

# INTRODUCTION

The Derwent flows through a landscape offering unrivalled beauty and variety, and this book has offered an exciting challenge in presenting its progress in a series of paintings. Rising in high moorland it tumbles along a steep sided valley dropping a thousand feet in six miles to reach 'Lakeland Derbyshire', a chain of distinctive reservoirs with conifer-clad valley sides and moorland heights. A series of gritstone edges takes us towards the limestone gorge of Matlock. Gritstone edges on the eastern side continue to Baslow, and one example, Curbar Edge, is shown in the paintings on page 11. The middle range of the River encounters the limestone gorge at Matlock, introducing some of the most spectacular scenery in Britain and eliciting praise from poets such as Byron who compared this with 'anything as fair in Greece or Switzerland'. The valley, now more gentle and thickly wooded, takes us towards the northern outskirts of Derby from which the River flows lazily over a wide flood plain to join the Trent after a journey of 66 miles.

The Derwent experiences a wide variety of geographical conditions, which in turn introduce a variety of different habitats for wildlife, providing a diverse range of flora and fauna along its length. On windswept moorland 2000 feet above sea level, near the River's source, heather, grasses and various berry bushes survive the harsh environment, but as the River tumbles down its steep valley trees and copses emerge. Extensive conifer forests planted around the reservoirs give way to deciduous woodlands and ultimately a rich agricultural valley as the River flows through Derby and on to the Trent.

The high moorlands are home to mountain hares – one of the few places in Britain where they are found outside Scotland – and endangered raptors like the merlin and hen harrier are present here. Goshawks are resident around the reservoirs, the woods also support crossbills and redpoll, and on the dark, brooding reservoirs themselves an osprey will make an appearance once in a while. The Derwent valley is particularly favoured by the pied flycatcher and newcomers like the goosander have colonised the River enthusiastically. I don't want to dwell here too much on individual species, but it is encouraging to note the otter is making a welcome return, and hopefully this may be followed by salmon in the not too distant future.

The swift flow of the Derwent prompted a number of cotton mills to be constructed in the last third of the eighteenth century and these played a major part in shaping the industrial revolution. Key individuals like Arkwright and Strutt were leaders in harnessing water power for cotton spinning, and started the industrialisation of the Derwent Valley, which has developed and diversified over two hundred years. The valley is now regarded with such interest by historians that World Heritage Status has been proposed for the section of the River from Cromford to Derby, and its prospects look encouraging. Cotton spinning, however, was found over much of the Derwent, and its swift waters have driven mills for various purposes for many centuries.

Villages and towns add interest, history and character to the progress of the Derwent, and for the artist their old bridges, riverside buildings and colourful customs provide a rich diversity of subjects. One of the finest country houses in Britain is situated by the River at Chatsworth where the Derwent flows through a Capability Brown parkland. The estate village of Edensor, with its striking architecture, contrasts sharply with the worker village at Cromford where Arkwright built functional, stone houses for his mill workers.

Recently an organisation known as the Derwent Valley Trust has been introduced, with the objective of promoting the beauty and heritage of the Derwent Valley as an important natural asset. Another aspect of the Trust's activity is the Heritage Way, a long-distance footpath which is being developed to take the visitor by riverside paths from the reservoirs in the north to Elvaston Castle near Derby in the south.

My project to record the Derwent in this series of paintings has taken more than three years and has necessitated many visits and many miles of walking along its delightful banks. In some instances I have visited the same locations several times in order to appreciate the changes that are brought about by different seasons. Sometimes I have been unlucky with the weather, but another occasion has offered a glorious day to make the scene sparkle.

A question I am often asked is 'Do you prefer watercolours or oils?' My answer offends neither camp as I really don't mind which medium I use. For me, the interest of painting lies in developing the subject with emphasis on content, focus, depth, lighting and atmosphere, whilst the mechanics and techniques of the medium are not important issues. Having made this point, most of the colour reproductions in this book are watercolours. For my field sketches I normally use charcoal, which is fast and fluent, and some of these, even some which have taken a few minutes, are reproduced here and these contrast with the carefully worked-out watercolours.

Another question often posed at exhibitions is 'Isn't it difficult to part with them?' It is true there is sometimes a considerable wrench when they are sold, since a great deal of work and thought goes into them. No artist can produce a painting any other way. It is therefore natural with so much of your life-force and creativity behind your work to feel sad when you part with them. This book is the logical conclusion where these paintings can be kept together as a complete record, but also as an opportunity to present some of my experiences in visiting the Derwent and to record aspects of this fascinating river.