BRIDGES OVER BREXIT

Irish Museums Association
Since the decision of the UK to withdraw from the EU was announced in 2016, the Irish Museums Association has been actively exploring the potential impact of Brexit on the museum and cultural sectors under the overarching concept of ‘Bridge over Brexit’ with our partners at Ulster University. In doing so, it has uncovered fascinating projects led by our museum members which have made real impact at grass-roots level within communities on both sides of the border.

The case studies contained in this publication provide powerful evidence of the ability of museums to bring creativity and imagination to the narratives of our past and present. They demonstrate how museums are indeed bridges over Brexit and how, in doing so, they help us to better understand both our weave of diversity and our shared heritage.

Museums are safe, shared spaces within which difficult questions can be asked and explored. They can open up conversations around our sense of place, our sense of identity, and how this is evolving.

These creative explorations often lead to surprising answers that challenge stereotypes and open up new possibilities. At their best, museums offer empowering experiences that can point to a better future based on mutual respect and understanding.

The Irish Museums Association’s goal is to provide a distinctive voice that articulates the important role that museums play in our society; all the more important given the rise of divisive discourse and in light of uncertainties, and tensions, created by Brexit.

With the prospect of changing relationships due to the UK’s exit from the EU, the challenge for the museum sector is to not allow this disrupt the strong and effective cultural partnerships that currently exist and have been mutually beneficial to both sides of the border. Brexit may cause difficulties for our sector but it will not prevent the continuing of collaborations that evidence our unique bond.

**William Blair**
Chair, Irish Museums Association
ILLUSTRATING THE SOMME
Interpreting our history through different art forms is a creative way of enhancing the experiences of visitors to our museums. With the *Illustrating the Somme* project, Armagh County Museum, Craigavon Museum Services, and Monaghan County Museum took an innovative approach when it came to commemorating the centenary of the Battle of Somme, using the dynamic medium of comic to connect with their teenage audiences.

As part of their programming around the Decade of Commemorations, these three museums came together to publish *For Valour*, using illustrations and storytelling to personalise this historic event, one of the bloodiest encounters of World War One.

By opting for a comic format, they were able to shine a light on the lives of three people caught up in the horrors of war and break down its complexity into a more digestible and accessible format for a younger audience.

Each museum selected a person from their region to feature, providing the content and working with the families of the protagonists to ensure their stories were told in a sensitive manner.

Private Tommy Chambers from Glenanne, who enlisted at just seventeen and tragically lost his life on the very first day of the Battle of the Somme, was featured by Armagh County Museum. Craigavon Museum Services opted to commemorate Portadown-born sculptor Anne Acheson who designed a papier maché splint that helped the limbs of injured servicemen heal better. Monaghan County Museum celebrated the actions of Private Thomas Hughes, awarded the Victoria
Cross for bravery which is currently on display in the National Army Museum in London.

*For Valour* allows these museums to shine a focus on difficult topics and celebrate the lives of local people from each community involved in this conflict. It engages their younger audiences in conversations around important and challenging themes, highlighting the role of cultural heritage and art in providing a space for these discussions through this tangible and thought-provoking publication.

*For Valour was funded through the Cooperation with Northern Ireland Scheme, operated by the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.*

Images courtesy of Armagh County Museum
Just after 11am on the 20th September 1942, the quiet Sunday stillness of the Emyvale countryside in north County Monaghan was shattered by the screaming roar of a Spitfire as it dived down, unmanned, from the clouds. Meanwhile, over the border in Northern Ireland, its Royal Air Force pilot descended safely under his parachute while listening to the last fitful cries of his stricken warplane as it plunged into a field just over the southern side of the border in County Monaghan and exploded.

The Monaghan Spitfire crash site was excavated in 2017 by a cross-border group including Monaghan County Museum, the Royal Air Forces Benevolent Fund, Queen’s University Belfast, and students from secondary schools located on both sides of the border.

Finds from the dig, such as the famous Merlin Rolls-Royce engine of the Monaghan Spitfire, original documents and maps, as well as first-hand accounts of the crash, formed the core of the exhibition which opened the following year at Monaghan County Museum, *The Monaghan Spitfire – Life on the Border with a World at War.*

Drawing together different disciplines such as archaeology, filmmaking, archival research, and oral history, *The Monaghan Spitfire* also features other occasions when the war exploded across the border into Monaghan and tells the story of a place trapped on the border between two worlds: one tearing itself apart, the other trying desperately to stay out of a global conflict which had almost engulfed it.

