

Leeds Irish Health and Homes
'Memories of Change'
The Irish Experience in Leeds archive project

Background

Leeds Irish Health and Homes is a voluntary organisation that provides culturally sensitive supported housing and advice to Irish people. The organisation began in 1992 when research highlighted that the Irish community was not accessing services such as healthcare, housing and social services. By 1996 Irish Health and Homes received funding for a pilot scheme of 9 months starting with 8 tenancies. 6 years on and we now manage 62 tenancies and help 200 people with advice and support services.

Project aims

One of Leeds Irish Health and Homes aims is to raise awareness in the community about the situation and experiences of the Irish Community. Following on from a successful project in 2001 to make a short documentary about our organisation and the Irish Community in Leeds, it was made apparent that there was a wider need to capture the lives of many more Irish who have experienced the stress of migration and settled with their families in Leeds. The video (see enclosed) called 'A Long Way From Home, The Irish Community in Leeds,' only covered the lives of a tiny minority of the Irish Community.

As one of the largest ethnic minorities in Leeds there is currently no accessible archive for the Irish people of Leeds or in fact Northern England to use, be part of and proud of. The Irish culture revolves around an oral tradition of stories and life experiences. As the 1st generation Irish get older the chance of losing this history and heritage is becoming more apparent.

As an organisation it is one of our aims to raise the profile of the Irish Community in Leeds and this archive will be a source of local history. The Community currently lacks co-hesion in knowing about individual stories and this archive will meet the need for a tangible history. The use of photographs and recordings mean that it will be accessible to all, with no barriers to those who may have literary or learning difficulties.

The project aims to span what life was like for those first arriving in the UK to present day experiences of people of Irish descent, and also aims to explore the complexities of dual-ethnicity and nationality. By having the expertise of a project co-ordinator the recordings of these people's faces, lives, families and experiences can be preserved to educate the generations to come and provide a lasting heritage.

Through running workshops and conducting interviews we wish to enable people to have the space to explore self-expression and self-representation as an individual, as well as looking at how we identify ourselves through society and culture.

The initial 3 months of the project will be spent working with the older generation and then 3 months will be spent on the workshops with the younger generation. We will then be able to educate the younger people by using the recorded experiences of the older generation. The rest of the 6 months will be spent working on the web site and final materials such as the CD Rom and the exhibition.

Project Outline

The project we propose is the creation of a visual and oral archive for the Irish population in Leeds. Rather than just collecting photographs of people's experiences we want to make it an active archive where all generations can be involved in creating and maintaining an oral and visual history.

The project will be split into the following activities:

- running a series of photography, story telling and web design workshops with children and young people of Irish descent;
- collecting photographs and recording oral history;
- creating a series of photographic portraits (linked to the recording of their stories) and
- documenting Irish events, informal groups and organisations in the area.
- The final archive will take the form of a launch exhibition, (which will later be shown at different venues in Leeds), a CD Rom, a website and a book, all of which will be launched at the Leeds Irish Festival in July 2004.

The archive will be a cross-generational project involving single people, families, widows, bachelors etc. The following details how each age-group will be involved in developing this heritage project

'CHILDREN OF IRELAND'

Photography and storytelling Workshops

The workshops will be run over a period of months with a group of children in an After School Club, and will help the children to develop ideas about narrative and how images and words can be used together to fully express ideas. We will use drama and storytelling methods to engage the children in thinking about their own lives and backgrounds and how they identify themselves. By teaching them how to use digital and throwaway cameras they can photograph and record the creation and development of their own stories both in the sessions and at home and create a documentary of their own lives as well as their hopes, dreams and the fantasy worlds that all children inhabit.

Web Design

As well as doing photography and storytelling, with the teenage groups we will also give them the opportunity to learn about simple web design, allowing them to create their own web pages and thus contribute to the online archive.

Currently Leeds Irish Health and Homes do not have the resources to involve children in their support services but this stage of the project will allow us to work with children of Irish heritage explore their history and also capture the imagination of children from other communities.

The Harehills and Chapeltown area is a predominately Irish area especially for 2nd and 3rd generation Irish children. Working with children and young people of Irish descent in this area, we will use photography and creative writing to enable them to record their own lives, families, hopes and dreams. They will also have the opportunity to explore issues of ethnicity, community, representation and identity.

The material collected from these workshops will complement SATS requirements for 7, 11 and 14 year olds as it will cover:

- Speaking and listening;
- Reading;
- Writing including creative writing and poetry; and
- Non-Narrative writing.

It will also educate children to have a wider understanding of their surrounding community and history.

OLDER GENERATION / 'IRISH BORN'

Collecting photographs and recording Oral History

The Irish born generation have their own particular culture revolving around inbuilt practices in Ireland. In the 1950's and 1960's the Irish labourer was the builder of Britain and its motorways. On the female side domestic work and nursing became the main forms of employment. Many married and settled here but many did not and remain bachelors/spinsters to this day. Each person has such an individual story to tell about their hopes and fears and ultimately their real experiences. This needs to be captured before it is lost forever. The ups and downs of this community, the laughter and tragedy is often recounted during informal music and storytelling sessions in people's homes but now needs to be recorded.

It is suggested that these people be interviewed about their life stories and the recordings can be a source of material. Volunteers will be asked to come forward for this.

Creating a series of photographic portraits

A set of portraits will be produced in conjunction with the interviews for the oral history. The photographer will work closely with the sitter allowing them to determine the way the image is taken and how they wish to be represented. The image can then be displayed alongside the text created from the sitters' personal recording about their experience of migration and change.

