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The Ulster Folk And Transport Museum

A U3A Shared Learning Project

It's all over bar the shouting. Our six-month project with the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra near Belfast came to an end last September when I handed in the work of the 25 participants in five huge folders

The two members of the museum education staff with whom we liaised, received our offering sporting big smiles.

I suspect they were astonished at the size and quality of our work.

They have since thanked us profusely showing their appreciation when they entertained us at a most enjoyable get-together in October.

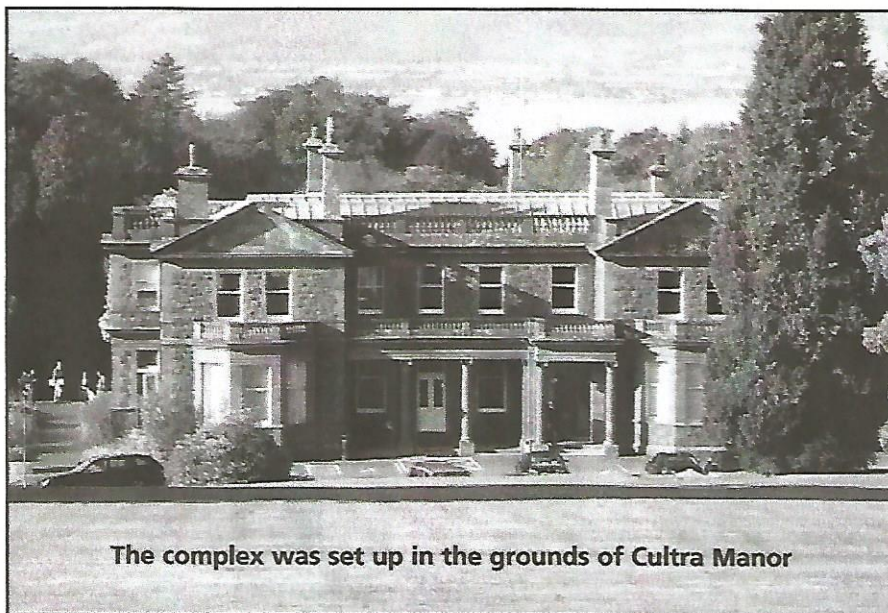
Their big task is just starting (as if they didn't have enough to do already – the museum is severely under-staffed). It will be their pleasure, we hope, to read and digest the contents of the folders.

It was their idea. I merely asked them, almost a year ago now, if we could help them in any way. 'We' are the North Down and Ards U3A History Group who were studying all things Victorian.

The museum portrays life as it was in Ulster during the years around 1900, and seemed an ideal shared learning partner.

A little taken aback, Madeleine and Patrick at first viewed the proposal with surprise and, understandably enough, some scepticism. We soon had that problem sorted out and they eventually came up with a first class outline of a somewhat daunting and detailed task.

We were to study five topics from a local point of view: housing for rich and poor; health care or lack of it; the pleasures of the cinema; the rise in popularity of photography; and suffragettes in Ulster. The areas of interest to the staff and those which would be the most useful were carefully detailed.



The complex was set up in the grounds of Cultra Manor

One of the main aims of the Museum Education Department is to provide in-depth information on Ulster life at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries to the hundreds of visitors, mainly children of primary school age and their teachers, who come to the site each week.

However, as you can imagine, two educationalists given the task of receiving, entertaining and informing so many people, have little time for further research and when new development took place this luxury became almost impossible.

Since 1960, more than 50 original buildings of all types from all over the Province have been transferred to and reconstructed in the grounds of Cultra Manor. The central 'urban' part has been named Ballycultra, a fictitious town with dwelling houses as well as public

buildings. These include a bank, a post office, three churches, a school (there is a rural one as well) and a police station.

The most recent reconstructions to be added to this delightful conurbation are a doctor's surgery, a photographer's studio, a cinema, a row of terraced houses and a Victorian Café.

Cultra Manor is the one-time home of the Kennedys, the family of a prominent industrialist working in booming 19th century Belfast. The last Miss Kennedy was reputed to have been a suffragette.

This was where we came in. The general historical background to four of these latest additions, together with the suffragist leanings of one of the daughters of the Manor House, became the subjects of our studies.

The Victorian Café was our main meeting place.



Team leaders l-r: Ronnie McClements (Cinema), Pat Nickels (Health) Geoff Reeves (Suffragettes), Joyce Gibson (Project Coordinator) Dorothy Lowry (Housing), Ken Ogilvie (Photography)



The Victorian Café
the venue for our meetings



The Picture House, reconstructed from Banbridge Co. Down. This formed the background to research by the Cinema Group.

It was easy to find seven recruits interested in housing – one because her grandfather had been a builder in East Belfast where he constructed ‘kitchen houses’ for local workers. She in her youth had collected the rents.

Another lady’s grandfather had been head gardener on the estate of one of the big industrialists in North Belfast. They both included much family memorabilia to accompany their contributions.

Six researchers whose careers had been with various areas of the health service – nurses, a physiotherapist, and a medical lab technician – studied things medical, producing some fascinating but blood curdling accounts of health care or lack of it as practised in 1900.

Four of our more serious historians, including two teachers and a librarian found it difficult to surrender their work when eventually time was up. They studied the suffragette movement in Ireland, producing a huge and learned tome. They obviously wished they had had much more time.

The three film buffs were every bit as keen. Their colourful folder was packed with memorabilia including some fine copies of old advertising posters with amusing stories of the popular country cinemas which developed in rural and urban areas in the early 20th century.

The project was drawn together by the work of the photography group. Photographic records of Ulster life around this time, including the work of WA Green, a talented photographer, are available in the museum’s collection and

elsewhere and were used by participants of all five topics. It was interesting to realise how important photography became to Victorian and Edwardian citizens.

The agreed length of the project was six months. We worked hard and in a myriad of different ways, each study group being given the opportunity at the monthly history meetings to present their findings to the group, including those not concerned with the project.

We formulated plans of action, led by our five team leaders, during numerous brain storming sessions. We visited libraries (the newspaper library in Belfast is a wonderful place to learn about suffragettes) and specialist museums such as the Police Museum in Castlereagh (one of the sub-topics was photography as evidence) or the Medical Museum in the Royal Victoria Hospital.

We talked to experts and enthusiasts including people with memories even longer than our own and to some of the Museum’s excellent guides. We kept in constant touch with the education staff through meetings of the steering committee just to make sure we were on the right lines. A little tweaking was necessary from time to time.

And what, on reflection did we feel about it? One of the most interesting outcomes was the variety in approach to, and execution of, the tasks in hand.

Original sketches and drawings, reminiscences, plans, posters, internet reports, photographs and family snaps abound.

It was hard work that’s for sure and not all plain sailing. There were times when everyone, particularly the team leaders, asked themselves why they had taken this on. No boundaries were set so participants were free to produce two pages (as some did) or 73 as several others did.

I, as leader, would say that my job was rewarding but heavy. If you decide to lead a project, don’t take on too much research yourself. You will have enough to do with everything else. Try to keep the group small – 25 people are a lot to manage.

Having said that, I enjoyed it enormously and judging from their appraisals, so did everyone else (well almost!). We opened their eyes. We met people and visited places we had no idea existed. We had an excuse to get together and make new friends, and many learned a new discipline. To gather, to sort and to write up facts is a satisfying and rewarding process. Go for it!

Just in case you’re wondering... yes we did keep copies and practical Geoff, one of the history teachers, has just completed a magnificent bookcase to store them in.

Our library is now up and running so everyone can have a jolly good read.