Exhibitions are at the core of every museum’s activity and by working with partners and community members from both sides of the border, *The Monaghan Spitfire* project was able to draw together research, provide access to public and private collections, and take a joint approach to how we interpret these histories and enhance the rich narratives of our island. To present the shared histories of a place while also acknowledging its differences.
“We want to tell the story of Monaghan people. To show we are on the border but we reflect both sides of the traditions that exist in our county.”

Liam Bradley, Curator, Monaghan County Museum

The Monaghan Spitfire exhibition was made possible through a partnership between Monaghan County Museum, Royal Air Force, Queen’s University Belfast and the Irish Air Corp, along with input from the Imperial War Museum in London.

Images courtesy of Monaghan County Museum
The F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio and the Highlanes Gallery were established through a cross-border partnership between two local authorities, Drogheda Borough Council and the former Banbridge District Council, with the aim of providing major cultural and tourism resources for the East Border Region and increasing cross-border cooperation through arts and culture.

After many years of committed cross-border work, and enabled by the European Union through the Ireland/Northern Ireland INTERREG IIIA Programme which provided essential capital funding, Highlanes Municipal Art Gallery, housed in a former Franciscan Church, opened in October 2006, and the purpose-built F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio, opened 18 months later in 2008.

Over the last decade, these institutions and their staff have worked together to curate and tour exhibitions, share resources and expertise, and support one another to attract and engage audiences.

One of their most recent projects, Crossing Lines (2018-19), epitomises the spirit under which they were founded. This touring exhibition included new and recent work from Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland Gifted Collection, National Museums NI, and artists’ studios. Conceived as a response to the challenges of Brexit, it considered the current global climate where increasing political and social turmoil have provoked public protest and campaigning on issues including gender, race, sexuality, class, religion, and the environment.

Crossing Lines was, in essence, a response to the ways in which the polarised debate on Brexit has mobilised people to take to the streets, and to social media, in an effort to have their voices heard. A response from two museums for whom Brexit threatens the very basis upon which both institutions were founded.
“We live in challenging times. No matter what your views on Brexit, the uncertainty and sheer logistics of leaving the European Union will have huge ramifications for museums and communities on both sides of the border in Ireland.

The future is uncertain but we are determined to find a way to continue our partnership no matter what the border looks like.”

Dr Riann Coulter, Curator, F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio

Images courtesy of Highlanes Gallery and F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio
Museum collections and archives are powerful tools to explore the past and empower people to create a vision for future change. By using significant objects, collections, and archives as a stimulus to pose challenging questions about the past, the Making the Future programme aims to take the temperature of where we are at currently as a society and create a manifesto for our future.

Making the Future is a cross-border cultural programme taking place over three years (2018-2021) where participants from different communities, cultural and religious backgrounds will have multiple opportunities to get involved, to have their voices heard, to tell stories relevant to their lives, to be creative and to gain new skills, and to make a positive contribution, changing themselves and society along the way.

The regional programme is being delivered by a consortium of leading cultural organisations including the Nerve Centre, National Museums NI, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, and Linen Hall Library. Through a programme of interconnected activities and projects, it looks at questions of identity and culture, uncovers hidden and untold stories, revisits our recent past, and explores the emergence of new social and political states. Stories and creative responses are being dynamically curated in shared spaces and places, including high profile exhibitions, events, digital content, and social media channels.

Making the Future has been designed to explore the legacy of the past and promote positive relations in Northern Ireland and the border counties, characterised by respect for different traditions and the ability to celebrate cultural diversity in an environment free from prejudice, intolerance, and hate.

Making the Future is funded by the European Commission’s PEACE IV Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).
“Making the Future provides a critical opportunity to use museums and their collections as a means to creating dialogue with communities across Northern Ireland and the Border Counties at this time of peace, reconciliation, and future change.”

Aaron Ward, Head of Audience Development, National Museums NI

Images courtesy of National Museums NI
The Donegal-based 28th Infantry Battalion of the Irish Defence Forces was activated in 1973 as one of the new battalions formed to strengthen border operations, with their primary role being ‘To Aid the Civil Power’. When it was established, it was the largest unit in the Irish State and battalion members and their families played a significant role in shaping the economic, social, and cultural lives of the areas in which they lived.

