

Less than two years ago, while between jobs, Paul McCann became part of a business idea which would change his life.

The idea was sparked by the place he was born and brought up in: Belfast's Sandy Row.

Paul underwent training, collected hundreds of photographs, and investigated the histories of the loyalist inner city area and its collection of characters that he has always found fascinating.

Now 41 years old, Paul is a fully qualified historical tour guide working for Sandy Row Tours, which already has bookings flowing in from as far away as Los Angeles and Washington as well as the Netherlands and France. If it continues to go well he hopes Sandy Row Tours will create more jobs and also open up the area to new visitors who will spend in the local shops.

Paul's training was supported by HLF as part of a project to revitalise interest in the area and kick-start regeneration - and it has transformed Paul's life.

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>
> - Paul

“It was a great stepping stone for me,” he said. “I was determined to become an expert on the area and studied history and trained up on my computer skills so I could help devise the best tour possible.

“I absolutely love being a tour guide and have learned so much more about my area and its history in the process.”

Paul has delved long and hard into the history of Sandy Row, from its very earliest days, helping to shed new light on its industrial past.

He has collected hundreds of old pictures of the area going back to the early part of the last century when Sandy Row was thriving with linen mills, a tobacco factory and tailoring businesses. At one point there were 20,000 people living in the area; now the population is around 3,000.

A vibrant history

Sandy Row was one of the first parts of Belfast to be settled. King William III’s troops were said to have camped there on their march down to victory at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Its people also played a big part in the expansion of the city in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Paul said: “These people went on to build Belfast with their own hands.”

The area was deeply affected by the Troubles, and the Sandy Row tour takes in memorials to those killed including ex-combatants from loyalist groups. There are also murals, although many of the paramilitary murals are now being replaced.

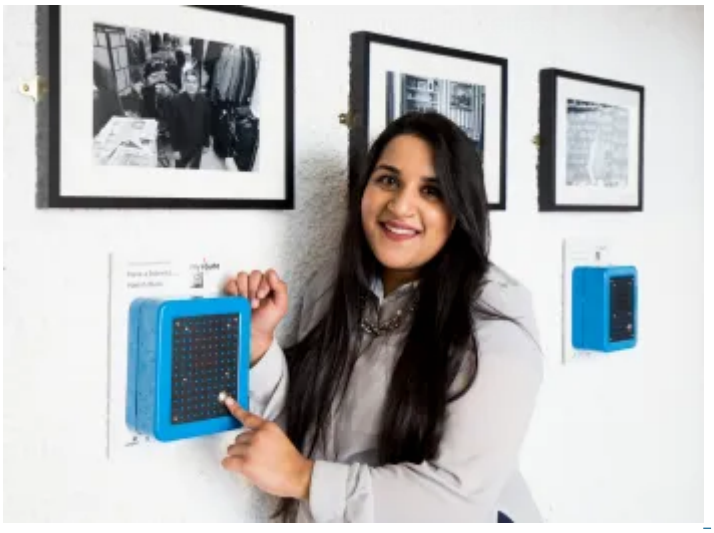
The most prominent portrays William III at the entrance to the area, now a striking Belfast landmark. It replaces a mural which proclaimed the area to be the heartland of the Ulster Freedom Fighters, a group associated with the Ulster Defence Association, or UDA.

Paul said: “We are living in changing times now, and after a long consultation residents agreed to change the mural.”

One of the highlights of the tour is a visit to the area’s Fairythorn Garden, which is dominated by a gnarled hawthorn tree so ancient that it predates any of the old buildings in the area. Paul explains: “It is said that if the tree is destroyed, Sandy Row will go as well. And in the past when bad things have happened to the tree, bad things have happened to







Changing lives: Iyma finds her route on Stratford Road heritage project