The project co-ordinator going out into the community to take photographs, record events and interview people will encourage involvement. Many Irish people are isolated and one of our aims is to access these people who have just as much an interesting story as the person well known in the Irish Community. Even if someone is not part of an established community group they will be able to participate.

Documenting Irish Groups and events

We feel it especially important to document events and cultural activities being currently undertaken in the area. All Irish organisations and informal groups will be photographed and recorded. These include traditional music and dance, sports clubs and literature and history groups. An appeal for old photographs from these groups will be made as well.

FINAL ARCHIVE

Exhibition

The work produced in these workshops will form an exhibition to be shown at publicly accessible venues, primarily in the Leeds area, including galleries, shops and community spaces. We already have permission from the Irish Centre and the Irish Studies course at Leeds Metropolitan University to show the archive there. The archive will then be stored at the West Yorkshire Archive Service, where it is still open to the public.

Entry Fees

It has been decided that an entry fee will not be asked for but a donation to the archive will be requested. This puts no pressure on people who may not be able to afford to see this history

Disabled access

We will strive to place the exhibition in places that have disabled access and facilities.

The archive can be accessed from anywhere in the world via the website. The CD Rom will be available in libraries and schools in the area, accompanied by an Education Pack. These, the exhibition and the book will mark a great achievement for all involved and be an important collection /document for the Irish people of Leeds as well as creating a space for some real and timely discussions to be raised about identity and particularly the complexities of dual-ethnicity.

Website

The website will be linked to the main Leeds Irish Health and Homes website which will be launched in September. It will feature all collected and created materials along with history of the Irish in Leeds. Links will be included to the young peoples' part of the site. Once the main project is complete it will become a static archive on a continuously up-dated site. One of our staff will keep the site updated about forthcoming events in the area, thus also using the site as a method of communication for the Irish community.

Book

The material produced over the coming months combined with collected photographs and memories will also be put together to create a book.

WHO WILL BE INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

As well as working with members of the public to record stories and memories and make portraits we also have close links to other Irish organisations in Leeds.

The workshops will be run with:

- young people who are currently students of Harehills Irish Music Project;
- teenage girls who currently use the Travellers Education Service; and
- children from a Chapeltown-based After School Club – Frankland Place Early Years Centre.

We will also work closely with:

- the Irish Centre;
- Leeds Metropolitan University Irish Studies Department;
- Mount St Mary's History Group;
- Luacht Focail – Literature group; and
- groups formed by Irish Health and Homes such as our Women's' Group and the over 55's who currently attend our Friday club.

Crèche facilities for those who require them to participate will be provided.

WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM THIS PROJECT?

The collecting of oral history means the 35,000 strong Irish Community in Leeds have the opportunity to have their voice heard. By advertising in UK national Irish newspapers and around Leeds we can ensure that those wanting to contribute will be given the opportunity.

The workshops will provide an opportunity for children and young people of Irish descent in Harehills and Chapeltown, and Travellers on the Cottingley site to be involved in a major community arts project and learn new skills in the visual arts, digital arts, computer

literacy and creative writing as well as gaining a greater understanding of their own heritage.

Through exhibiting the work in areas accessible to the general public rather than just formal gallery spaces we will engage with a broader audience.

There has been much documentation of Irish communities and archives have been made in other major cities in England such as London, Liverpool and Manchester, but Leeds has been somewhat overlooked and this project is an excellent way to redress that balance and allow people to speak for themselves about their own experiences as well as looking back and making a record of the past.

The team of workers will include

Project coordinator
Administrator
Web design workshop leader and web designer
Publicity designer
Creative writing workshop leader
Youth and Community worker
PR officer
Project committee/support workers
Volunteers to support workshop sessions

The administration and PR Officer will provide support and time in-kind.

Time scale

We plan to begin as soon as funding is secured – September 2002 and complete the project in time for the Leeds Irish Festival in July 2004.

Activity	People involved	Timings
Receive grant		September 2002
Organisation of workshops/Advertising for volunteers	Project co-ordinator PR Officer Administrator	Sep2002 -Oct 2002
Start recording oral history's		Nov 2002
Portrait work on people who have provided oral history's		Dec 2002
Workshops with children		Jan 2003 -May 2003
Development of website		June 2003
Development of exhibition		July 2003- September 2003
Setting of book/printing		October 2003 - Jan 2004
Launch of the archive		July 2004

SUPPORT AND ADVICE

Those backing the project include -
 Leeds Metropolitan University Irish Studies Department
 Leeds Irish Centre
 Harehills Irish Music Project
 Travellers Education Service

Those willing to advise and mentor the project -
 Smurfit archive
 West Yorkshire Archive Service
 The Pavilion
 Mount St Mary's Archive

How will we know whether it has succeeded?

The project coordinator and committee will meet and check the progress of the project and make sure we are still meeting the project aims. These meetings will be held monthly. We will be flexible in adapting any workshops or ideas that are not progressing as intended.

Ultimately the success of the archive will depend on

- number of people who have participated
- number of people who have come through the exhibition to see it
- the number of hits on the website
- the number of books sold.

Other evaluation measurements will also be qualitative. We will ask all participants of the project to fill in feedback form at the end of the project. We will also ask people who access the website if they can fill in a feedback form about the quality of the archive.

OTHER FUNDING

Funders we have approached for the project include

- Your Heritage - £50,000
- Paul Hamlyn Foundation (particularly for the book) -£50,000
- The Ragdoll Foundation - £20,000

We will only require funding for the duration of this project.