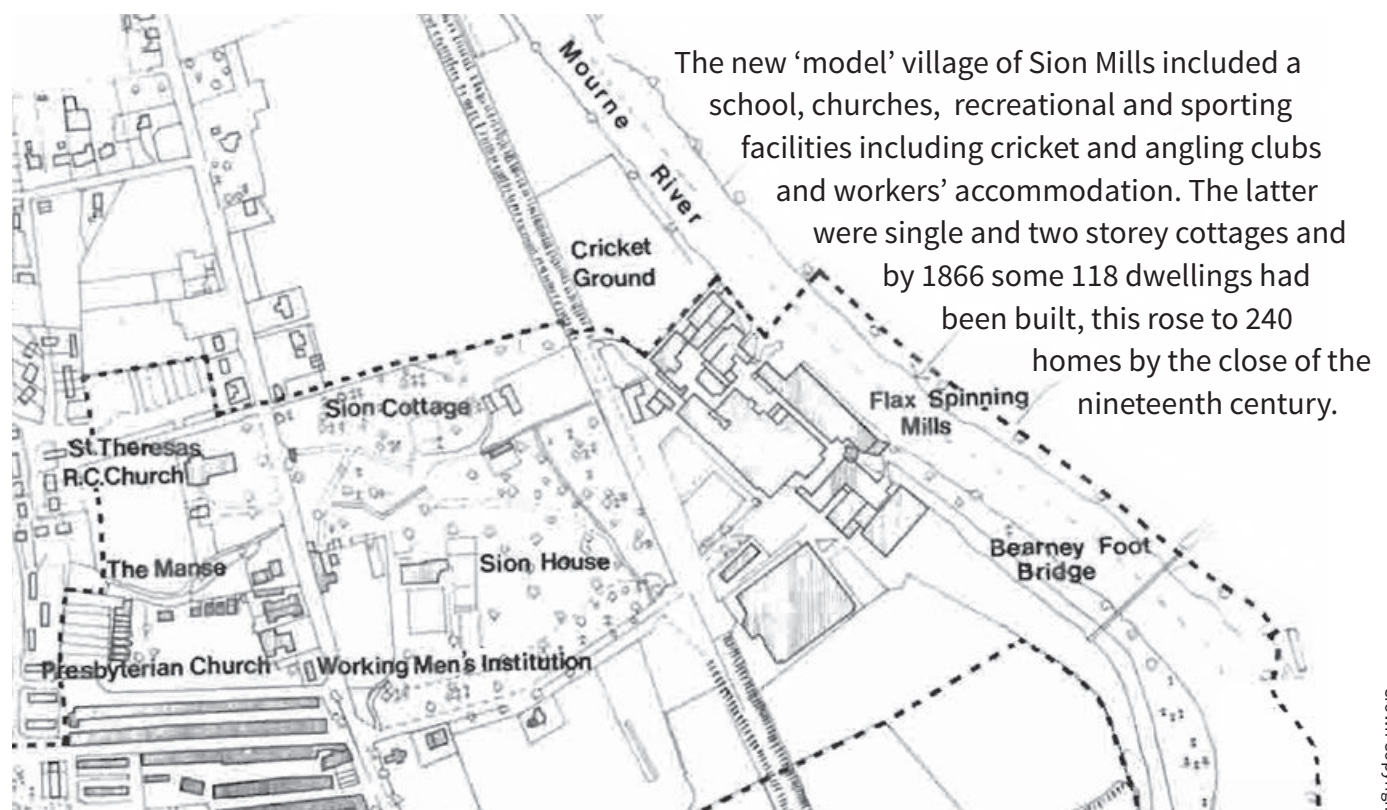


Teacher Information Card (1 of 2)**The Herdman Family and Sion Mills**

Captain Herdman, of Herdmanston, Ayrshire was the first of the family to arrive in Ulster in 1688, and he fought for King William III at the Battle of the Boyne before settling at Glenavy, County Antrim. Further members of the family arrived from Ayrshire in 1699 and established themselves as farmers. By the 1830s three Herdman brothers (James, John and George) were involved in businesses within Belfast. James, the eldest brother, inherited Millfield Tannery from his father, and John went into partnership with the Mulhollands who owned the York Street Spinning Mill. In 1835 all three brothers in partnership with Andrew and Sinclair Mulholland and Robert Lyons purchased a flour mill in the district of Seein, near Strabane, County Tyrone. Seein, meaning a fairy mound, when spoken in a broad Ulster country accent evolved into Sion.

Among the economic factors that brought the Herdmans and their partners to Sion were: the existence of the old mill which could be adapted to the spinning process; a reliable supply of water throughout the year from the river Mourne; the proximity to a large number of flax growers in North West Ulster; the port at Londonderry; and a readily available pool of labour. The old flour mill was converted into a linen mill and production commenced in November 1835 with 75 employees. In 1849 when the Herdman brothers had bought out all of their business partners, over 400 worked at the mill. Between 1853 and 1855 a new mill was built, with a top storey added in 1879. By this time the mill was employing over 1,000 people and at its peak this number would rise to 1,500 workers.

But the Herdmans were not solely interested in the production of linen. From the outset they sought to create a moral, God-fearing, temperate (they banned Public Houses in the village), educated and non-sectarian community by building a model village. This was based on Saltaire village located on the outskirts of Bradford, West Yorkshire constructed by the textile magnate, Titus Salt.



Teacher Information Card (2 of 2)

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Sion House, built in 1846, was the home of James Herdman, and was described as ‘a square Irish country house’. It was the work of the 19th century architect Sir Charles Lanyon who would go on to design Queens University and Crumlin Road Gaol and Courthouse. In 1883 the Herdman dwelling was significantly modified to become a long, part-timbered, part-plastered Elizabethan style mansion with verandas and balconies.

For the next 70 years this new Sion House played host to generations of the Herdman family. Celia Ferguson (née Herdman) one of the two last direct descendants living in Ireland, reminisces: “*Sion House was my grandfather’s home. I lived there after the Second World War. It was such a busy house! As well as my relatives and a Welsh nanny, there was a cook and four or five parlour maids. A dairy maid, washer maid and four gardeners came during the day. The head gardener lived in the gatelodge. It was very self-sufficient.*”

In 1967 Sion House and its contents were auctioned, the house going for only £5,000 and the contents £3,000. The mill ceased spinning linen in 2004 and the company that owned the mill went into receivership in 2011.