# ROSES, LACE AND

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Lesley Yendell, Lead Artist. Gwen Stevenson, Video Artist.







# ROSES, LACE AND LINGERIE

Lesley Yendell, *Lead Artist*. Gwen Stevenson, *Video Artist*.

#### **NELSON McCAUSLAND MLA**

I welcome this publication of shared memories: "Roses, Lace and Lingerie" reflecting on the history of the Garvaghy Road area of Portadown.

In the years before it was developed for housing, this area was home to a number of factories, including *Ulster Lace* and the *Mayfair* brassiere factory where people from both traditions worked together. The area was also home to the world renowned *McGredy Roses* and it is from these three industries that the title *Roses, Lace and Lingerie* emerged.

The 'Shared History' project gave the former workers an opportunity to meet up again and share their stories and reminiscences which are now recorded on film and in print. Their stories reflects a different era when the area was a mass of colour from the sixteen acres of rose gardens and a hive of activity as those involved in the three main industries went about their daily work.

Some remnants from this past still exist in the area – the *Mayfair Factory* has now become the *Mayfair Business Centre* providing much needed employment in a range of new industries. *McGredy Roses* is still in operation, albeit on the other side of the world in New Zealand, where it proudly boasts its *Portadown* roots.

This project has helped to recreate relationships across the community divide and has provided a means for senior citizens to make a significant contribution towards improving our understanding of the history of this area. The positive examples and stories of work, friendships and memories that were lost when the factories closed down are now on record for future reference.

I congratulate all involved in this project. You should be proud of your efforts.

**NELSON McCAUSLAND MLA** *Minister for Social Development* 



#### **EMMA DRURY**

This publication has been created as a lasting record of the 'Roses, Lace and Lingerie' project. It celebrates and is drawn from the shared memories and heart-warming stories of some of the *Portadown* residents who worked in McGredy Roses, Ulster Laces and the Mayfair Factory prior to and during decades of conflict.

This shared history project was developed as part of our 'Re-imaging Craigavon' programme which aimed to explore the cultural diversity of the Borough and address perceptions about people, places and relationships in the area. The programme placed Artists at the centre of each project and local people engaged in a range of schemes that allowed a different viewpoint to be explored and explained.

Artist *Lesley Yendell* developed the 'Roses, Lace and Lingerie' project in this vein and proposed a pilot project that would start the process of bringing people together. She worked with *Marion Weir, Re-imaging development Officer* establishing contacts, gathering research and creating a small network of people who would participate in the project.

Lesley then embarked on a longer project funded through the *Neighbourhood Renewal Programme* administered by *Department for Social development*. With film artist *Gwen Stevenson*, Lesley spent time meeting and talking to people who lived through this era, filming interviews and collecting memorabilia. Lesley pulled this material together and with new work of her own, created an inspirational exhibition telling stories of work, friendships and memories that were lost when the factories closed down.

We are very grateful to those who participated in this arts project. We hope that people will continue to meet and reminisce, and we hope that this book might be passed to others who were part of these work forces that made such a mark on *Portadown*.

Emma Drury, Arts Development Officer, Craigavon Borough Council.

"It is an ideal subject to bring Artist and Community together and this shared history project drew its inspiration from Portadown, its inhabitants and its industries."

# ROSES, LACE AND LINGERIE WHO, WHAT, WHEN AND WHY...

By Lesley Yendell.

'McGredy Roses', 'Mayfair Manufacturing Company', and 'Ulster Laces', all were industries once based in Portadown... Who worked there? What did they produce? When did they open? Why did they close? I had many questions running through my mind as I began work on the pilot scheme for 'Roses, Lace and Lingerie'.

It is an ideal subject to bring Artist and Community together and this shared history project drew its inspiration from Portadown, its inhabitants and its industries.

Roused by the idea that older people are containers of history I set about finding and meeting up with a fascinating and diverse group of people who had worked in these industries. I hoped to use the memories of their working lives to paint a picture in my imagination of their work places, the industrial processes they were involved in and use that as the basis of the art work for the project.

With the disappearance of these industries a shared past of work, camaraderie, friendships and memories also seemingly disappeared. Today 'Mayfair' still stands, home now to Mayfair Business Centre, 'Ulster Laces' was recently demolished and Sam McGredy's rose fields were built over long ago.

