Newman Brothers Coffin Works open again for



Following the completion of extensive restoration, for the past two months the trust has been busy getting the Coffin Works ready for visitors. The machinery – some of it more than a hundred years old – has been restored to full working order and in the stamp room, warehouse, office and shroud room, everything has been taken out of storage and put back in its proper place. Costumed tour guides will take visitors back in time to experience the sights, sounds and smells of this fascinating factory as it was in its heyday.

A £1million grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), matched by English Heritage, Birmingham City Council and others, has formed part of a £2m package of funding that has made the rescue of the building and the rebirth of the Coffin Works as a heritage attraction and arts venue possible.

Simon Buteux, Trust Director, said:“Be prepared to be surprised – Newman Brothers was not a gloomy place but buzzed with activity, music and noise: the thud of the drop stamps pressing out coffin fittings by the dozen, the clatter of a long bench of sewing machines where seamstresses made shrouds and coffin linings of innumerable designs and colours. There are plenty of things that visitors can touch and activities to have a go at.”

The Coffin Works has a gallery too, with a programme of exhibitions inspired by the building and its products. The inaugural exhibition *Shadows & Dust* is by multi award-winning composer and visual artist Andy Garbi. Defying easy description, it is an absorbing and often moving audiovisual artwork created using the acoustic and light qualities of the

derelict building, captured before the restoration work began – what Andy calls the ‘DNA’ of the factory.

Throughout the coming year a diverse array of events is planned, to suit all different ages and interests. During half term, Tuesday to Friday, 10am-12pm, there will be a range of family activities, including a chance to make your own souvenir on our mini drop stamp. Others might prefer *Tales & Tequila* on 2 November – stories by candlelight honouring the lives of four famous Brummies while celebrating the Mexican Day of the Dead.

Reyahn King, Head of HLF, West Midlands, said: “This is incredibly exciting news for Birmingham. Thanks to the passion and dedication of volunteers, and support from HLF and partner organisations, the Coffin Works – once the maker of the world’s finest coffin furniture - is now open, fully restored and set to become an enduring attraction in the heart of the Jewellery Quarter for generations to come.”

The Grade II* listed Coffin Works was built in 1894. Queen Victoria was still on the throne and funerals were big business. Newman Brothers developed a reputation for making some of the finest coffin fittings in the world, and their products have adorned the coffins of Joseph Chamberlain, Winston Churchill and the Queen Mother amongst many others. Though in business for more than a century, the manufacturing processes and the way that the business was run changed very little, so visitors the Coffin Factory will step back into a different world.

Suppliers to the undertakers' trade for over 100 years, Newman Brothers closed its doors in 1999, leaving most of the contents in place as if at the end of an ordinary working day. There was a huge stock of coffin fittings, shrouds and coffin linings that were made on site, testament to changing funerary fashions, as well as the business archive and product designs. There was a range of extraordinary machines, including a pantograph, used to engrave the names on the coffin plates, a frill-maker for the shrouds, and of course, the staff clocking-in machine, which visitors will use to 'clock-in' to tours. There were even travelling salesmen’s bags, still with their samples inside, and brandy and cigars in the director’s office.

In 2007, as the rain began to pour through the holes in the deteriorating roof, all contents except the largest machines were removed from the factory to off-site storage. There they stayed while the funds were raised to restore the building. Now Birmingham Conservation Trust has brought everything back, and brought back to life a factory which dealt in the business of death.

Full details of opening times, prices and how to book are provided on the Coffin Works website, where details of forthcoming events will also be found. Newman Brothers at the Coffin Works has a Facebook page and a Twitter feed which provide frequent updates.

Notes to editors

About Birmingham Conservation Trust

Birmingham Conservation Trust is a charity which exists ‘to preserve and enhance Birmingham’s threatened architectural heritage and to promote an enjoyment and understanding of the City’s historic buildings’. Founded in 1978, Birmingham Conservation Trust is one of over 250 building preservation trusts in the UK. The Trust is a registered independent charity and a company limited by guarantee with a separate trading arm. We saved the Back to Backs in Hurst Street which the National Trust now manage. For more information, visit the Birmingham Conservation Trust website.

About English Heritage

English Heritage is the Government's statutory advisor on the historic environment. English Heritage provides advice on how best to conserve England's heritage for the benefit of everyone. While most of England's heritage is in private hands, English Heritage works with all who come into contact with it - landowners, businesses, planners and developers, national, regional and local government, the Third Sector, local communities and the general public - to help them understand, value, care for and enjoy England's historic environment.

English Heritage is also entrusted with the custodianship of over 400 sites and monuments which together form the national collection of built and archaeological heritage. These include some of the most important monuments of human history such as Stonehenge and Hadrian's Wall. For further information about the work of English Heritage, please visit the English Heritage website.

The English Heritage grant to the Coffin Works was £450,000.

Further information

Birmingham Conservation Trust: Simon Buteux, Director on 0121 303 2664.