

ARTISTS EXPLORING BUSINESS HERITAGE: Kirkintilloch Industrial Heritage Trail

Local business archives inspired an Industrial Heritage Trail in Kirkintilloch, near Glasgow. The canal side trail features six sculptures each representing an important part of local history. The sculptures were designed and made by artists Becky Sik and Elspeth Bennie working with project volunteers, young people and the Kirkintilloch brass foundry, Archibald Young Ltd. The project was managed by the EDLC Cultural Co-ordinator with funding from the Heritage Lottery and Creative Scotland. Becky and Elspeth were able to spend time at East Dunbartonshire Archives researching the history of Kirkintilloch's industrial past as part of the project. Both artists found the original drawings and photographs preserved by the Archives particularly inspiring. As a result they brought children from Hillhead Primary School, Kirkintilloch to the Archives to view them and then create their own designs based on what they saw. The children's designs were then cast with help from Becky and Elspeth.

During the nineteenth century, the combination of both rail and canal access, and the easy supply of fuel from the many local coal mines made Kirkintilloch an ideal location for the iron founding industry. In all, four foundries established themselves in Kirkintilloch, manufacturing a wide range of cast iron goods, exported around the world. East Dunbartonshire Archives holds the records of the Lion Foundry Co Ltd, ironfounders, Kirkintilloch. The Lion Foundry was established in 1880 by Robert Hudson, James Jackson and James Brown, formerly of Walter Macfarlane & Co's Saracen Foundry in Possilpark. It was located at Barleybank, Kirkintilloch and specialised in high quality architectural ironwork, such as building fronts and bandstands. It was one of a number of foundries who supplied pillar boxes and red telephone boxes to the Post Office and British Telecom. When BT stopped using red telephone boxes in 1984, the foundry was forced to close. The Lion Foundry records preserved in the Archives include corporate, financial and staff records as well as advertising and publicity material. Of particular note are the extensive production records amounting to nearly 1000 photographs and over 2,300 drawings of the company's cast iron products. Historic Scotland have stated that the Lion Foundry archive is the most complete collection of iron founding records in the UK.

Another local industry which inspired Becky and Elspeth were J&J Hay Ltd, boat builders, Kirkintilloch. Over the course of the 19th century traffic on the Forth and Clyde Canal gradually increased as the new foundries, saw mills, chemical works and collieries began operating along the route between Grangemouth Docks, Port Dundas and Bowling. In 1867 two brothers, John and James Hay, went into partnership to provide barge plant for this trade. The brothers acquired a boat building yard, located on the canal, West of Townhead Bridge in Kirkintilloch where they constructed a repair slip, as well as owning an engineering workshop at Port Dundas. The firm constructed their own lighters (or 'puffers') and operated estuary and coasting lighterage on the East and West coasts, as well as inland work.

J & J Hay Ltd built at least 60 puffers, the last, the 'Chindit', was launched in 1945. The most famous of J & J Hay's boats was 'The Saxon' which played the role of 'The Vital Spark' in the BBC series of the same name. As canal traffic declined, the company moved to new premises in 1954 and concentrated on repairs. The yard closed completely in 1961, and in 1963, J & J Hay amalgamated with G & G Hamilton to form Hay Hamilton Ltd. In 1968 Hay Hamilton merged with Ross & Marshall Ltd, forming a new company called Glenlight Shipping Ltd.

The J&J Hay Ltd records in the Archives include corporate and share records, partnership records, boat repair records and photographs. The artists were inspired by photographs of the puffers and plans showing the site of the boat yard. Launches from the yard could be spectacular and attracted crowds of local people. Due to the width of the canal puffers were launched sideways into the Forth and Clyde Canal – spectators who got too close were in danger of a splashing!

Artist and blacksmith Elspeth Bennie created a series of five sculptures marking the location of local industries and featuring the tools used by the workers. These include a forged steel model of a puffer representing the boat building past of the canal, as well as forged tools such as tongs, ladle, and bench rammer set in a pouring shank to represent three of Kirkintilloch's iron foundries. Elspeth also made a cast iron plaque to commemorate the uniqueness of the Luggie Aqueduct which carried the canal over the Luggie Water and the Campsie Branch Railway.

Sculptor and artist Becky Sik created the striking final marker on the route. The material is dyed jesmonite and is inset with castings produced during workshops with local school children. On the top of the marker is a cast aluminium tea cup. This one-piece casting was used as a test piece for foundry apprentices. It was made in partnership with the town's last surviving foundry, Archibald Young Ltd. The artist commissioned the foundry to make the tea cup to show that these skills still exist and should be preserved. Happily the team at Archibald Young were able to rise to the challenge and produce this intricate finishing piece.

As part of the project Becky also worked with volunteers to create a documentary film 'Shoulder to Shoulder', featuring interviews with former foundry workers, shots of archive material and footage of castings in situ across the UK. This sensitive and beautifully realised record of the local foundry industry will become a valuable archival resource for future generations.

Working with artists to explore heritage attracts new audiences to archives and allows a deeper, richer level of engagement with participants. The business records of Kirkintilloch, many rescued by the Archives from an uncertain fate after industry closures, are now inspiring a new generation to explore and learn about their heritage in a creative way.

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