Perhaps for those that worked at *Mayfair* the sight of premises may still prompt a memory or two - the roar of the machines, the bustle, the speedy stitchers, watching supervisors, stock rooms, messenger girls, mechanics, a multitude of voices, the sounds of popular music and so much more. But *Ulster Laces* and *McGredy Roses* are gone. They have disappeared; their presence has already become transitory in the history of Portadown, with little left to show of the working lives lived out within them. *A reminder perhaps of the fleeting nature of our existence?* 

**BUT there are memories that persist!** Of McGredy Roses - the scent of roses, the colourful fields, the glass houses, the budders' knives, the proud competition cups, the medals and the wonderful roses' names. Of Ulster Laces - the whiz and buzz of machinery, the busy looms, the teeming threads, the conveyor belts and the cutting room.

The project 'Roses Lace and Lingerie' sought to rescue some of those memories.

The pilot scheme found a number of people who expressed an interest in sharing their memories of their working lives for the project. Gradually a small collection of photos, objects and memorabilia grew and a few people who were willing to share their sewing skills for the project came forward.

It was an encouraging start and there were many other contacts to be made.

To celebrate the close of the pilot and launch the next phase of the project an event was held in January 2011 at the *Millennium Court Art Centre*, Portadown. It was a particularly bitter night but in spite of the cold, the launch was attended by lots of people who had taken part in the pilot scheme. There was lots of laughter and conversation, some speeches and while that happened, I made a performance piece.

The result of my work was a large-scale drawing made of flour on the floor. The images were inspired by and drawn from 'McGredy Roses', 'Mayfair' and 'Ulster Laces'. The piece was delicate and fragile, at the end of the night it was swept away - a reference to the ephemeral nature of the existence of these industries. This echoed the many changes to the working lives of the employees, it was an allusion to the aim of the project - to rescue those memories before they disappear.

The next phase of the project began in late February. Working with video artist *Gwen Stevenson*, we followed up on contacts, filmed a number of interviews and gathered up more memorabilia. Gwen created a film from the interviews. A collective sewing project was initiated, with the women of *Bannside Ladies Arts and Crafts Group* working together to create a tablecloth celebrating the project. Alongside these activities we collected and documented a selection of memorabilia for *Craigavon Museum Services* so that another record of the material would be held.

This part of the project ended with an exhibition at a 'Pop Up' gallery in the High Street Shopping Mall, Portadown. We took over a disused shop unit and reconditioned it creating a gallery space to show the art work completed during the project. The show included video projections, an installation and graphic work inspired by 'McGredy Roses', 'Mayfair' and 'Ulster Laces'. Passersby were fascinated with the work and many other factory workers stopped by and shared a story or two.

The project had progressed rapidly and ended in a whirlwind of activity. We met some lovely people who shared their stories and memories with us, and we would have loved to have had the time to meet more.

We interviewed as many people as we could from all areas of the work force and just as it seemed the potential of the project revealed itself and the momentum of the project was growing, our time was up!

This exhibition brought to an end this particular chapter of the 'Roses, Lace and Lingerie Project'. Over the following months we went on to complete the collective sewing project, organize a re-union event and prepare this book about the project.

Pulling together the book has in a sense been a time of contemplation, review and an interpretation of the huge amount of material the project generated.

Including something from everyone who was involved was a challenge but nearly all the content of the articles for the book was drawn directly from the participant interviews. The experience of listening again to all the interviews brought with it a feeling of deep gratitude to the people involved in setting up the project, to those who found people connected to the companies but most importantly to those who trusted us with their stories.

#### Lesley Yendell

# ROSES, LACE AND LINGERIE THE PILOT SCHEME

By Lesley Yendell.

My initial contacts for 'Roses, Lace and Lingerie' pilot scheme were passed to me by Marion Weir. The first few came from Portadown community groups - Jennifer McCann, Louis McCann, Gordon Blevins and Patricia McKeown.

In a sense 'Roses, Lace and Lingerie' was all about networking. Once my list of contacts started it grew and grew and criss-crossed with names. Meanwhile I criss-crossed Portadown following up contacts.

At the end of the pilot scheme a meeting with Pat served as its conclusion. We met briefly to exchange information, to look at the photographs I had managed to track down, to reminisce and talk about how to continue with the project. Some of these 'snippets' from our conversation give an idea of how the project was developed through research, conversations and referrals!

#### Pat: (talking about photograph)

'You see, that's the actual factory (Mayfair) the only thing done was it was renovated at the front. To me there's not much difference except for the fancy doors.'

'The front of the factory was to the side, the way we went in there was a gap there and the gap is actually still there.'

"..to the left of where you went in, that would have actually been our canteen to the right was all the offices."

