


Theme 3: Industry and Welfare

Activity 1: Exploring the Linen Industry in Ulster



5th November 1888

Belfast receives Charter to become a City

Queen Victoria bestowed a charter on Belfast in 1888, officially recognising it as a city.

At this time Belfast was the leading commercial and manufacturing centre on the island of Ireland and the third largest port. Its industrial might was largely built on linen manufacturing. There were 192 linen manufacturers in Belfast, with 34 bleachers and finishers.

In 1888, Robinson & Cleaver opened their new department store in Donegall Place, Belfast. The building, created in the finest of materials and with a lavish interior, was a symbol of Belfast's increasing prosperity. It was decorated with busts of some of its more famous customers, including the Queen, Prince Albert and the Emperor and Empress of Germany.

Despite its growing wealth, thousands of people in Belfast lived in dire poverty, in overcrowded and unsanitary houses.

Industry, Welfare, Textiles

Robinson and Cleaver's Royal Irish Linen Warehouse by Marcus Ward, Belfast, 1889.
Irish Linen Centre & Lisburn Museum Collection

[Belfast receives charter to become a city on the 5th November 1888.](#) Belfast was the leading commercial and manufacturing centre in Ireland when it received the charter. Its industrial might was built largely on its linen manufacturing capabilities with 192 linen manufacturers and 34 bleachers and finishers operating around the city.

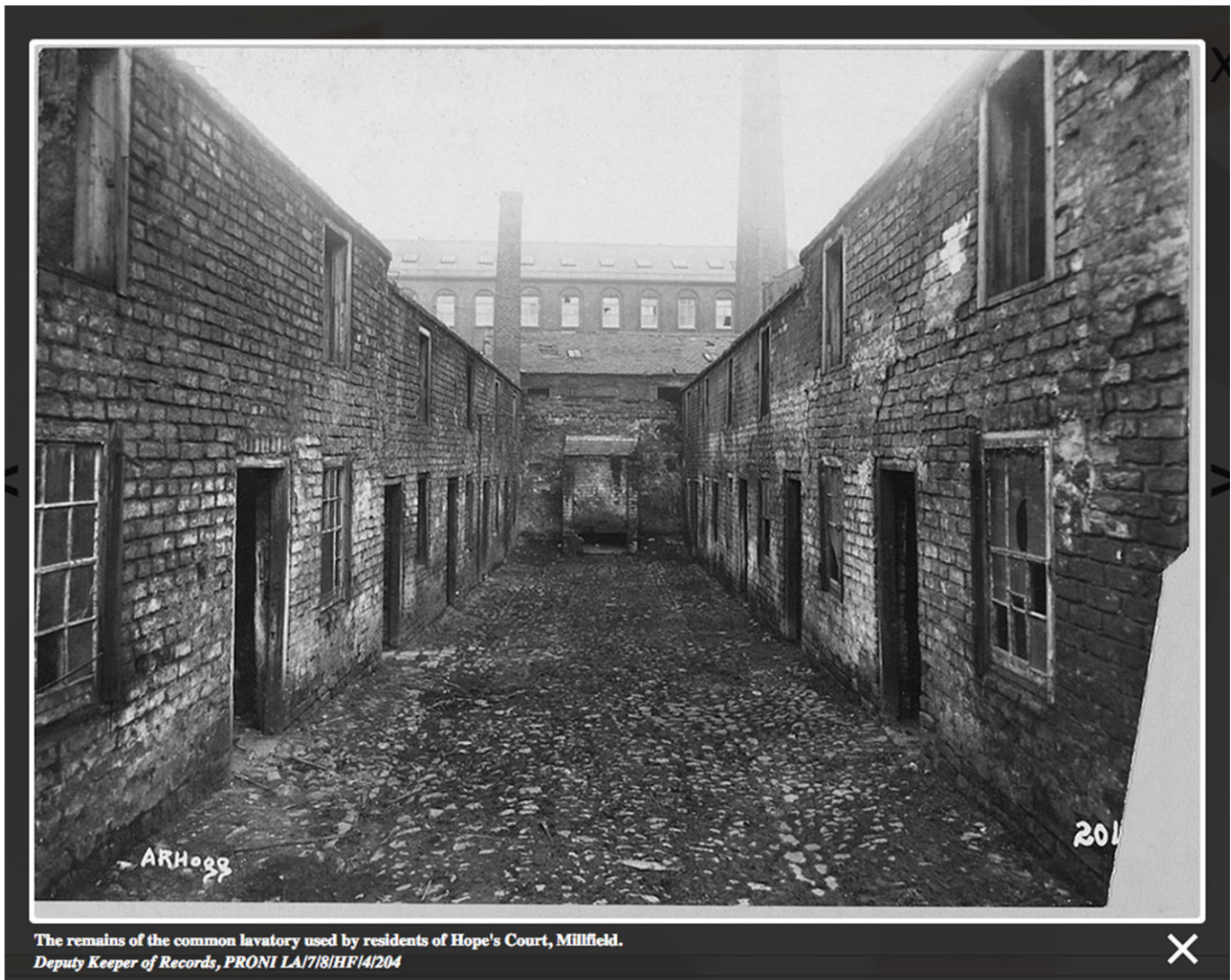
The climate of Ireland is suitable for growing flax and cultivation of the crop began around the 16th century. Initially a cottage industry, the Huguenots arrived and modernised the production of linen. By the Victorian period, Ulster had become a linen producing powerhouse. Mills, bleach greens, flax fields and ponds could be found across the North East of the province. The industry has all but disappeared but evidence of the industry can still be found in the names of towns and streets and in some buildings. This activity encourages an exploration of the linen heritage and the working and living conditions of the textile workers in the local area and makes a connection with current textile working conditions in other parts of the world.

