

North Down and Ards U3A
REPORT ON A SHARED LEARNING PROJECT
in partnership with the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Cultra, Holywood, Co.Down

TITLE: RESEARCH INTO FIVE AREAS OF LIFE IN ULSTER IN AND
AROUND THE YEAR 1900,

(as suggested by certain selected new exhibits recently opened by the Museum also to include the Manor House)

OBJECTIVES:

- To build a partnership with the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum (UFTM) and U3A participants.
- Over a six month period participants will provide material on suggested themes which may be used to develop learning programmes for schools & groups.

DURATION OF THE PROJECT

Phase 1	Preparation and recruitment:	September 2008- March 2009
Phase 2	Research	March 2009 – August 2009
Phase 3	Completion:	September / October 2009

BACKGROUND

Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

Situated between Bangor and Holywood, some 8 miles from Belfast, the Museum was opened in 1964 in the grounds of Cultra Manor, former home of Belfast industrialist Sir Robert Kennedy. It extends over more than 170 acres of rolling countryside

The museum now comprises two separate parts:-

1 **The Transport museum** (Opened 1994, Extended 1996)

2 **The Folk museum.**(UFTM) (Conceived 1958, Begun 1961, Opened 1964)

Buildings, representing life as it would have been in and around the year 1900, were transported from all over Ulster and re-erected on suitable selected sites. They make up :-

a) The Rural Section with over 50 transported and reconstructed buildings eg Farmsteads, crofters cottages, smithy, corn and spade mills, Orange hall, school etc. and

b) Ballycultra Town, where typical buildings found in a small town, eg terraced houses, school, bank, churches, Masonic Hall, Post Office, cinema, photographers' various shops café, bar, police station, and doctors' surgery, are grouped round a central green area known as the Diamond.

NORTH DOWN AND ARDS U3A HISTORY GROUP

The group was formed over ten years ago and at present has about forty members. A theme is agreed upon each year to be the focus for our studies. We hold a monthly meeting with frequent outings to places of interest in some way connected with the theme, also a Christmas party and one or two residential trips. Members participate fully, researching topics, delivering talks, taking part in projects and group activities and recording their findings. The theme in 2007-8 (by popular request extended to 2008-9) was 'The Victorians.'

THE PROJECT

Phase 1

PLANNING and RECRUITMENT

***June 2008** At a meeting of the History planning group, after general consultation, we decided to continue with the Victorian Theme in the year 08/09. We discussed the possibility of visiting or even working with the (UFTM).

*** September 2008.**

Joyce Gibson, leader of the History group, who had led a previous Shared Learning Project (SLP) in 2005, suggested to the group a possible SLP with the UFTM.

*** September/ October, 2008 :**

Negotiations were opened and an appointment made for Joyce and 2 other members of the steering group to meet Madeleine McGreevy and Patrick McGarvey, (M&P) education officers at the UFTM

***October 13.**

First meeting with UFTM staff

Minutes We again outlined the concepts of a) U3A b) Shared learning, as described in telephone conversations. Madeleine had given the matter some thought and there was general discussion of possible themes.

General impression. Some astonishment and doubt on the part of the UFTM staff.

Outcome No commitments were made but they very kindly agreed to host our annual Christmas party at the UFM, to give us (no limit on numbers) free entry, a guided tour and to provide a Christmas tea at very low cost. This was to be seen as a recruitment drive. We left delighted although a little uncertain regarding the future of the project

***November 4 am**

SLP discussed and well- received by members at the monthly history meeting. A written provisional plan issued to all interested

***November 4 pm**

Project outlined at six-monthly NI Regional meeting and recruits from the region invited. Some interest but no recruits came forward.

***November 25**

General invitation issued at the North Down and Ards U3A (ND&A U3A) monthly meeting to all members to attend the UFM party and later possibly to participate in the project.

***December 2**

54 members comprising at least 25 non-history group members attended the very successful party. The UFM staff went to great pains to give us a really good tour of Ballycultra in three groups. We met the staff's immediate boss who spoke to the gathering. She had obviously come to see if we would pass muster. I think we gave a good impression!