'That's the way our cutting room was set out, all the stitchers were to the right, the cutting room and dispatch to the left.'

'It's **Joe Chambers** that sticks in my head because he was always there. You turned around and there was Joe.... and it was first name basis, it wasn't **Mr Chambers** or any thing it was Joe so it was.'

'All of that was **McGredy Roses**'... 'There is supposed to be another photograph of...now...**Mr John Beady** he lives on our estate, he's supposed to have the photos, so I've left word I'm looking to see him...and I've got that write up from the paper, I must get that out, its of **Sam McGredy**...'

'Malachy has a photograph of the house itself, so he's lending me it, the only problem is he can't get it out of the frame, can you scan that?'

'There's some one, her name is **Annie Mason**, they say that her memory she has of way back is unbelievable but I don't know if she worked in the **Mayfair** or not, I'll have to find that out...I'll go round and see her... and contact Iris... and **Joan** she worked at Mayfair and for Mayfair at home... see what memories she has maybe she has photos or something....It's powerful this....we're getting there now ...it's brilliant so it is!'



### ROSES, LACE AND LINGERIE LAUNCH PERFORMANCE AT MILLENNIUM COURT











# ROSES, LACE AND LINGERIE THE THREE INDUSTRIES MCGREDY ROSES ULSTER LACES MAYFAIR



## ROSES BY MANY OTHER NAMES...

(with apologies to W. Shakespeare!)

By Lesley Yendell with editorial assistance from Liz Stein





**Sam McGredy** (the first) was passionate about flowers, especially pansies. To indulge his passion, towards the end of the nineteenth century he moved up from Southern Ireland and bought some land in the small townland of *Garvaghy*, in *Portadown*, with the intention of settling down to a quiet life of farming and growing his pansies. His hobby was creating hybrids of the lovely velvet flowers to create new colours and textures, marrying the strengths of one variety and eliminating the weaknesses of another.

One day, in search of a new project, he tried out his skills on another flower altogether, the queen of the garden, the *Irish rose*. The result was brilliant; a completely brand new variety, perfect in form and scent, every silky petal in place. He was so excited. This was it; he would sell his hybridised roses and branch out into the world of business.

Thus McGredy Roses was born, and continued as a family business for four generations.

At the start of the 1900's, the land Sam had bought in *Garvaghy* was open farmland with no buildings and it was already completely dedicated to rose growing, with Sam's son (also named Sam) helping to run the successful business. However, nearly twenty years later, following World War I, the land was needed for farming and was compulsorily purchased by the government, forcing *McGredy Roses* to move out to *Mullavilly* where it expanded into 350 acres of land. Father and son kept offices in *Portadown*, however, bussing the workers out to the fields at *Mullavilly*. By now a third *Sam McGredy* was already working with the roses too.

Disaster struck the business with the advent of the Second World War, when the flower fields were again needed to grow food for the war effort, and sadly Sam, (the third), now in charge, watched as the roses were ripped up and burnt. With the loss of the roses there was no need for daily or twice daily inspections, the keeping of notebooks on disease, growth habits etc, and consequently most of the men who tended the roses were laid off. It wasn't until the war ended that the growing of roses was to be resumed.

**Sam McGredy** (the third) died at a young age, leaving a two year old son (yes, Sam the fourth!) who would eventually inherit the business. While young Sam was growing up and attending school, the company was run by *Tom Weir*, a brilliant hybridist, who had worked with both Sam's father and grandfather. He was a great friend of the family and eventually came to work alongside Sam when, at the age of twenty-two, he completed his university degree and took over at **McGredy Roses**.

Under Sam's direction *McGredy Roses* expanded. He put new roses on the market, and in the flower business, if you wanted to market a rose it had to be new. Sam had inherited the family flair for creating new hybrids. From the acres and acres of roses he grew, just a few would be selected. To create a 'new' rose, each had to have exactly the right qualities: plenty of petals, a good point of bloom; it shouldn't 'ball' in the wet, nor be susceptible to diseases such as blackspot, rust or mildew. Sam's roses grew to be stronger and more beautiful than any in Ireland.