Donegal County Museum, the Public Arts Office of Donegal County Council, and the Defence Forces came together to deliver highly ambitious multi-disciplinary arts and community projects that allowed them to explore the question of how we remember former servicemen, focusing specifically on those who served along the border between Donegal and Northern Ireland throughout the period of the Troubles.
How we Remember commemorated the battalion’s contribution to peace, both at home and abroad, through a series of projects that included the commission of a series of stained glass windows at the battalion’s headquarters at Finner Camp, a specially commissioned film on reminiscences of former serving personnel at Rockhill Army Barracks, and a major exhibition at Donegal County Museum in 2016.

The exhibition highlighted the often overlooked role of the members of the Irish Defence Forces in upholding peace in the border regions and in war-torn areas throughout the world. In doing so, it was able to open conversations around conflict, nationalism, ethnic division and support peace building initiatives.

Museums offer untapped potential for helping formal education resources to interpret and communicate the curriculum. They expand and enrich the classroom learning and provide hands-on activity where learning driven by curiosity, discovery, free exploration, and the sharing of experiences with companions can take place.

How we Remember was supported by an extensive education programme that reached over 1,700 children with special education packs designed to mediate the exhibition and tours designed especially for primary schools.

“The pupils were hooked from the very beginning and their attention was held throughout. They loved being able to try on the helmets and rucksacks and certainly handling a rations box was an eye opener for many. As a teacher, it really opened up the whole idea of a visit to the museum, to view an exhibition, as being a place worth a visit.”

Acting Principal, Killygordon NS

How we Remember was funded by the European Union’s PEACE III Programme, managed by Donegal County Council for the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Images courtesy of Donegal County Museum and Paul McGuckin
CREATIVE CENTENARIES - #MAKING HISTORY 1918 EXHIBITION
1918 was a year of civic action, the end of war in Europe, women voting for the first time, and a groundbreaking election result in Ireland. The Tower Museum and the Nerve Centre's Creative Centenaries #MakingHistory 1918 exhibition explored themes such as the suffrage movement and women’s fight for equality, the conscription crisis, end of the First World War, health and well-being, developments in technology, and the emergence of a new society in post-war Ireland. It asked visitors, “How will you help create the next 100 years of history on this island?”

Never before seen images of the Dorsetshire Regiment’s time in the city at the outset of the War of Independence went on display as well as illustrations from the First World War diaries of Jim Maultsaid, who served with the Chinese Labour Corps. Images of servicemen with the U.S. Naval Air Station in Lough Foyle during 1918 were also showcased for the first time.

Archive content was brought to life through film, animation, and augmented reality; free graphic novels featuring key characters in the exhibition were available to visitors; and a news feed and tweets revealed stories from the time. The ‘Zappar’ app and a quick scan of a code connected the visitor to wartime music as they read the panels. Twitter symbols showed what the leaders and commentators of the day were saying. ‘Breaking News’ gave the key headlines.

Participants involved in the community engagement programme developed research, creative, and digital skills. They played an active role in the creation of the exhibition including the selection of stories, research and content production, and by providing creative responses to the exhibition stories and themes.

This gave them an opportunity, 100 years later, to re-examine and analyse some of the key events which took place in Ireland and which continue to impact on society today. By taking a creative, multi-disciplinary approach,
#MakingHistory 1918 allowed participants to safely explore this shared history and ‘improve understanding across the community in a respectful and dignified manner’.

“#MakingHistory 1918 was an ambitious project, the marrying of new technology with traditional museum interpretation. We wanted the public to leave with one message: this was a decade that transformed life on these islands, defined our relationships, and determined our present.”

Roisin Doherty, Curator, Derry City & Strabane District Council Museum and Visitor Service

#MakingHistory 1918 was funded by the European Union’s PEACE IV Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Images courtesy of Derry City & Strabane District Council Museum and Visitor Service
08 / CONNECTING PEOPLE, PLACES AND HERITAGE
Over the past 15 years, Cavan County Museum has worked to promote peace and reconciliation in the Cavan and Fermanagh regions through the peace project, *Connecting People, Places and Heritage*, which originated in partnership with Fermanagh County Museum.

In doing so, both museums found unique and novel ways to use Cavan and Fermanagh’s shared and diverse heritage to tackle issues around prejudice and sectarianism; creating a series of cross-community, cross-border partnerships among schools and adult groups that resulted in heritage trails, travelling exhibitions, oral history archives, and workshops.