***6 January 09**

18 History group members plus others expressed interest in the project

***20 January**

Exploratory meeting at UFM to which all 18 who were interested were invited. Only eleven showed up owing some scepticism and most inclement weather. A Set back!

*** 30 January**

Project officially accepted by the UFTM! Meeting arranged for 20 February

***20 February**

Meeting with M&P. Guidelines (appendix 1) received and details discussed. Free entry to the UFM promised to all participants

***3 March**

Over 30 possible recruits attended a meeting open to all ND&A U3A members. 23 signed up and chose an area of research. (See 'groups' below and appendix 2). A Leader for each group was appointed.

Phase 2

The RESEARCH

The Areas of research were determined by M&P, education staff.

(see appendix 1) As with all other organizations, in the present economic climate the UFTM are finding things 'a bit tough.' M&P, with a dwindling number of excellent guides, are now practically alone in looking after the educational demands of thousands of visitors each month, mostly primary school parties. The general history behind newly re-erected buildings, particularly a doctors' surgery and pharmacy, terraced houses, a country cinema and a Victorian photographer's studio had not yet been investigated, although visitors were thirsting for knowledge. Research in these areas was to form the subjects of our project. The topic of housing was to be three pronged and would include opulent middle class homes like the Manor House, doubly significant as one of the Kennedy daughters was reputed to have had suffragist leanings, another of our research topics. The newly arrived Victorian Café provided a venue for many of our meetings.

***Numbers**

The project lent itself to small group work (see above) and quickly gelled.

The 25 members as shown in appendix 2 were those who actually carried out and completed the project. At the beginning there was the inevitable chopping and changing but it was not excessive.

***The Project Leaders (see appendix 2)**

Management was shared by two teams, with some members serving on both. Joyce headed both groups.

- 1) Steering group (5) ie Those who liaised with M&P, the UFM staff. (4-5 meetings)
Progress was monitored and any difficulties hopefully ironed out
- 2) Group Leaders.(7) This group met to report progress, discuss new developments and pass details on to members (4-5 meetings)

Inevitable misunderstandings were normally ironed out at the monthly history meetings. (see below)

The Groups (see appendix 2)

*The project was divided into five areas:- Housing, Health, Cinema, Photography and Suffragettes. Each Topic was conveniently sub-divided which made the allocation of tasks much easier (appendix 2)

*The size of groups varied from 3 to 7 members, determined by personal interest or former profession. The health group comprised several nurses including a nurse tutor, medical lab technicians and a physiotherapist; the housing group several teachers

including a domestic science specialist; the cinema group had all had been lifelong film-buffs and studying suffragettes were two history teachers and a librarian. Recruitment to the photography group was largely by default as few really knowledgeable photographers volunteered, however they too finished by showing great enthusiasm for their subject.

*The number of meetings held varied with the topic and the style of the group, the norm being four although the suffragists only met formally twice.

* **Methods of research**

1 As well as displaying numerous exhibits, the UFTM is an important centre for research with an extensive library which also forms a depositary for several local photographic collections including those of W A Green (1870-1958) . These facilities were used extensively by all our research groups, who were also able to consult experts on local matters, such as senior librarian Roger Dixon, who are employed by the UFTM and have extensive knowledge of Ulster history and customs.

2 A small team of amiable and well-informed guides, very often retired local teachers, are also available. Many of us took advantage of this facility to tap into their knowledge. M&P admitted that lack of time often prevented them from benefiting from this sort of 'chat'

3 Some of the housing group used cottages and houses on site as a starting point for research. One, the ex- headmaster of a local Primary school, who retired long ago, imagined the questions he would have been asked on a visit to the nineteenth century hill farm and answered accordingly, a unique and interesting way of dealing with the subject. The health team also used the doctor's surgery to kick-start their investigations

4 There are many well-stocked and easily accessible libraries in the Province such as the Linen Hall Library, Belfast, founded in 1788 to promote the study of Irish/Ulster matters. This proved a fount of information especially for the Suffragist group who used it extensively.

5 Members of this group, together with most others, also took full advantage of the large selection of original newspapers kept by Belfast's Public Library. There many of the original editions of papers such as the 'Belfast Telegraph,' one of the oldest in the British Isles, are available to peruse for the asking.