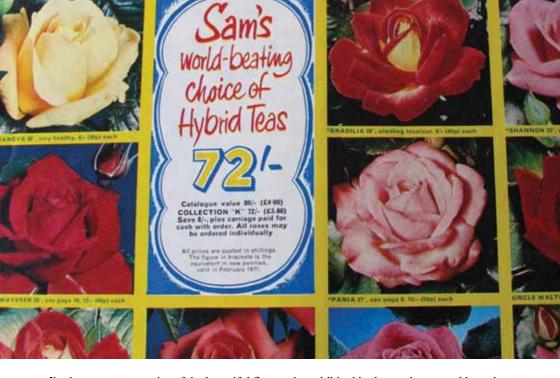
But Sam also knew that in order to sell the roses overseas he had to get noticed. He started to enter *McGredy Roses* into the big flower shows in England. Shows such as Chelsea, Harrogate and Southport were a great help in the promotion of new breeds. If you won a medal it reinforced the quality of your rose and drew attention to it. Over the years *McGredy Roses* had won many medals, enough in fact to present an entire chain of office to the *Portadown Mayor* made of gold medals! And Sam's sister, *Molly*, still has three on her own charm bracelet.

Sam had other ways of getting his roses noticed. His university training had given him ideas about marketing which were innovative at that time and really drew people's attention. He decided to give names to his new roses, calling them after famous actors, dancers, musicians, indeed after all the celebrities of the day. He had a *Ginger Rogers*, a *Louis Armstrong*, an *Ena Sharples*, for example, and *The Queen* herself was given her own *Queen Elizabeth*. He even named roses after the names of successful companies such as *Royal Doulton*, *Benson and Hedges* or *Mullard Electronics* and of course family members were not forgotten with his *Molly McGredy*, *Paddy McGredy* and *Uncle Walter* varieties. The name not only drew attention to the roses, they delighted the donor of the name too and added frisson to the catalogue.

Until they were formally named, many of the roses carried nicknames so workers could identify them rather than using numbers. Sometimes the nicknames stuck *Sexy Rexy* being one such name; very popular on the continent, it created some controversy at the *Royal Horticultural Society!* 

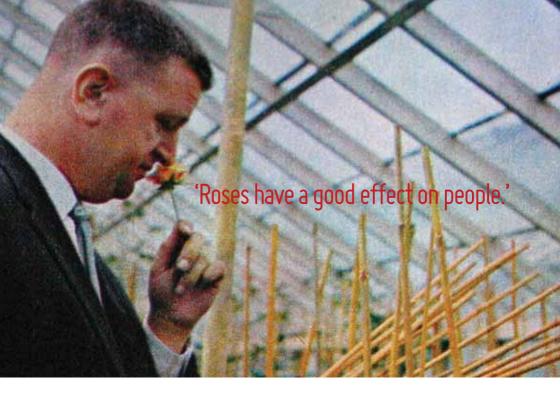
Working alongside Sam, photographing the roses for *McGredy Roses*' annual catalogue, was *Jim Lyttle*. He was Tom Weir's grandson, a professional photographer who had a small studio set up at *McGredy Roses*. He had other professional commitments, but whenever a rose was ready, in tip-top condition, he would be called in to photograph it.





Jim has many memories of the beautiful flowers he exhibited in the catalogue, and how they were named, but one rose in particular sticks in his mind. Sam had bred a brand new rose, which was variegated in colour and because of this was nicknamed 'the hand painted rose'. Then Sam got it into his head he would like to name it after the famous artist, *Picasso*. Jim was called into take shots of the rose and his photographs were then dispatched to Picasso's agent asking for permission to name this wonderful flower after the artist he so admired. Time passed with no word from France and though, in the meantime, a hand-painted china company expressed interest in using their name for the rose, Sam prevaricated, hoping for a reply from the artist. He waited six months and at last the message came through: *Picasso would be delighted!* To mark the occasion, Jim photographed the rose with the additional flourish of a paintbrush and palette and the rose made its debut in the annual catalogue.

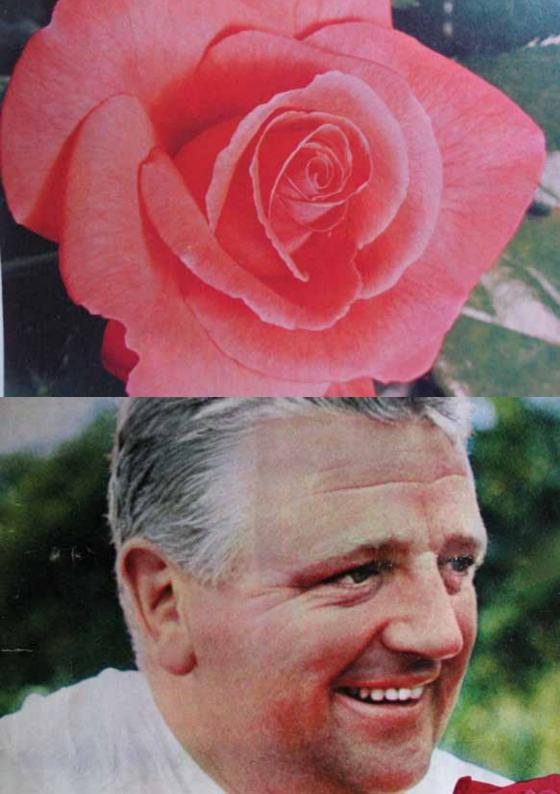
A modern man, looking to new horizons, in the 1970s *Sam McGredy* decided to leave Northern Ireland and transfer the business to New Zealand. This turned out to be a complicated process since a special licence had to be obtained and there was a lot of official red tape to get through with lots of hiccups. In addition, the physical export of his rose stock proved onerous, and in the end, instead of sending the rose plants, the 'budding eyes' were sent and later propagated in New Zealand itself.



