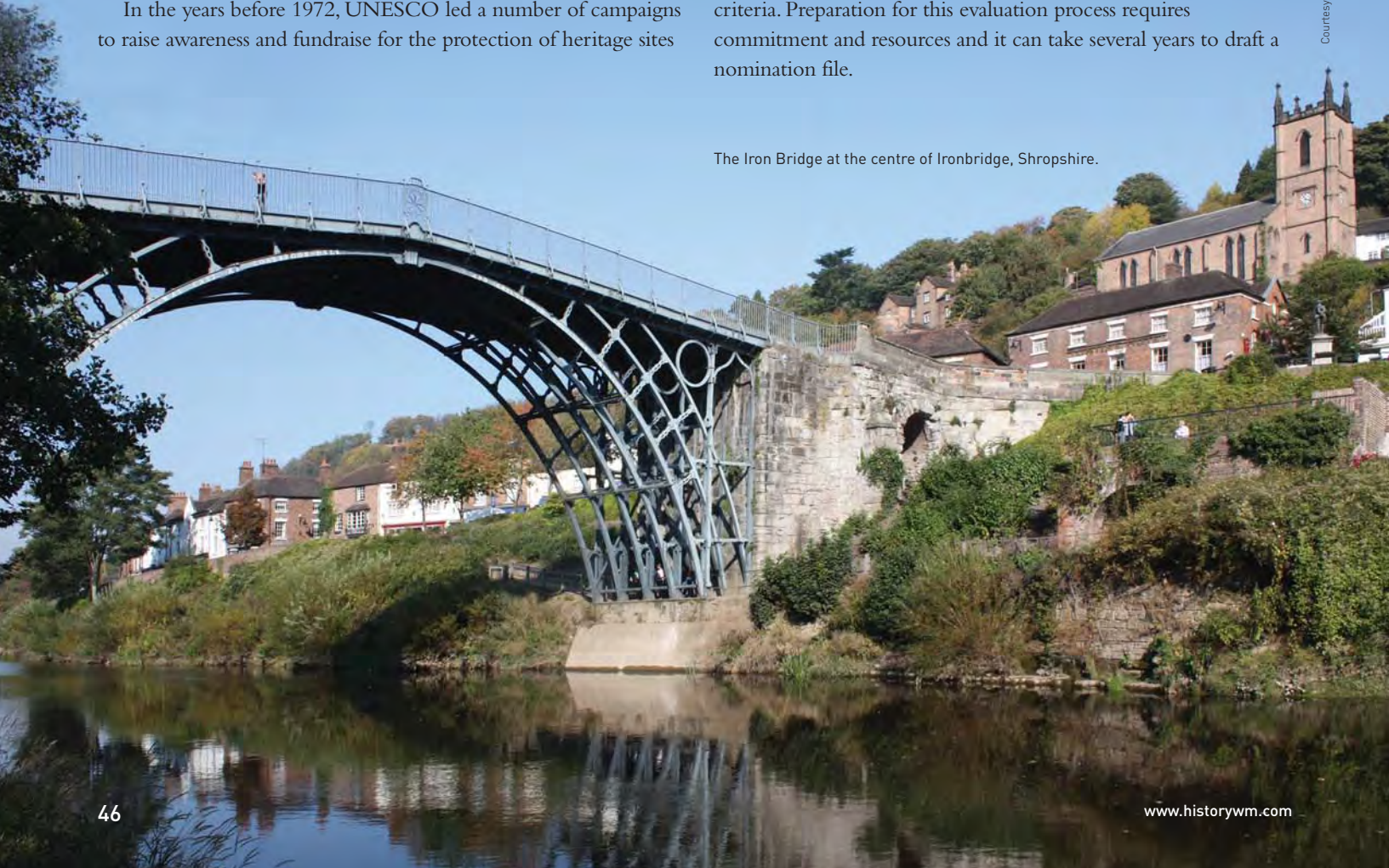
In 1972, UNESCO adopted the Convention concerning the protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage, an international instrument whose aim is to promote the collective protection of the most significant examples of cultural or natural heritage. The convention was the result of a growing movement, post-World War II, to protect heritage across international borders.

