

New investment is reawakening Ulster Folk



Ulster Folk Museum is creating new facilities and ways for people to get involved. Credit: Johnny Frazer.

The transformative £50million redevelopment project will help bring people closer to their shared heritage.

In times when it can be hard to make sense of the present, let alone the past, museums have the potential to be more relevant than ever.

Ulster Folk Museum's innovative [Reawakening project](#) is about keeping heritage alive for future generations. The project, now entering its delivery phase, is realising that ambition by reconnecting with its own heritage to help visitors reconnect with theirs.

Rediscovering the museum's purpose

Kathryn Thomson, CEO of National Museums NI, says: "The Ulster Folk Museum was one of the first peace-building facilities in Northern Ireland in that it was created with the specific purpose of exploring our shared heritage, but also our cultural diversity. We want to bring that back to the fore in terms of what people can learn and experience when they come here."

Aaron Ward, Director of Public Engagement at National Museums NI, explains that when the museum was founded in the 1950s “it set out to illustrate the diversity that makes the people of Ulster who they are. But it recognised it was doing so in a society that was often characterised by division.

“Over time, that purpose had become less clear. So through this project we’re asking two simple but important questions: what is this museum here to do for people and how do we reconnect with that sense of purpose?”

Listening to audiences

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Heritage crafts provide opportunities to slow down and connect with the past. Credit: Johnny Frazer.

Aaron says: “The development phase allowed us to start bringing our audiences, funders and stakeholders along with us on that journey.

“We’ve piloted new types of engagement, learning and volunteering, and that’s helped us understand that people are really looking for connection with heritage. But they don’t want that to be passive. They want to be active participants.

“The world we live in can be fast paced and quite uncertain at times and through the project, we’ve been really encouraged by how much people actually value the museum and its collections. It’s a place where people can find those connections, where they can slow down.

“The natural environment is as important and as relevant as anything else. We found that when we talked about the museum as a place to understand sustainable ways of living and understand how people in the past were more

connected with the land, it really resonated with our audiences.

“We’ve taken all of that insight and evidence and created a scheme that responds to those needs.”

Turning day trips into lasting connection

Aaron says that museums can sometimes be seen as one-off visit destinations. The key to addressing this, he believes, is actively involving audiences.

“So we’ve been designing programmes like heritage skills workshops, behind the scenes collections access, foraging and environmental volunteering.”

The museum has also developed successful language programs working with Ulster Scots and Irish language partners.

“Over the long-term, the museum will be a place where people can connect with their heritage and the land.”



An artist's impression of Ulster Folk Museum's new Culture Hub. Credit: Hoskins Architects.

Kathryn says that “Overall, the project will completely transform how people interact with and engage with the museum. We want this to be a place that we don’t own but share and cohabit with others.”

Aaron agrees: “It’s a people’s museum, so local engagement is a real priority. The new spaces will mean we can fully explain the heritage and display the collections in a way that allows people to make meaning out of it. But it’s not just about launching facilities, it’s about connecting with people.”

“In the future, I’d like people to be driving home having been inspired. Whether that’s to dust off their granny’s cookbook and bake a soda bread, to take up a heritage craft like printmaking or leatherwork or to plant a sustainable vegetable garden.

“And we want people to go home with a sense of curiosity to visit again because they know there's lots going on.”

Supporting museums for the future

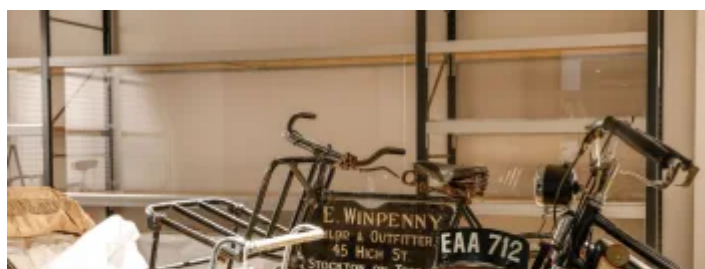
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[Peacelines I. Photo: Frankie Quinn. Shared with permission of Belfast Archive Project.](#)



[project reach new audiences](#)



The rationalised collection will be housed in a new Open Store. Photo: Preston Park Museum / Stockton Borough Council.

Creating space: rationalising Preston Park Museum