But though the Irish roses now bloomed at the other side of the world, the rose fields of *Portadown* are still a cherished memory in the minds of many people from the town. *McGredys* was a prominent business with an excellent reputation, giving work to many locals over the years. The rose fields often appear in the background of many old family snapshots and, after World War I, work in the rose fields was highly sought after. Ex-servicemen, in particular, loved to work in the tranquil surroundings, the peace, the silence, the perfume and sheer beauty of the rose fields providing a therapeutic antidote to their experiences on the front line.

Sam's sister *Molly* recalls that even in more recent times, a policeman once confided to her that during the Troubles, when he was on night duty, he and his fellow officers just loved making sure *McGredys* was all right last thing at night: going round the rose fields, he told her, before they went to bed, enabled all the tension of the night to leave them and they could go home sure of a good night's sleep.

As Molly observes herself, 'Roses have a good effect on people'. So it was with McGredys Roses the world over.





## MAYFAIR MANUFACTURING COMPANY

By Lesley Yendell with editorial assistance from Liz Stein





*Mayfair Manufacturing Company* came into being in the 1930s on Mill Avenue as a small, homely factory owned by *Jack Posnansky*. At that time the company employed about 250 workers to make ladies' slips and nightwear.

Having achieved success with lingerie, in the late 1950s there was a push to improve productivity to meet demand. Specialist trainers were brought over all the way from the USA, at great expense, to teach the *Mayfair* machinists how to improve their performance. More attention was given over to 'prepping' and faster techniques were taught, producing some 'super' machinists. This, coupled with the installation of the new faster machines, led to increased production. So much so that *Mayfair* outgrew its homely premises on Mill Avenue and production moved to a brand new factory built on the *Garvachy Road*.

Joe Chambers' story charts the development of Mayfair. His first job was at Mill Avenue where he looked after raw materials, the velvets and trimmings. He then moved on to combine working with study, and by the age of twenty-nine, he had moved up to become a director of the expanding company. At that time not only did Mayfair have a plant in Portadown, there were also factories in Belfast, Newcastle and Brixton in South London.

*Mayfair* continued to make lingerie: ladies' slips, nightwear, dressing gowns and children's clothes. Their main client was *Marks and Spencer* and occasionally they made small quantities for special smaller companies. Soon they also diversified into producing fitted nylon bed sheets.

Sheet production grew rapidly and a new factory was set up at *Keady*. At its height 35,500 beds per week were being covered by brushed nylon sheets, top sheets, bottom fitted sheets and pillowcases. In fact, so much fabric was being consumed by the production that the chairman of *Courtaulds*, the fabric supplier, came over to see what *Mayfair* was doing in order to use so much material!

Expansion continued as two more factories were set up; after the success in *Keady*, another one opened in *Gilford*. It was a heyday for *Mayfair*.

In Joe's words 'It had become a big operation, a very big operation. Every body had put the effort in that was needed, every one had been keen to progress...'

Everyone has a memory of those hey days. *Trevor Crowe* recalls, 'When you worked there it was a powerful buzz. You walked into the floor every body sewing, every body stitching'. Margaret Blevins agrees. 'Every one seemed to get on with their work but you could sit and have a wee chat at the same time, the craic was good'.

However, despite the sociable atmosphere in the workshops, the machinists had to work hard to earn their money; *Marks and Spencer* demanded high quality stitching and 18 stitches per inch was the norm. Describing the complex processes involved, *Gordon Blevins* explained how the 'making' of the garment was divided up into a series of short operations. First there was the spreading machine, which set out the fabric so the pattern could be laid and cut out. The pattern pieces were then 'tied up', and given out to the different machinists who would carry out various operations such as side seaming, shoulder setting or sleeve making. Finally the garment would be 'made up', carefully examined for flaws and once given the go ahead, would be packaged ready to leave the factory.