In the years before 1972, UNESCO led a number of campaigns to raise awareness and fundraise for the protection of heritage sites

that were under severe threat. It was the imminent flooding of the Abu Simbel Temples in Egypt by the construction of the Aswan High Dam in 1959 and the floods in Venice in 1966 which famously formed the focus of these campaigns and succeeded in rallying the support of members of the international community. From this demonstration of support UNESCO drafted what is now considered to be its most successful convention. In 2015, it had 191 signatories, including the UK.

Countries which have ratified the convention can nominate one property per year for inscription onto the World Heritage List. Once nominated, inscription to the list is far from a *fait accompli*, as the nominating country must demonstrate to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee that the site is of outstanding universal value, meeting one or more of ten specific criteria. Preparation for this evaluation process requires commitment and resources and it can take several years to draft a nomination file.

The Iron Bridge at the centre of Ironbridge, Shropshire.



Courtesy Roger White

There are 1031 properties inscribed on the World Heritage List, as of June 2015. The majority are cultural sites (802) but there are also 197 natural sites and 32 properties which are considered to be mixed cultural-natural sites. The UK has 29 World Heritage Sites, including the latest inscription, the Forth Bridge in Scotland in June 2015.

The World Heritage Convention at its heart concerns the protection of the world's common heritage for future generations. Inscription onto the World Heritage List acts as a way of identifying which sites have special global significance and of encouraging their protection. The World Heritage label does not come with any funding, and a site receives no money from UNESCO. The World Heritage label is often associated, rightly or wrongly, with an increase in tourism to an area.

Courtesy Roger White



The Derwent River was harnessed to power the machinery for the Derwent Valley Mills, Derbyshire.

The Ironbridge Gorge

The Ironbridge Gorge was among the first properties to be nominated by the UK and was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1986. In the early years of the convention, countries could nominate multiple sites and Ironbridge was inscribed in the same year as Stonehenge and Avebury, Durham Castle and Cathedral, and the Castles and Town Walls of King Edward in Gwynedd.

Surprisingly Ironbridge was inscribed before more traditional symbols of the UK's heritage such as the Palace of Westminster, Westminster Abbey and the Tower of London. The fact that the site was put forward by the UK as one of its first inscriptions is indicative of the extent to which this industrial landscape was felt to have global significance. The inscription is more than the site of the Iron Bridge, extending beyond it in either direction and including both banks of the Severn to cover an area of 5.5 square kilometres (550 hectares). The designated area includes Coalport, Coalbrookdale, Ironbridge, Jackfield and part of Madeley.

Lying at the southern end of a coalfield, known as the 'Coalbrookdale Coalfield', the Ironbridge Gorge represents a cohesive landscape containing traces of the structures and infrastructure symbolic of rapid industrialisation and the product of intense human activity. It includes mines, railway lines, Abraham Derby's famous blast furnace and other industrial features.

The Iron Bridge, which has come to symbolise the site, acted as a symbol of technological achievement in manufacturing and

design, and was a draw for visitors from the time it was built in the late eighteenth century. The landscape also contains workers' housing, warehouses and wharfs. Inscribed under 4 of the 10 UNESCO criteria, the site's outstanding universal value derives from its completeness as an ensemble and its association with an era which had a profound effect on human development.

The Derwent Valley Mills

The West Midlands' second World Heritage Site is the Derwent Valley Mills, inscribed in 2001, some 15 years after the Ironbridge Gorge, but the Derwent Valley Mills' World Heritage status is less known. The property, whose principal features are a series of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cotton mills dispersed across a landscape, encompasses a much larger area than the Ironbridge Gorge, covering a 24km stretch of the Lower Derwent Valley from Matlock to Derby.

The area contains 23 key properties, such as Richard Arkwright's Cromford and Masson mills and the Derby Silk Mill (among others) and, like the Ironbridge Gorge, the inscription also recognises many of the associated settlements, transport networks and river weirs. The Derwent Valley Mills site is inscribed under 2 UNESCO criteria, as a site where significant technological developments occurred, leading to a large-scale and rapid social change.

The property is also symbolic of the harnessing of natural energy from the Derwent River to power the machinery housed in each mill complex, and the mills themselves associated with the origin of the modern factory. Once again, like the Ironbridge Gorge, the Derwent Valley Mills are a product of their location combined with human invention. Without the underlying geology and topography neither site would exist in the form it does today. ●

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Further Reading

To find out about the sites on the World Heritage List, including the Ironbridge Gorge and Derwent Valley Mills, go to:

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>

UNESCO Inscription criteria: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>