6 Specialist libraries , such as the Police Library at Castlereagh Police Station or the Medical Library at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast were also called into service.

7 The local libraries themselves were of course much used by many participants as was the internet, an invaluable source of information.

8 Personal interviews and casual conversations played a big part in our work. Many members reminisced with elderly friends or relatives who had some fascinating childhood memories to pass on, whilst others found elderly strangers more than willing to talk about the past. One member of the housing group did some valuable research amongst the fishing community of the Ards Peninsular who, unusually for this day and age, appears to be in an enviable time-warp. A health researcher gained some very useful information from a casual encounter with a young medical student in the local library.

9 A member whose grandfather had built many terraced houses for workers in East Belfast found a significant number of authentic documents eg an old rent book, tucked away round the house and used them to great effect together with many interesting anecdotes.

10 There were examples too of researchers visiting sources of information further afield. What better place to find out about the history of photography than the Lacock (Wilts) home of the father of photography, William Fox-Talbot? A visit to a photographic exhibition in University College, Dublin included a photo of the unfortunate Mr Asquith, British prime-minister, being accosted by a suffragette on a visit to Dublin in 1912.

General encouragement and feedback

It was very important to keep the 'large group' spirit alive throughout the project and to work together, as well as on our separate areas of interest therefore:-

1 We paid an extra visit to the UFM on April 21 when members, with the help of a question sheet, were encouraged to take a closer look at the Museum's extensive exhibition halls. Here much relevant material was on display but could have been missed. For general interest, we were also shown round the Corn Mill

2 Monthly History Meetings were also used inform, revise and encourage.

* Each group was allocated a time during one of the meetings, giving each member at least one 5-15 minute period in which to outline his/her research.

* As a result, between April and June, we heard some fascinating talks, often illustrated, about life in Ulster in Victorian times, of great interest to all.

Result. All members, researchers or not, benefited greatly. Several of the newcomers joined the history group as a result.

*The talks served to spur reluctant members on and to regain their enthusiasm, 'If she/he can do it, so can I!' and to give a sense of achievement to all.

* The meetings proved an important opportunity for clarification or to ask questions.

Phase 3

Completion

The project was to be presented in five duplicated folders compiled and edited by the group leaders. Each had to be carefully indexed, colourful and with plenty of photographs. The dead-line was 27 August and, by and large, this date was well adhered to. The folders were delivered to the UFM staff on September 7.

The Finished Folders

It would be impossible to give here more than a brief impression of the finished folders many aspects of which have already been dealt with earlier' I would however like to make the following observations:-

The folders were all very different, of course in content but also in approach and presentation. They all however adhered to the stipulated criteria and were very well illustrated, one at least (in the photography folder) using original drawings with great effect. All folders used photographs, some from the internet but many from the extensive local collections held by the UFM itself. All were very well indexed and specific material was easy to find. Many topics of course overlapped and it was interesting to compare the different approaches to the same subject.

Housing This folder, as you might expect, was the most 'homely' and the most readable, packed with personal references and anecdotes. The writers had obviously enjoyed the time spent researching this topic but the articles on poverty and deprivation make one grateful to be living in the twenty first century.

Health This feeling of gratitude for the ‘here and now’ was very much endorsed on reading this folder. It is obviously a medical record written by professionals with a good eye for detail and was one of the more scholarly contributions. The research was deep and extensive, the articles giving not only a sense of period but also a vivid impression of the local scene at the time.

The Early Cinema in Ulster A much lighter topic deserved and received a much lighter approach, full of local knowledge and enthusiasm. Although there were only three contributors they managed to include 28 different sections each contributing another little piece of information to the patchwork. They included some fascinating titles such as ‘Anecdotes from County Down Cinemas’ and ‘Jam Jars-admission price.’ No aspect of the cinema at that time seems to have been omitted. The folder shows much thought, very wide consultation with a great variety of people and a great love of the subject.

Women’s Suffrage. By far the most scholarly of the folders, this was a masterly piece of research. Every effort was made to make the information as accessible and interesting as possible to the layman and it makes a fascinating, if a fairly long, read. Again many topics, often rather unexpected, were covered such as diseases or local government councillors, and the whole area was admirably introduced and explained. Any one wanting to find out all there is to know about Suffragettes in Ulster should read this folder, although the writers were really loath to surrender it in the end, (they couldn’t stop researching!). There is obviously even more to be learned!