The machinists were supported by a back-up team who, literally, oiled the wheels of their progress. The mechanics were responsible for devising all kinds of complex sewing machines and devices, aimed at speeding up the operations enabling multiple operations to be done at the same time. Each operation had a different machine depending on the job. There were machines with different feeders, with different feet, over-lockers, for example, or machines dedicated to buttonholes and button sewing; the list goes on. The mechanics were right there on call if a sewing machine went wrong; and if a girl needed a mechanic she put a red flag on top of her machine!



# Meet the Mayfair workers who make those 'Marks and Sparks' clothes...



d marker Elizabeth McCirliand below to make up a sugar coat, emobal by (beli-right) supervisor Barburu Hamday, Maris Harv and Marie Culture



Story by Diane Day

Pictures by Garry Morrow Did you ever wonder where the famous Marks and Spenser stores get their great value fashions from?

Well, the answer lies right in Portadows and Mayfair Manufacturing Co. Ltd.

The Portadown factory turns out many of the pretty nighties, house coats and swimwearthelies the rails of "Marks and Sparks."

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The familiar fact of Malestas Mailott, who when an morting of Mapfair is a well known bestell return 500 space time. Malestas has translind to many yets of the mortif as referen international attribute.



Hilda Winter was a veteran machinist. She remembers, 'I wasn't keen when I first started because I had been used to making garments, I loved dressmaking but when I went there we just sewed part of some thing, we were part of a team. It was all very monotonous ...you were doing the same part over and over again.' Later she was made a supervisor where she enjoyed the organizing, breaking down of garments and getting the production off at the end of the day. 'I loved to see the girls making plenty of money, being satisfied' she recalls 'Coming from a war generation we didn't have a lot. Those factories meant girls and some wives could work and get money...It was a good time in the fifties and the sixties.'

J. E. Posnansky

57, Effra Road, London, S. W2. Telephone: Brixton <del>0038.</del> 4022.

Private Office.

#### CHRISTMAS 1957.

It is with renewed pleasure that I can send you a personal note, together with Mrs. Posnansky's and my own good wishes for the future.

We can again record some progress in various departments, especially the Automation Room - where we now employ some extra fifty people to feed the underwear trimmings section.

We also have some plans for future development which will some to fruition in the near future to help the general progress of the Company.

The success we have had in the past and hope to achieve in future can only be reached with the concentrated help of each and every one of the 1,000 people the Company is employing.

May I express the hope that we will have plenty of work in the coming year, and that you will enjoy good health and strength to work even harder and earn better wages.

Yours sincerely,



Amid the pressure and demands of producing such high quality products there were still times for humour and high jinks! One day a new style of nightdress had to be made up. Jokingly *Trevor Crow* said to the girls '*Turn it round real quickly and I'll wear it for yous*'.

The girls didn't have to be asked twice; they had it made up in ten minutes and Trevor was kept to his promise!

Lingerie, nightwear, dressing gowns, slips, sheets and pillowcases were all made at *Mayfair*. They even produced children's wear.

One innovation that backfired, however, was when *Marks and Spencers* once had the idea of including toy teddy bears called 'Zippy' with the children's wear. Underestimating the ingenuity of small children, they hadn't anticipated that one small child would pull the zip off 'Zippy' and, unfortunately, nearly choke on it. *Marks and Spencer* responded to this near tragedy in the only way possible: as Trevor remembers, 'We had to take all the wee bears out and burn them. It was terrible!'

But outside the company there were worse terrors afoot, when its success was threatened by the onset of *The Troubles in Northern Ireland*, bringing with them terrible times, making business difficult over a long period. *Mayfair* was placed in a 'standstill' situation, informed that their sales could be neither increased or reduced. As competition from abroad began to eat into their orders, with their biggest customer *Marks and Spencer* sending more and more production to cheaper suppliers abroad, *Mayfair* knew they could no longer keep going.

For Joe it had been the time of his life helping *Mayfair* grow. They had been exciting times, very uplifting times and very challenging times. And, even though, in his heart, he feels its closure might have been avoidable, in his own words he admits,

'In the end things went very bad, the feeling was gone, the staff were mostly gone and at the end of the day Mayfair faded out, it couldn't last.'





Embroidery and Lace... stitched and unstitched...

