

The Silent Monitor



This small four-sided wooden block was known as a 'silent monitor' and was used by Robert Owen as a means of imposing discipline at his New Lanark Mills.

Robert Owen was strongly opposed to the use of corporal punishment, so in order to keep discipline at the New Lanark Mills, he devised a 'silent monitor' or telegraph'. This was hung next to each worker in the mills, with each side displaying a different colour. 'Bad' behaviour was represented by the colour black; 'indifferent' was represented by blue; 'good' by yellow; and 'excellent' by white. The superintendent was responsible for turning the monitors every day, according to how well or badly the worker had behaved. A daily note was then made of the conduct of the workers in the 'books of character' which were provided for each department in the mills.

If any employee thought that the superintendent was unfair, he or she had the right to complain before the entry was recorded in the book but such complaints very rarely occurred.

The silent monitor was introduced by Owen very soon after he and his partners took over the mills in 1800. Similar to a system used by other progressive educationalists such as Joseph Lancaster, Owen intended to reverse the undesirable qualities which he had found among the workers by the device without resorting to punishment. However, firm measures were required, in his view, as "the difficulty of overcoming that which has long been wrong greatly exceeds the difficulty of putting matters right from the beginning."

Among his many new management tools were not only the books of character but the 'produce' and 'report' books which aided strict stock control and performance monitoring and, along with regular staff searches, soon eliminated the extensive theft that appears to have been commonplace prior to Owen's tenure. While Owen reckoned that it took him some 8 years "to lay the foundation for future progress", it seems that his new methods brought quick improvements – "It was gratifying to observe the new spirit created by these silent monitors".

Replicas of the silent monitor can be bought in the New Lanark Mill Shop – try one!