Midlands photo archive project wins Heritage Lottery Fund support

13/06/2014

The partnership, set up by regional daily newspaper the Express & Star with the University of Wolverhampton and WAVE: the museums, galleries, archives of Wolverhampton, will make an estimated one million photographs dating back more than a century available to the public via an online platform.

Development funding of £59,800 has been awarded to help the partnership, which includes Black Country community group representatives, progress their plans to apply for a full grant at a later date.

The project aims to carry out vital archiving work, digitise the collection and make the photographs available through a single web portal, allowing free on-line public access to the unrivalled images of local events, momentous and everyday, for the first time. Educational and community programmes will also be established to allow local people to use the collection to make sense of their heritage and history.

The Express & Star photo archive has been described as one of the most important regional photograph collections in the country, including photographs of royal visits and speeches by Prime Ministers, through to images of local ways of life which have since disappeared.

The collection includes wartime images which were not published due to government censorship and a photograph of American civil rights activist Malcolm X visiting Smethwick in 1965, nine days before he was assassinated. Following digitisation, the original images will be transferred to Wolverhampton City Archives where they will be preserved for future generations.

Express & Star editor Keith Harrison said: “We are delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund has supported our partnership with the University of Wolverhampton, WAVE and local community groups. Many of these photographs are deteriorating with time, so it is excellent news that they will be preserved digitally to be searched, free of charge, by the general public.Thank you to all of the readers and members of the public who supported the project by taking the time to give their views on the collection’s importance, either by writing in or by interacting via social media, to back the preservation of this historic collection.”

Dr John Pymm, Dean of the University of Wolverhampton’s Faculty of Arts, said: “It is excellent news for the partners and the wider community that this exciting archive project has won initial HLF support. We know that this valuable collection is a substantial historical source and a mass of regional personal stories. It documents a huge shift in the social, economic and physical landscape. Making the archive available will give thousands of people access to a unique record of the history of the Black Country.” The University will be managing the grant and the digitisation work.

Heidi McIntosh, City Archivist for WAVE, said: “We are really excited to be part of this hugely important historical project. The City Archives gets enquiries almost daily from people wanting old photographs from the Express & Star, such as pictures of a friend or relative who appeared in the newspaper. Unless we know which date the picture appeared, it can be very time-consuming to find these images - but this project will in future enable us to track them down quickly and easily, and also provide a digital copy if required."

Steering group panel member Ann Eales, of Friends of Wolverhampton City Archives, said the project represented “an incredibly exciting opportunity for anyone carrying out research of the area”. She said: “Digitisation will allow for quick and easy searching and the possibility of finding pictures of local scenes, and even family members, previously found by trawling through hundreds of folders and pictures.”

Reyahn King, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund West Midlands, said: “This extensive archive contains a very comprehensive visual history of Wolverhampton. We look forward to receiving the detailed plans for making this collection widely available.”

Work will now begin on developing the project, ahead of a second round submission planned for 2015.

Notes to editors

Anyone interested in volunteering to help with the work can email chris.leggett@expressandstar.co.uk.

Anyone interested in the collection can follow the Twitter account @ESPhotoArchive or follow their Facebook page.

About the Express & Star Photographic Collection partnership
The partnership comprises representatives of the Express & Star, University of Wolverhampton, WAVE: the museums, galleries, archives of Wolverhampton, Friends of Wolverhampton Archives and the Black Country Society. The Express & Star will not benefit from the grant, with the University acting as grant holder for the project.

Further information

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