## THE STORY OF ULSTER LACES

By Lesley Yendell with editorial assistance from Liz Stein



Just before the outbreak of the Second World War, a new manufacturing company opened at 16 Edward Street, Portadown. Ulster Laces, was the brainchild of Polish emigrant Kasriel Bloch, whose grandfather had already established a successful embroidery plant in the Free City of Danzig.

*Kasriel* developed the company into a successful export business and his trade took him to London, where he supplied the *Mayfair Manufacturing Company*. He developed a close friendship with its director, *Mr Posnansky*, and one day in 1937, with the threat of war looming over his native country, he confided his fears about the rising anti-semitism in *Danzig* and his worries about raising his sons in such an atmosphere of uncertainty and danger.

Touched by his story, *Posnansky* offered to support his friend if *Kasriel* were to set up an embroidery plant in Britain. There followed discussions with the *Board of Trade*, where it was suggested that since there was currently widespread unemployment in Northern Ireland, it would be socially beneficial to base his new business there.

In June 1939 the company was founded. Kasriel's work permit was already in place and visas arrived for the rest of his family on the 31st August; they didn't know it at the time but they left on the same day as the last trains out of Europe before the terrible war that followed.

The new plant, set up in what was formerly *Cowdy's Handkerchief Works*, was equipped with state-of-the-art *Jaccard* embroidery machines. These amazing machines were up to 35 feet long and held 685,000 needles! With attention focussed on the war, lacemaking was considered a luxury, so the factory dedicated most of its work to embroidering badges for soldiers' uniforms. However, they did keep up some of their lace work, for export, providing for the linen industry in Canada and the U.S.

The difficult war years were followed by shortages of raw materials, and a scheme was set up to modify production and cope with these shortages. It was known as the post-war utility scheme. However, by 1948/49, *Ulster Laces* was once again back on track producing lace and other ornamentation for a wide variety of textiles. They supplied lace for both the lingerie and handkerchief trade and when the advent of paper tissues began to threaten their orders, *Ulster Laces* adapted to the changing trend by starting a large quilting plant.

The advances and changes in the machinery meant that lace could be produced more cheaply than embroidered fabric and lingerie was soon made using multiple layers of lace. By the late sixties the factory was producing lace cardigans made from an exciting new discovery, acrylic lace fibre. This product was a great success and prompted investment in new machinery to develop and grow the business. The focus shifted to knitwear production and to keep ahead of their business rivals, *Ulster Laces* constantly reviewed, updated and adapted their machines in order to produce original merchandise which was competitive and up to date. Other companies failed to match this expertise and they soon led the field by the quality of their designs.

Not only were their products state-of-the-art, but *Ulster Laces* was also ahead of its time in its treatment of its labour force. Most of its employees were women, skilled in their work, so a crèche was provided to retain the workforce after they had children. There was also a nurse and a teacher on site and a mini-bus service was available to collect older children from school. In addition, the company also provided a canteen, a social club and various other activities and benefits for its staff. Forward looking, indeed.





The success of *Ulster Laces* can be shown in the stories of individuals employed from in and around *Portadown*. It was common for whole families to be employed at the factory, brothers, sisters, wives, husbands, grandchildren too, for with the creche, social club, buses and a canteen, the workers were well looked after. *Eric Brown* began working in the lace department in 1959 and by the time his friend *Billy Palmer* started working there in 1962 the company had moved into garment making. The factory was generally spotless, full of coloured fabrics blues, pinks, whites, yellows, the sound of the machines and the radio filled the air, remembers Billy.

'We got on well with each other. The 'craic' was good, lots of humour. I kept up my friendship with Eric... and I see people in town all the time, and still talk about it.'

Billy and Eric still remember *Ulster Laces* as a great place to work.

Yvonne McCrory and her friend found them rather strict as employers, though. 'The working day was eight 'til six. The gate would close at eight and if you weren't in you couldn't have got in. You would have no option but to go home and of course lose a day's pay.' At work itself there was no slacking, it was all go. The girls were reliant on their speedy stitching skills to make their money and the bosses were around most of the time over seeing production. When the long awaited bell rang promptly at six pm, signalling the end of the working day, those who had to catch buses would rush out, eager to get away home.

There were compensations to the job, however. The mixed labour force meant that Yvonne had friends from all over Portadown.

'We went to dances together and walked to work together'.

Inside the factory, wearing their blue overalls, they sewed away accompanied by the hits of the day from the likes of *Everly brothers*, *Jim Reeves* or *Englebert Humperdinck*. One day a request on the radio was played dedicated to all the ones who run for the bus at night... '*The Elephants' Tango*' rang out across the room to everyone's great amusement!

