West Yorkshire’s mills

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West Yorkshire’s mills were world leaders in innovation and design during the industrial revolution and for many years after, but what social effect did they have on the communities that lived around them and supplied the workforce?

Now, thanks to a £38,200 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) this fascinating aspect of local history will be told, in some cases by direct descendents of those who worked to produce Yorkshire’s world-beating textiles.

My Mill, My Heritage will be run by the South Leeds City Learning Centre – part of Education Leeds – in partnership with the University of Leeds International Textiles Archive (ULITA). The grant will enable the workers’ stories of some of the most successful woollen textile mills of the north to come to light.

Fiona Spiers, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund in Yorkshire and the Humber, said: “The mills defined the industrial and social landscape of West Yorkshire in a bygone era and this project will tell that story, with direct links to the people involved, while at the same time teaching a range of both new and old skills to today’s generations.”

Four famous mills will be involved in the project, some still producing world exports today.

Hainsworth woollen mill at Stanningley has been in operation since 1783, being the creator of such eminent fabrics as the Royal Guards uniforms worn at Windsor Castle to the fastest snooker and pool cloth in the world. Thwaite Mills is a fully restored working water-powered mill located in tranquil surroundings just two miles outside of Leeds city-centre and one of the last remaining examples of a water-powered mill in Britain. Leeds Industrial Museum at Armley Mills, once the world’s largest woollen mill and now one of the biggest textile museums in the world, will also contribute, in addition to Bradford Industrial Museum which occupies the site of the former Moorside Mills, a small worsted spinning mill built in 1875 by John Moore.

Those taking part in the project will be recruited from neighbouring communities and schools, and will research how the cultural and social history of the textile industry affected each locality. Some mills still have employees whose parents, grandparents or even great-grandparents worked there. The participants will learn how to make a textile wall-hanging, one for each mill, using a variety of techniques including quilting, hand-panting and printing. This, along with a video diary of current and former employees and owners of the mills, will form an exhibition that will go on display, first at the University and then in each of the mills taking part. The first exhibition will start at ULITA in June 2010, and he travelling exhibition is expected to take around six to nine months leading to spring 2011.

Commenting for South Leeds City Learning Centre, Anna Clapham, said: "There used to be many, many mills in West Yorkshire and the character of a locality remains long after a mill has gone. The aim is to increase awareness of participants and their families of the role their mill has played in their heritage, and to encourage groups to take part in active learning. This is a wonderful opportunity for the groups to learn old and new skills, and to create a permanent record based on their mill ”

For further results can be found on the Leeds City Learning Centre and ULITA websites.

A second HLF grant of £48,800 to chart the history of the Irish community in Leeds has also been given the go ahead. The 20-month long intergenerational project, Untold Stories, will focus upon the experiences of Irish immigrants in the hey-day period of the 1950s – 1980s, and how traditions have evolved and been carried forth by second and third generations up to today, through a series of oral histories, life narratives and a photographic archive. A travelling exhibition and film screening is expected at the end of the project which is to be launched on 6 November 2009 and will complete in March 2010.

Notes to editors

This year HLF is celebrating its 15th anniversary. Using money raised through the National Lottery, since 1994 it has not only revitalised hundreds of museums, parks, historic buildings, landscapes and wildlife sites, but has also given new meaning to heritage itself. People from every walk of life are now involved with the heritage that inspires them, making choices about what they want to keep and share from the past, for future generations. HLF has supported more than 28,800 projects, allocating over £4.3billion across the UK, including over £358 million in grants to Yorkshire & the Humber alone.

Further information

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