
Stitched – The Shirt Factory Quilt Project

Tower Museum, Derry City & Strabane District Council

A Case Study on NI Museum Council's Grant Funding



The Tower Museum, operated by Derry City & Strabane District Council, is a leading cultural institution dedicated to preserving and sharing the rich history of Derry-Londonderry and the wider region. Located within the city's historic walls, the museum is known exhibitions such as The Story of Derry and An Armada Shipwreck – La Trinidad Valencera. Its collections span social history, textiles, maritime heritage, archaeology, and community memory, offering visitors an accessible and immersive insight into the city's industrial, cultural, and creative past. Through dynamic programming, community partnerships and ongoing collections care, the Tower Museum plays a central role in safeguarding local heritage and supporting future interpretation for the forthcoming DNA Museum

Project Summary

Stitched – The Shirt Factory Quilt Project focused on the conservation, documentation, and rehousing of shirt factory quilts and related textile items held by Derry City & Strabane Museum Services. This project was made possible through the NIMC Museum Collections Capital Grant Round 2, with a grant of £1,685.10. Working closely with a volunteer group of experienced local quilters – facilitated by Margaret Lee of the Irish Patchwork Society – the project assessed 20 quilts and 2 associated textile items, carried out conservation and stabilisation work, improved cataloguing and interpretation, and rehoused the collection using archival-quality materials.

The project also created new opportunities for oral history collecting, strengthening understanding of Derry-Londonderry's shirt-making heritage and supporting future interpretation within the upcoming DNA Museum.

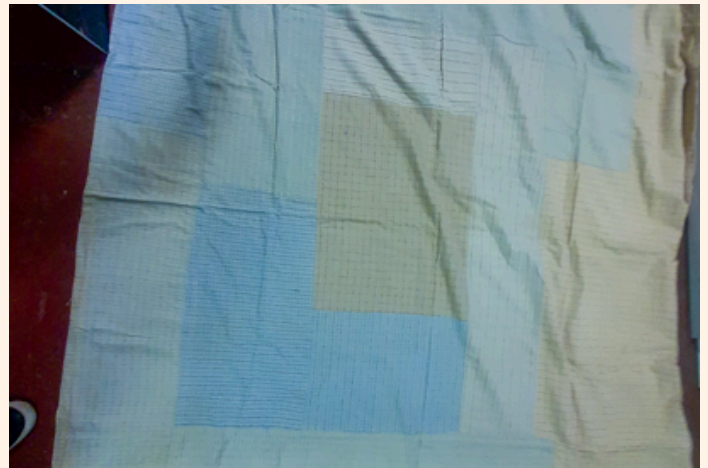


Context and Need

Before the project began, the Museum Service's textile collections faced several challenges:

- Many quilts lacked detailed documentation.
- Items were stored in inconsistent locations and formats.
- Some textiles were at risk due to unsuitable storage materials.
- Interpretation and contextual information were limited.
- Opportunities for community involvement had not yet been fully explored.

The project addressed these issues by combining professional museum practice with the specialist knowledge of local quilters, ensuring both preservation and deeper cultural understanding.



What the Funding Supported

The grant enabled essential improvements across conservation, documentation, and storage:

Preventive Conservation

- Assessment of 20 quilts and 2 textile items
- Minimal, reversible conservation interventions
- Identification of items requiring specialist textile conservator support

Archival-Quality Storage

- Purchase of conservation-grade boxes, acid-free tissue, and textile materials
- Rehousing, labelling, and secure storage of all items
- Improved retrieval systems and safer handling procedures

Documentation & Research

- Creation of detailed catalogue records
- Volunteer expertise added information on patterns, materials, construction, and repairs
- Historic documentation gaps identified and addressed
- Enhanced interpretation and research potential

Volunteer Participation

- Establishment of a dedicated volunteer quilting group
- Specialist skills contributed to conservation, documentation, and interpretation
- A student placement supported early documentation and preparation work

Oral History Development

A key outcome of the project was the expansion of oral history activity. Initial interviews included a former shirt factory owner, with further contributors identified through volunteer networks — including a former factory manager, machinists, an engineer, an inspector, and local residents with lived experience of the industry.

Several participants expressed interest in taking part, and arrangements are underway for a broader oral history session with improved recording procedures. This work will directly support the development of richer interpretation for the DNA Museum.



Success Measures

The project met or exceeded its objectives by delivering:

- Full assessment and documentation of textile items
- Conservation and stabilisation work
- Rehousing and improved storage for existing quilts
- Enhanced catalogue records and interpretation
- A new volunteer needlework group
- Increased community engagement and visibility
- Progress toward a wider oral history programme



Impact on Collection & Access

The project has significantly improved the preservation, documentation, and accessibility of the Museum Service's textile collections. Key outcomes include:

- Rehousing and cataloguing of 20 quilts and 2 textile items
- Enhanced intellectual control and improved documentation procedures
- Volunteer expertise enriching understanding of construction, materials, and historical context
- Identification and correction of historic documentation gaps
- Increased community involvement through volunteer participation

Public interest remains strong. Social media content relating to the shirt factory collections generated 1,678 views, 52 engagements, and 14 interactions, demonstrating the appetite for future interpretation and engagement.