Photography. In a way this fifth folder ties up and adds to our understanding of the topics discussed in the other four. In it we read about the discovery of photography, the way it works and of the lives of the great Victorian photographers of Ulster, many of whose photographs are liberally dotted throughout the other folders. Without this visual evidence it would not have been possible to write so vividly and comprehensively about social conditions over one hundred years ago.

The duplicated folders are to be the basis of a new history library to be set up by the ND&A U3A History group using a large portable book case especially made by Geoff, one of the team leaders. All interested are welcome to borrow the folders on application.

Corollary

* On October 7 all researchers were invited to a coffee morning at the museum, where the staff thanked us warmly for our efforts. Although it would take many weeks to read and digest all the information provided, M&P were really impressed with what they had seen. They were sure that their work in these areas would now be much simplified by our help. This was followed by a most interesting tour of the museum and as a follow-up we were invited to return to the museum for a festival of silent films, being staged in November by local students.

THANK YOU to everyone who took part:- Madeleine and Patrick for their help and for making it all possible, UFTM staff who were so helpful in many different ways, the Northern Ireland Region of U3A for their grant towards expenses and to all the participants especially the team leaders, some of whom also served on the steering group **PHOTOGRAPHS.** I have put **45 selected photos** onto a CD, roughly depicting the three stages outlined in para.2 ‘Duration’ beginning with the recruitment party and followed by a pictorial tour of the Museum. Copies may be obtained by e-mail/calling me on:-

Joyce Gibson, Project leader, December 2009 < jhe.gibson@virgin.net T028 91462043

Appendix 1

University of the Third Age

Aim: to provide research material for Learning Centre staff to incorporate into school workshops.

Objectives:

- To build a partnership with the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum and U3A participants.
- Over a six month period participants will provide material on suggested themes which may be used to develop learning programmes for schools & groups.

Guidelines for working at the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum

Thank you for your interest and enthusiasm regarding working alongside the Education staff for the purpose of research into the following topics:

- Early silent cinema focusing on the arrival of cinema into provincial towns, distribution of film reels around the towns, growth of cinema going as a past-time especially for the poor, publicity, the grandeur of the cinemas, the newsreels, introduction of sound and the social side of the experience e.g. collecting jam jars to allow entry to the cinema.
- Comparison of life in a Manor house, a middle class house and a working class dwelling. The rise of household gadgets both rural & urban, cleaning materials used within the home. Use of servants, their day to day duties, pay, conditions etc.
- Healthcare - procedures & cures used by the Victorians, the life of a doctor, old wives remedies, common diseases of the time, dealing with disability
- The rise of the Irish Suffragette movement. Who was involved, what type of protests did they get involved in? How many women joined their ranks? Reaction of the rest of society.
- Photography - introduction of the camera and how it became something many could afford. The science behind taking and developing the image. Local photographers, why did they get involved with recording everyday life e.g. William A. Green. Using photographs as evidence, how reliable are they? Using photos for advertising.

Appendix 2

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

GROUP	NAME	Phone	ADDRESS and E-MAIL
Co-ordinator	Joyce Gibson	91462043	8 Hanover Glen Bangor BT197SX jhe.gibson@virgin.net

*** Leader** + Member of steering committee

1 Cinema

Ronnie McClements*+ ronniemcclements@hotmail.com
Adrienne Brown
Angela Ley

2 Houses

Dorothy Lowry* dorothy.lowry@btinternet.com
Grace Burnside
Sheelagh Dalzel
Lorna Douglas
Bill Henry
Cathy McGrath
Joan Pepper

3 Health

Pat Nickels*+ pat.nickels@tiscalico.uk
Betty Blundell
Charlotte Fawcett
Louise Miller
Sheelagh McCann
Edith McIlwaine

4 Suffragettes

Rosemary Murray*+ rosemary.murray9@btinternet.com
Geoff Reeves*+ moigeoff@tesco.net
Evelyn Donaldson
Margaret Wykes

5 Photography

Ken Ogilvie* ken-ogilvie@talktalk.net
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