Footwear history project charts Northants heart

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Northamptonshire County Council's Global Footprint project, made possible by £49,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and grants from the county council and other bodies, will chart the social, cultural and economic impact of an industry that once employed thousands of people and produced millions of pairs of boots and shoes.

Concentrating on the 20th century through to the present day the research will trace the decline and renaissance of an industry that accounted for two-thirds of the 70 million pairs of boots needed in the First World War.

The project, which forms part of the county's contribution to the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, will recruit participants of all ages who will get involved in workshops and learn all about the industry. They will explore artefacts and documents in local museum collections and the public record office; interview former industry workers and record their reminiscences; help to plot a shoe heritage trail around places of historic interest and create a special website.

Of particular interest will be the language, dialect, local traditions, songs and even ceremonial rites that came about and formed a unique cultural tradition within the county.

Global Footprint will engage some of the county's remaining footwear manufacturers and the newly developed website will be hosted and maintained by the International Footwear Foundation.

Boots and shoes have been made in Northamptonshire for some 900 years and in the mid 1840s there were more than 1,800 shoemakers operating in the town of Northampton alone. By the 1940s there were still 240 factories across the county although today the number has reduced to just under three dozen, all of which are more than a century old. The remaining firms are known for their prestige footwear.

Emma Sayer, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund East Midlands, said: "Boot and shoe manufacture has shaped so many aspects of county life, from its landscape, buildings and language to its customs and communities. This project will be a worthy contribution to the Cultural Olympiad bringing all these aspects together for the first time to create a treasure trove of heritage information for future audiences to enjoy and learn from."

Councillor Heather Smith from Northamptonshire County Council said: "In Northamptonshire we are extremely proud of our footwear manufacturing industry history. This celebration marks in a tangible way both past and present the wonderful products that have been and still are produced in our County."

Further information

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