*Connecting People, Places and Heritage* enabled participants to explore potentially contentious history by examining personalised perspectives of recent history and emotions relating to the border area, while promoting and facilitating an understanding of the histories, traditions, and preconceptions of all those involved.

The *Connecting People, Places and Heritage* programme has resulted in imaginative and innovative projects such as the more recent ‘Peace City Cavan’ where children from Cavan and Fermanagh schools came together to create a common city, a 3D art installation made with recycling materials. It used objects from our everyday lives in an inventive and creative way, basing the names of each element on ‘tolerance vocabulary’ and using key words like friendship, respect, peace and teamwork. Each building or house represented the individual, and the whole city represented the community of children who took part in the project.

The legacy of *Connecting People, Places, and Heritage* has a very physical presence in the form of the Peace Garden at Cavan County Museum which has played host to numerous commemorative Exhibitions: WWI Trench Experience, 1916 Easter Rising, Battle of the Somme, and Road to War – Path to Reflection.

The close partnership between Fermanagh & Cavan County Museums continues today as they collaborate on projects that explore the War of Independence & Civil War on both sides of the border, bringing us up to the legacy of Partition.
Connecting Peoples, Places and Heritage was originally funded by the Department of Education and Cavan Peace Partnership under the European Union’s PEACE II, III, and IV Programmes, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Images courtesy of Cavan County Museum
In many ways Dundalk has always stood on the periphery. Historically it has been a site of territorial contention and it therefore comes as little surprise to learn that the County Museum, Dundalk reflects this experience, not only in its collection but also in many of the projects it has led and developed over the past quarter-century.

An emphasis on respecting the experiences from all communities, irrespective of belief systems, has been a key and recurring feature of these projects. In the early part of the new millennium the museum set out to see how it is possible to break down the barriers between the two cultures on the island.

It developed joint education projects with Newry & Mourne Museum which saw the roll-out of a programme of talks and workshops examining our shared history; published Cross-Border tales, the culmination of an intergenerational oral history project involving secondary school pupils interviewing senior citizens about their experiences of growing up in the claustrophobic environment of the Border; and hosted the Beyond the
Boyne exhibition featuring Orange Order banners and memorabilia, as part of a wider programme, ‘Cultural identity - Changing perceptions’.

This interest in the nature and extent of the Border in its many manifestations continued over subsequent years with a variety of projects, all of which continued to deal with and address the legacy of the Troubles.

Most notable among these was Aftermath which employed discursive, creative and artistic approaches to storytelling and life stories to highlight the issues and needs of the participants. This exhibition set out to explore the less visible signs of post-conflict which reveal underlying questions connected to hidden histories, unresolved antagonisms, and personal hopes and dreams.

“Dundalk, and indeed Louth, was tremendously affected by the conflict and by the huge influx of people from across the border. The Aftermath project has, without a doubt, gone some way towards addressing numerous issues between people at the heart of the conflict, those who were displaced from their homes and suffered tremendous loss.”

Brian Walsh, Curator, County Museum, Dundalk

The continued influence of the Border continues to inform the museum’s work, opening conversations around the legacy and impact of conflict. In the words of the descendant of someone who was seminally involved in the War of Independence, Civil War (and the Irish political scene for several decades after) on visiting the recent 1916 Rising exhibition: “Now I understand, whereas before I just knew.”

Aftermath was funded by Co Louth Peace and Reconciliation Partnership under the European Union’s PEACE III Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).
Museums, as trusted civic institutions, have enormous potential to bring our communities together and discover commonalities, strengthening our society in the process. We find evidence of this in the work carried out by Irish museums, particularly those located along the border corridor, who have made such a strong contribution to peacebuilding and conflict resolution on our island.

It is important that we build on this role and ensure that museums are awarded the space and resources to continue these conversations, to focus on meaningful engagement so that they be reflective of all of our communities and traditions. To recognise the proven effectiveness of museums in facilitating difficult and complex discussions.

With the publication of *Bridges over Borders*, the Irish Museums Association seeks to not only advocate the cross-border activities carried out by our museums, but also acknowledge the commitment and dedication of their staff.

**Particular thanks are due to:**

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Sarah Millsopp, Armagh County Museum www.visitarmagh.com/places-to-explore/armagh-county-museum

Aoife Ruane, Highlanes Gallery www.highlanes.ie

Brian Walsh, County Museum, Dundalk www.dundalkmuseum.ie

Aaron Ward, National Museums NI www.nmni.com