Community project reveals history of Colman's

Archive image of Colman's Carrow Works factory workers

Colman's Connections: The War Years 1914-1918 has been curated by the Colman's Detectives, a community research group, along with the Heritage Heroes from Lakenham School, and uncovers stories and real-life experiences of how the Colman's Carrow Works factory and its workers' lives were affected by the First World War. The intergenerational community research project has been led by Norwich Heritage Economic and Regeneration Trust (HEART) and received funding of £37,700 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The research undertaken by the Colman's Detectives has led to the creation of a 'pop-up' exhibition, interactive digital timeline and book about the stories they have discovered.

The book and exhibition look at the mustard workers' roles on the front line, the impact of the war on women, families and workers on the home front, and the part Colman's played in the war effort. During the exhibition, visitors will be able to see authentic medals and original items owned by soldiers and families on display, view a Roll of Honour commemorating mustard workers lost during the conflict, and discover 'Household Hints' collated from wartime copies of Carrow Works Magazine, as well as follow the history of the firm during the conflict on a digital interactive timeline.

Colman's has an extraordinary story, and has played a significant role in the history of Norwich and its citizens. The company still employs many people and holds a special place in the culture and identity of the city. During the First World War, many soldiers wrote home describing their experiences. One such correspondent was Harold Ernest

Philpott, who was a clerk at Carrow Works, before serving with the Royal Army Medical Corps during the war. His letters, published in the Carrow Works Magazine, describe his journey to Gallipoli, where during a stopover at Alexandria, he saw a Colman's advert on a tram.

The project also researched the 'from cradle to grave' philanthropic attitudes of Colman's during the war, from its schools and medical care, through to societies, housing, pensions and even coffins for their workers – the latter recorded in the exceptional 'Coffin Book' which detailed the date, name, address and department of the deceased, as well as the type of wood used and fixtures and fittings, which all depended on the worker's rank within the company.

Explaining the importance of the HLF support, Robyn Llewellyn, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund East of England, said: "The impact of the First World War was far reaching, touching and shaping every corner of the UK and beyond. Heritage Lottery Fund has already invested more than £70million in projects – large and small – that are marking this global Centenary; with our new small grants programme, we are enabling even more communities like those involved in the Colman's Connections project to explore the continuing legacy of this conflict and help local young people in particular to broaden their understanding of how it has shaped our modern world."

Sarah Power, Colman's Connections Education Project Manager, said: "This has been an exciting and really engaging project to work on, and we are hugely impressed with the amount and quality of research that the Colman's Detectives have uncovered – they have done an amazing job of pulling together archive sources to produce a fascinating book and exhibition."

Patricia Brocklebank, Colman's Detective, said: "It has been great to work with others who share a passion for local history and research and at the same time learn new skills. I have been amazed at the huge volume of information and material in local archives that is available to the public, and very appreciative of the help that staff at the Millennium Library and the Norfolk Record Office have given us."

The exhibition takes place at The Forum, Norwich, from Monday 2 November to Friday 13 November. The Colman's Connections book will be on sale at Colman's Mustard Shop & Museum from 2 November, and in all good retailers from 5 November. There will be a series of talks, workshops and family activities about the First World War to accompany the exhibition.

The community project was run by Norwich HEART with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), and was also supported by Norfolk Record Office, Norfolk Library and Information Service, The Forum and Unilever Archives.

Notes to editors

About Norwich HEART

Norwich's Heritage Economic and Regeneration Trust (HEART) is an independent charitable organisation which champions remarkable heritage in Norwich and beyond. Working in collaboration with local and European partners, it has helped to contribute to the local and regional economy through heritage regeneration, tourism and major cultural events.

About Colman's Mustard Shop & Museum

Colman’s Mustard Shop & Museum was opened in 1973 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Colman’s, with premises on Bridewell Alley. It moved to the historic art nouveau Royal Arcade in 1999, where it has been based ever since in a careful replica of Victorian trade premises.

The shop stocks an extensive range of powder and prepared mustards, including a number of specialities made exclusively for the shop. In addition, there are a wide selection of mustard pots and spoons, together with tea towels – not to mention a broad range of Colman’s memorabilia. It also contains many items on loan from the archives, covering all aspects of the history and production of Colman’s mustard. HEART took over the shop in 2009 from Colman’s parent company Unilever PLC.

History of Colman’s

Colman’s has been an influential business in Norwich for 200 years. The firm’s history dates back to 1814 when Jeremiah Colman, a flour miller, took over a mustard manufacturing business based at Stoke Holy Cross, four miles south of Norwich. In 1823, Jeremiah and his adopted nephew James established J & J Colman which flourished. Best known for mustard, the company made flour, starch, laundry blue and cornflour.

James’ son, Jeremiah James Colman, later took over the company which moved to its present location at Carrow, Norwich. J. J. Colman was a visionary, and his ideas on employment and social welfare were years ahead of his time. He built a subsidised school for his employee’s children almost twenty years before parliament made any form of education compulsory and employed Philippa Flowerday, one of the very first industrial nurses, to help sick employees.

By 1914, Colman’s had blossomed into the city’s most affluent business and was celebrating its centenary. The business harboured philanthropic attitudes towards their workers, creating health and welfare schemes, educational programmes, sports clubs and a canteen when such provisions were not commonplace. When their workers joined the war effort, great care was taken to make their voices heard to the people of Norwich. Due to the vast amount of employment that Colman’s provided locally, its history offers an invaluable insight to the people who lived in the region 100 years ago.

Colman’s workers represented a large quantity of individuals, from a variety of class backgrounds in the city. The Colman Empire was not simply a place of employment; it became succour for the soldiers away from home through the company magazines that were sent to them, and the provisions that they received. As a result, the factory received huge quantities of correspondence from the Front Line in the form of personal letters and photographs. Colman’s produced a quarterly magazine for its workers called Carrow Works. During the war years, it published a great many articles about its workers including personal letters and photographs. These magazines, which are held in collections at both the Norfolk Record Office and Library Service provide a valuable insight into workers during the war years.