Changing lives: from Belfast welder to heritage



Owen Mort started his own business using an ancient craft after support from HLF's Skills for the Future programme.

Owen Mort had just completed a tiring all-night shift at the shipyard in Belfast where he worked as a welder when he saw an advert that transformed his life.

It was for a course to retrain as a heritage blacksmith, which was funded by HLF's Skills for the Future programme.

He got a place, left his job and within days realised that this what he was born to do. As soon as the course was completed he set up his own business, Black Anvil, which is based on the family farm in the remote and tranquil Clogher Valley, County Tyrone.

Start-up costs were minimal: Owen acquired an anvil on Gumtree for just £150, bought a blacksmith's leg vice for even less, found and restored a full set of hammers and other tools from an retiring blacksmith and constructed his own furnace in an outbuilding. Even better, now he has everything he needs to make any tools he requires - that's one of the joys of the craft, he says: if you don't have the tool you need, you can make it in a few hours.

Why blacksmiths have beards

Owen did not advertise or market his business, yet from the beginning the work flowed in: local farmers needing gates and tools repaired, customers who wanted handmade railings and elaborate gates, shows and fairs which clamoured to showcase his craft. And then there are the heritage projects: restoring railings, gates and ornamentation using the same techniques with which they were made decades or even centuries before. He has even built a footbridge to provide access to the prehistoric Springfarm Rath in Antrim.

Owen also took the time to grow a long, bushy beard. “It is actually a practical thing, not a fashion statement,” he says. “When you are working with fire and metal sparks fly, if you are clean-shaven they get stuck to your face and burn. With a beard, they just singe the hair and then fall to the floor. That is why so many blacksmiths have beards!”

> “I love the work. My slogan is 'bringing metal to life' - that’s what I do and that’s the joy of it."
>
> - Owen Mort, blacksmith

Owen, 28, graduated in mechanical engineering at the University of Ulster at a time when recession meant job vacancies were scarce. That’s why he went for a job as a welder - today he is one of a small handful of young people who are reviving an ancient craft.

He adds: “It’s incredible really, the farm gates I am repairing today were made by a blacksmith who lived less than a mile down the road. A hundred years ago wherever you were you were never more than a mile away from a forge. Today by my reckoning there are just five blacksmiths in Northern Ireland qualified to do heritage work.

“I love the work. My slogan is 'bringing metal to life' - that’s what I do and that’s the joy of it, you can do pretty much what you want with it once you know how. And I would like to thank National Lottery players everywhere for giving me the opportunity to acquire these skills.”

Read more about Owen's enterprise on the Black Anvil website.













A trainee learns dry stone walling on an HLF project in the North West

Changing lives through heritage