Hidden river at the heart of Belfast to be exposed

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Belfast was founded at a sandy ford across the river, which is the origin of its name – Béal Feirste means the Mouth of the Farset – and the waterway's heritage is intertwined with the history of the city. HLF has earmarked £98,500 for a cross-community project to highlight this hidden heritage, which is set to be run by Cultúrlann in conjunction with the Spectrum Centre.

The groups plan to redevelop land around an exposed part of the river and also produce a full heritage package – including an exhibition, Farset app, public information signs, and tours with trained guides – that will highlight the heritage to local people and also attract tourism.

As Belfast grew, the Farset's banks became the quaysides of a burgeoning merchant city. Now it runs under High Street in a tunnel big enough for a bus, but its influence can still be spotted in local names, Skipper Street runs off the main thoroughfare, while pubs such as the Crow's Nest and Mermaid Inn are nearby.

Historical mentions of the river date back to the Dark Ages, with one reference to the ford concerning a battle between the Ulidians and Picts at the ford in 667. Until the 19th century the river flowed south east through the city, rising nearby to where the Crumlin Road becomes Ballyutoag Road, and merging near the mouth of the Lagan around the location of The Big Fish.

It helped power Belfast as it became an industrial city, including supporting mills and factories that line its route from Legoniel to the Lagan, through places like Greater Shankill and Millfield. Today it is almost entirely hidden by culverts, visible only in a few spots, such as in Townsend Street Enterprise Park and close to Shankill Cemetery.

The project will see the creation of an exhibition, outdoor heritage information boards, a heritage app, 15 trained tour guides and a cleared and landscaped piece of the Farset. Cultúrlann and the Spectrum Centre expect that, as well as the benefit for the local community, around 3,000 people per year will make a visit to their Farset facilities.

Eimear Ní Mhathúna, from Cultúrlann, said: "People often say 'if walls could talk' but if rivers could talk the Farset would tell the story of Belfast.

"From its first settlers, who named it Béal Feirste, 'the mouth of the sandbank (Farset)', to the three castles of High Street and the development of the linen industries, foundries and distilleries that Belfast was famous for and the communities that grew up around them, the Farset river is at the core of Belfast's natural, built, industrial, commercial and social history.

"Many of the people living by the river are not aware that it is there and those that are may not be aware of its significance. People have been brought up in communities without knowing why their neighbourhoods are placed where they are because there are few physical indicators to link them to the past.

"Where there were once rows of mill houses, there are now housing estates. Where old neighbourhoods like Millfield with its distilleries and flour mills once stood, there is a technical college, motorway and an interface barrier with no trace of the river that once powered the mills after which the area is named."

Paul Mullan, Head of HLF Northern Ireland, said: “This is a fascinating project as it will work with communities to reveal the heritage that is literally running under our feet. It will betelling a story that is central to the development of Belfast but which has largely been forgotten.

“HLF is always seeking to support good project ideas that can reap benefits for heritage, people and communities. This project has the potential to draw out lots of different stories about the development of Belfast, including the wider industrial heritage which features more than the well-known shipbuilding industry. We are looking forward to seeing how this project develops."