Every Friday work stopped at one o'clock, the machines were cleaned and left spotless and gleaming ready for Monday.

When *Marks and Spencers* came to visit, although already clean, the whole factory was given an extra going over, no fluff, oil or thread to be seen anywhere. The girls then sat waiting at their machines; when the signal was given that *Marks and Spencers* bosses had arrived, they would start sewing.

Working for such a prestigious company as *Marks and Spencers* was exacting work and the workers had to be highly skilled to produce garments which met the highest standards.

When a branch of *Marks and Spencer* opened in Belfast many stitchers, and even the bosses, took the time to go and see their products in the store. *Donna Monaghan* and *Annette McCann* were among those visiting.

'It was some thing to see them (garments) hanging up in a bag when we had only seen them in pieces, and also to see how much they cost!'.

Margaret Medlow, now Margaret Johnson, remembers how even the supervisors and the bosses couldn't resist the temptation of visiting M and S and examining the products there. She started work at the age of fourteen sewing and scalloping by hand, motifs of flowers, butterflies and birds for underwear. She retired forty-six years later and still has happy memories of *Ulster Laces*. She got on well with the bosses and fondly remembers how kind the *Blochs* were.

When *The Troubles* brought with them rough, tough times, it was more difficult to get customers over to Northern Ireland. But *Ulster Laces* stayed open throughout, only closing during the workers' strike, when it was felt that to remain open would have jeopardized the safety of the workers.

There was no religious sectarianism at the factory; from the outset *Ulster Laces* had recruited its workers for their skills and ability only and as a result there was a mixed workforce from both sides of the religious divide. Even people who held quite hard line views would find themselves good friends with workmates who held very different views and with whom they might not otherwise have associated. *The Bloch family's* experiences of anti-semitism in *Danzig* meant that it was unsurprising that at *Ulster Laces* intolerance was not tolerated.

But the world of textiles was moving on, competition increasing. The world was waking up to the possibilities of cheap labour and the wages of workers in Northern Ireland were now high in comparison to other countries. *George Bloch* knew the writing was on the wall when, shopping in Belfast C&A one day, he picked up an *Aran* wool cardigan made in the *Far East*. He took it home and in the design room at *Ulster Laces* he weighed it: the company couldn't even have bought the raw material for the price that the garment was retailing at.

Cheap imports quickly proved impossible to compete with and across Northern Ireland companies struggled to survive. *Ulster Laces* was not the only company to lose the battle. Soon the textile industry, once one of the biggest employers in Northern Ireland, had faded away. The thread was finally broken at *Ulster Laces* and the factory closed.





## ROSES, LACE AND LINGERIE THE VIDEO PROJECT

#### By Gwen Stevenson.

'Culture permeates all aspects of any society. It acts as the basic fabric that binds people together. Culture dictates tastes in music, clothes, and even the political and philosophical views of a group of people. Culture is not only shared, but it is deep and stable.'[1]

Many articles and books have been written in recent decades about culture in organisations. Every organisation has its own unique culture or value set. Most don't consciously try to create a certain culture. Instead, it is typically created unconsciously, based on the values of the top management or the founders. Other organisations work hard to consciously develop and maintain a culture through extensive training of managers and employees believing that this contributes to growth and success.

Aplethora of definitions exist for organisational culture. Simply put, it is "the way we do things around here." The 'Roses, Lace and Lingerie' video tries to capture the essential essence of how things were done around McGredy Roses, the Mayfair Factory and Ulster Laces. As the stories and recollections of former employees, managers, directors and friends unfolded, a clear picture of the shared and unique core values emerged for each of the factories.

McGredy Roses was embedded in the local community with strong family values and ties but it was global in its success and visionary in embracing cosmopolitan celebrity culture. The Mayfair factory got things done by promoting camaraderie and a spirit of teamwork where people had a good sense of humour and took joy from team results instead of individual accomplishments. Ulster Laces emphasised technical and engineering innovation while simultaneously creating a tolerant and caring working environment providing employee facilities and policies that were way ahead of their time.

While the factories have closed their doors for some time now, the stories of the factories remain in the hearts and minds of the wonderful people that it was my pleasure to meet in the course of making this video. The aim of the video work was to honour those memories and to testify to the shared memories of the people of the *Garvaghy Road*.



Video stills from "ROSES"













Video Stills from "LACES"



Video stills from "MAYFAIR"



# ROSES, LACE AND LINGERIE FINAL EXHIBITION













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