

From shirts to arpilleras: Derry's textile heritage continues...

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Phil Coulter's song 'The Town I loved So Well' which depicts the Derry he knew growing up in the 1950s speaks of how "In the early morning the shirt factory horn, Called women from Creggan, the Moor and the Bog".

Indeed he wasn't the only one who's most poignant memories of Derry include this acoustic morning call to the woman of the city.

The Old Ebrington Factory Horn echoed across the city once again last year during Covid to accompany the weekly 'Clap for the NHS/Frontline workers', which then Mayor Cllr Michaela Boyle said was a poignant and heartfelt gesture that would resonate with the people of the city and district. It epitomised the importance of the textile industry to the history of Derry.

A new FREE exhibition entitled 'Shirts, Singing and Sewing' is currently being displayed at the Tower Museum to give place to this under-documented story and to highlight the ongoing significance of textiles to contemporary life in Derry.

The Fashion and Textile design Centre (FTDC) will subsequently host the exhibition at their premises on Shipquay Street with a launch at the beginning of September 2021. Alongside the exhibition, Deirdre Williams (Business Development Manager at FTDC) says they "expect a diverse range of workshops that will appeal to all generations".

The exhibition documents the origins, the rise and the fall of Derry as a world-wide hub for quality textiles.

Over a number of years, the Tower Museum has been trusted with many special projects relating to this heritage. It is much in fact, that only a fraction of it is on display with opportunities for more exhibition opportunities in the future.

The current exhibition is a time capsule snapshot of the life of a factory girl including, the sewing and collar/hole cutting machines, photographs from inside the factories during working hours alongside business cards, minute books, personal materials, and photographs of staff social outings from Portrush to Donegal.



Factory Girls in Derry are currently being celebrated at a new free exhibition entitled 'Shirts, Singing and Sewing' being displayed at the Tower Museum in the city.



2019: Some of the former Derry factory girls who attended the launch of the Factory Girls Murals in the Craft Village.



Vida en Nuestra Población/Life in Our Poor Neighbourhood, Chilean arpillera, Taller Recoleta, 1982. (Photo Colin Peck © Conflict Textiles)

As well as celebrating the history of shirt creation in Derry, the exhibition also importantly illustrates how the textile legacy in the city lives on in various forms, notably in the Fashion and Textile Design Centre.

Deirdre Williams, Business Development Manager at the centre explains that it "was established in 2014 by the Inner City Trust as a legacy to our city's once great shirt manufacturing industry. It was set up to help shape and support fashion and textiles within the city and help people develop the skills required to seek employment or start up their own businesses."

The FTDC also runs community classes in pattern cutting and sewing, works with schools and youth organisations like Princes Trust and

delivers business mentoring to start-up businesses.

The other contemporary textile programme closely linked to the city comes in the form of the International Conflict Textiles collection curated by Roberta Bacic. It is this that brought me to the exhibition. In 2006/7, Roberta Bacic was asked to facilitate discussions with women in Northern Ireland from different backgrounds about dealing with the history of the Troubles. To open up discussion, she used a Peruvian arpillera made by women from both sides of the conflict in Peru in the 1980s/1990s. Arpilleras are three-dimensional textiles from Latin America, of Chilean origin which became a medium, primarily for women to denounce the human rights abuses and repression

of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, 1973-1990. They became a source of income for women whose husbands were disappeared or imprisoned and a means to depict images of the political oppression to those abroad. During her work in NI, Roberta was asked to explore how quilt-makers in Northern Ireland had/would depict the conflict in their work, and non-surprisingly, given NI's strong textile history which began in homes and moved to large scale manufacturing, the results were astounding.

Since then, Conflict Textiles has continued to use the process of arpillera workshops, seeding the creation of arpilleras and textiles exhibitions as a means of encouraging people to reflect on and process the difficult past in Northern Ireland and beyond.

One of the Chilean arpilleras is displayed in the Tower Museum's exhibition and is entitled 'Life in Our Poor Neighbourhood'. Recently, I asked my cross-community group of women, many of whom are former 'factory girls' to comment on the piece. The dialogue which unfolded shows the power of such pieces in processing the past, fostering empathy and evoking emotions that need to be worked through. One of the ladies kicked off the conversation - "You see that part that the children are on. What's that? Is that rows of plants?... You know when I saw it at the start, I thought, God forgive me, I thought it was barbed wire". Her observation was quickly followed by a chorus of "So did I". Another continued - "We saw enough of that in our

lifetime". When I asked her what she meant, she said "ever the army was in there was barbed wire where, barbed wire, wire... it was just wire country".

This evoked a conversation about the songs they had in their record collection. The Wolfe Tone 'Behind the Wire', the Ramblers' 'Over the Wire', U2's 'Sunday Bloody Sunday'. As if taken back to a couple of the women, they were singing the lyrics to the songs. Clearly this triggered memories of the architecture from the Troubles.

Based on my own experience of the power of textiles, both the past and the present, I encourage people to visit the exhibition at the Tower Museum and to take part in this ongoing project in the city with the aim of making the city a more vibrant and thriving place like Conflict Textiles. Clearly do it for us move on for

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