1. Ask the class/group to research the production of linen. Can they identify and describe all the stages of the process from flax to fabric and the type of location/premises for each stage i.e. flax field, flax retting ponds, beetling mills?

- BBC Video clips describing [how linen is made](#), and the [bleaching & spinning](#) process.
- [Craigavon Historical Society](#) describes all the stages of linen production.

2. Study maps of the local area to discover evidence of linen manufacturing in your area. Names like 'Mill Lane', 'Flax Street' and 'Linenhall Street' would indicate an association with the linen industry. Look at [old OSNI maps](#) of the area to see if the class/group can find buildings or areas associated with the linen industry like flax ponds or bleach greens. Ask the class/group to source old photographs or take photographs of any surviving physical evidence remaining such as mill cottages, street signs or old chimneys and create a collage about the linen heritage of the area.

3. In 1894 the [Royal Commission on Labour](#) reported on women working in the Irish textile industry. They noted the high rates of Tuberculosis (TB) amongst women working in the industry. The report also stated that many processes in the flax mills and linen factories were dangerous under the terms of the Factory and Workshop Act of 1891. Ask the class to study the photograph of [women working at warping machines at York Street Mill](#), can they identify possible hazards in the workplace. Using the list of stages of production of linen from step 1, can the class/group identify possible hazards associated with each step?
4. In 1901 the [Factory and Workshop Act](#) raised the minimum work age to 12 years old. Explain to the class/group that a hundred years ago they might have been employed in a factory as a half-timer. Ask the group/class to research the experience of half-timers and to write a week of personal diary entries from a hundred years ago.
5. The rapid expansion of linen production and shipbuilding in Belfast during the 19th century resulted in an influx of people into the city in search of work in the factories, mills and yards. Ask the class/group to describe this photograph of [Hope's Court, Millfield](#) which demonstrates the living conditions for those working in manufacturing in Belfast in the late 19th century. Note the mill in the background and the remains of the single privy/toilet for the whole street. Explore [Alexander Hogg's photographs](#) of Belfast urban streets and ask the class/group to imagine what life was like for one of the occupants of Hope's Court.



6. Legislation has ensured that working conditions in the UK have vastly improved. However the majority of textile and clothing manufacturing now takes place outside the UK in countries such as Bangladesh, China and India where regulations are less stringent. Ask each member of the class/group to find the country of origin on the label of three of their favourite items of clothing. Plot these on a map, and discuss with the class why textile and clothing production has moved overseas.

7. Discuss with the class/group the possible working and living conditions for workers in overseas textile industries. Over the past few years there have been reports of harsh working conditions in a number of clothing factories in Bangladesh, China and India. The collapse of the Rana Plaza in Bangladesh, which killed over 1,000 workers, highlighted the dangers of the industry. The following footage sheds light on the conditions in these factories. Watch the clips and discuss with the class/group the similarities of factory conditions overseas and in Victorian Ireland. Ask the class to think of ways to improve working practices in the textile industry across the world.

- [PBS award winning documentary China-Blue](#)
- [The Full Story of the Rana Plaza Factory Disaster](#)
- [Deadly Cost of Fashion: Rana Plaza Collapse](#)
- [BBC News Dark world of Bangladesh's clothing industry](#)

Other links

- [BBC For Teachers KS3 Ethical Fashion Thematic Unit](#)
- [Lisburn Museum and Linen Centre](#)
- [BBC For Teachers KS2 Linen Thematic Unit](#)

KS3 Curricular Relevance

Areas of Learning: History, Geography

Key Elements:

- Explore issues related to Economic Awareness (History & Economic Awareness);
- Investigate the impact of globalisation and how it has produced winners and losers (Geography & Economic Awareness);
- Explore issues related to Personal Health (History & Personal Health);
- Explore how history has affected their personal identity, culture and lifestyle (History & Personal Understanding);
- Develop a sense of place and belonging at a local level (Geography & Personal Understanding);
- Investigate differences in lifestyle within and between countries (Geography & Citizenship);
- Explore how we can play a role in helping to promote a fairer world for all (Geography & Citizenship);
- Research and debate ethical issues in geography (Geography & Ethical Awareness).

Learning Outcomes:

- Research and manage information effectively to investigate historical/geographical issues, using Mathematics and ICT where appropriate;
- Communicate effectively in oral, visual, written, mathematical and ICT formats, showing clear awareness of audience and purpose;
- Demonstrate creativity and initiative when developing ideas and following them through;
- Work effectively with others.

Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities:

- Managing information;
- Thinking, problem-solving and decision-making;
- Working with others;
- Using ICT.

Knowledge, Understanding and skills:

- Understanding cause and effect;
- Developing enquiry skills to undertake historical investigations;
- Developing chronological awareness and the ability to make connections between historical periods, events and turning points;
- Developing creative thinking skills in their approach to solving problems and making decisions;
- Understanding a range of local, national, European and global contexts.