

*A small part of one of my favourite projects: writing scripts for the Titanic Museum in Belfast. I've been a Titanic freak since I saw A Night to Remember back in the 60s. Hey, I even like the James Cameron film. So when I was asked to write content for the museum I was in seventh heaven. This is one of my favorite bits: a piece about the linen mills of Belfast...*

## **Linen Workers**

*The script is spoken by two women, as if reminiscing.*

### **Hackling Shop (ground floor)**

Hackling was always man's work. They brought the flax into the mill and it was pulled through sharp pins like a comb, time and time again. We called it Spike Island...

You were counted very grand if you got a hackler for a husband. It was skilled work. Well paid.

They started on the coarse stuff When you got the hang of it, you'd move on to the finer fibre. You needed a good eye.

There was always clouds of dust in the air – the stour. Got into the chest – you'd see them sitting there on a Monday morning, panting, trying to catch a breath. It just caught them. The only relief was a drink. It sort of cleared the pipe, y'see...

### **Roving Room (ground floor)**

In the roving room they got the flax ready to spin – the fibre put through the roving frame and got longer and longer... More even too, ready for spinning...

Rovers saw themselves as a better class than the spinners. You wouldn't know it to look at them. Covered in pounce and fluff from the flax they handled... It wasn't healthy.

Hairy rovers, skin and bones. That's what the men called them. And the boys that took the flax into the roving room from the hackling machine... Shoes and hair all covered... They called them the tow-pow boys... They got a hard time from the women - ran in and out as red as flannel, wee things...

Rovers looked dried up... A wee'un lost any good colour hardly in no time ... Skin shrivelled more, dried up, not like the spinning room...

## **Spinning Room – Spinners (first and second floors)**

If you worked in the wet spinning end of the industry, I`m telling you it took you to have a faith... Because with the damp, the heat, and having to do as you were told, and very little money to live on...

The frames moved through troughs of hot water – you were always wet with the spray and you were in your bare feet or you`d slip, but they got red and raw from the dirt...

Each spinner worked a stand. You`d have two frames, either side of you. You had to yell for help many a time.

You worked after you were married. Only stopped for a chile. . Then the wee`un was left with the baby farmer. They kept them quiet with whisky sometimes...

You`d hang your shawl at the bottom of the stand, and you had to take it every night and shake it in case it was full of clocks . But they were only wee yellow things...Not like proper big black cockroaches ...

One time they tried to speed up production. You`d be fined for laughing, talking, even fiddling with your hair... So we went on strike. It didn`t change the conditions, but they knew after that if someone got in trouble for singing, we`d all walk out....

## **Spinning Room – Doffers (first and second floors)**

I started as a doffer. Half-timer - school in the morning, work till 6 in the evening every other day....

Doffing the frame was taking the full spindles off and putting new ones on ...

The doffing mistress blew a whistle and you moved on to another frame That was your whole worry, getting ready for that doffing mistress.We were terrified of her...

You had to scrub your spinner`s stand out and it was half the length of this street. You dried it with bags – you know, sacking...

Every doffer stayed in the stand with a spinner. The spinner`d say `that`s my doffer` and you would have done anything for your spinner. It was really a competition as to who had the best doffer...

### **Reeling Loft (fourth floor)**

Up in the Reeling Room, they picked their own jobs, you know...

They were the toffs of the mill. Some of them dressed up terrible. And they kept their shoes on at work.

The doffers carried the filled bobbins in cages from the spinning room. You had to unwind the spinner's bobbins into hanks... If the bobbins weren't properly full... or there'd be a slub on the thread that made it break... you lost time fixing it.

Reelers were on piecework. Send us big fat doffs, they'd say...

I've yet to meet a reeler who said she got good yarn. Some of them sent back the cages with crosses on them. But if you tramped on a spinner's toes, she'd give you double tying in next time...

### **Weaving Shed (ground floor)**

That first day I went to the weaving was desperate... It put a sort of fear on you... that awful blundering of the looms. You had to sign to send a message...

The heat and damp was terrible. You'd get dizzy with it. Then you'd step outside into the cool air with your clothes all damp...

Snow white apron, every Monday morning. You bought the material yourself and made your own... you were so proud of it, you carried it over your arm to work...

You had to know how to change a shuttle, the way to draw in the broken ends of a warp, tie a weaver's knot...

When a warp thread broke, you had to go behind the loom and find the loose ends... knot on a piece of yarn.

I could work and sew with the scissors in my hand to this day... Could open my purse and take my money out, with the scissors still there.

You had to judge when a bobbin was running out, then you'd thread the yarn on a new one with a weaver's kiss... Suck the end of the yarn through the eye of the shuttle...

If a girl went into a sanatorium in the afternoon and another weaver sucked on her looms, those shuttles weren't taken away to be disinfected... You were sucking and breathing the same threads...