Plans for the Future

The Museum Service intends to build on the project's momentum through:

- Consultation with a professional textile conservator
- Potential talks, workshops, or training sessions for volunteers
- Further oral history recording with industry contributors
- Development of exhibitions, digital interpretation, and audiovisual content for the DNA Museum
- Continued cataloguing and accessioning of new donations
- Future collaborative projects with quilting groups and heritage organisations
- Use of project research and documentation in future displays and public engagement

The enhanced catalogue records and photography will also support future digital access as the Museum Service explores options for a new Collections Management System.

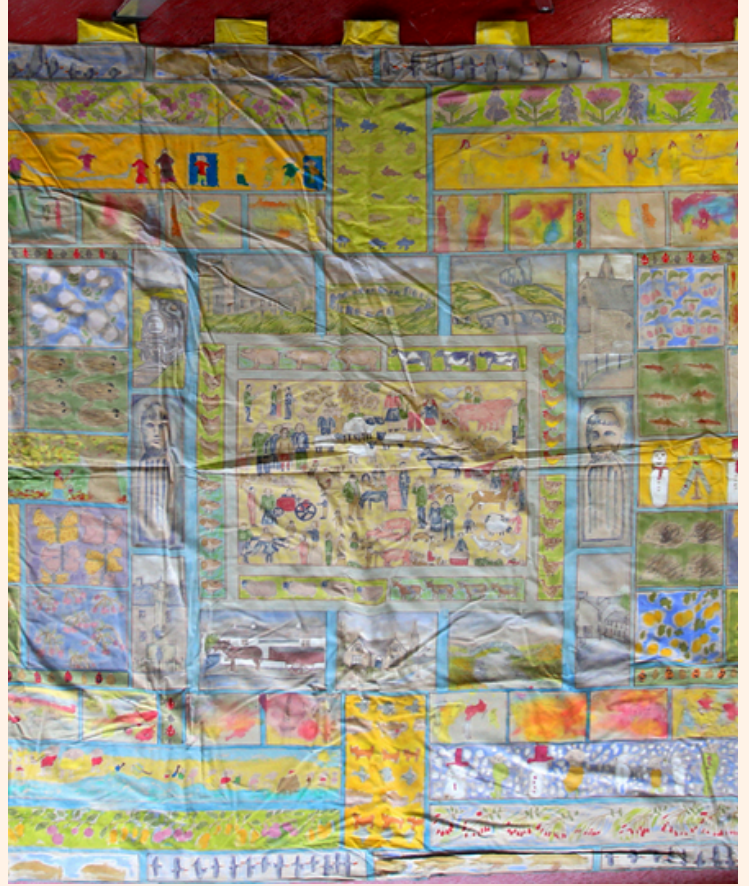
Value of the Funding

The Museum Service described the grant as highly valuable, enabling a collections care project that would otherwise have been difficult to prioritise. The flexibility of the programme allowed the team to address a specific collections need while generating wider benefits for research, volunteering, community engagement, and future interpretation.

They would be keen to apply again should a suitable collections need arise. They also noted that opportunities for follow-on skills development, particularly for volunteer conservators, as well as networking and knowledge-sharing between funded organisations, would be a beneficial addition to future programmes.



Unexpected Outcomes



The project generated several unanticipated but highly valuable outcomes:

- New research opportunities through relationships with volunteers and local quilting groups
- Donations of archival material, shirt factory-related textiles, and four quilts, with more under discussion
- A wider network of oral history contributors than originally anticipated
- Increased community enthusiasm for textile heritage and quilt-making traditions

These outcomes highlight the potential for future collecting, interpretation, and community-led heritage work.

Additional Impact: Community, Heritage & Identity



This project demonstrates how a relatively small collections care grant can generate benefits far beyond conservation and storage. Working alongside a volunteer group of experienced local quilters, the Museum Service captured specialist knowledge relating to quilt construction, materials, patterns, and textile traditions that had never been documented before.

A particularly significant aspect was the involvement of local quilting groups. Participants — predominantly older women with family or personal connections to the shirt-making industry — brought lived experience that connected practical craft skills with local industrial history. Their involvement strengthened community ownership of the collection and deepened the emotional resonance of the project.

New relationships with heritage groups and individuals connected to the shirt industry led to oral history opportunities, research leads, and donations of archives, textiles, and quilts. Four additional quilts have already been accessioned as a direct result of project engagement.

The enhanced documentation, photography, and interpretation generated through the project will support future exhibitions, digital content, and public engagement activity, including interpretation for the future DNA Museum.

This project shows how collections care can simultaneously strengthen preservation, documentation, community engagement, collecting, and future access.

Key learning from the project includes:

- Specialist volunteers can significantly enhance research, documentation, and interpretation
- Collections review projects help identify and address historic documentation gaps
- Textile collections are powerful catalysts for community engagement and oral history development
- Relationship-building is essential for meaningful community participation
- Consistent evaluation and demographic data collection will support future audience development
- Volunteer interest in textile conservation suggests opportunities for future skills-based training

