

Life



A stitch in time

Celebrating creative talents around NI during August Craft Month

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Skipper: Tim Griffin and his son Ben who has also joined the tour company

In cruise control

A Co Antrim boat business is not only a hit with tourists but it's also becoming part of Northern Ireland's film and TV production industry. **Gillian Halliday** finds out more

WHEN Tim Griffin crossed the Toome Bridge every day as part of his job as a gas engineer, he always looked down at the River Bann and wondered what lay beyond the next bend.

It was a curiosity which would eventually get the better of him and led him to buy a boat so he could see for his own eyes.

That was in 2012 and neither Tim or his partner Lynn Gibson could foresee how his interest would lead to them starting a business, which not only showcases the beauty of the River Bann, Lough Neagh and Causeway Coast but it has also been a key component in the filming of blockbusters such as *Game of Thrones* and *The Northman*.

Lynn said: "Tim bought that first boat, RHIB Endurance from

Red Bay Boats in Cushendall and you could say the rest is history.

"After finding out what lay beyond that bend in the River Bann, Tim went on to complete his qualifications and become a commercial skipper so he could conduct tours along the river.

"We started out small as tourism along the river back then wasn't as popular as it is today."

"The river has been an important feature in our lives as we live close to it. This is partly why we called our business, Abhainn Cruises as 'abhainn' means river in both Irish and Scottish [Gaelic]. This is particularly fitting as the Causeway Coast has such close links to Scotland and some of our tours go to the Scottish islands."

As well as tours along the River Bann, Abhainn also hosted tours around Lough Neagh as



Making a splash: Lynn Gibson on board one of their tour vessels

the fledgling Co Antrim business grew.

Tim continued his studies and is now a commercially endorsed offshore yachtmaster as the business added a series of sea tours along the Causeway Coast. Continuing the family-theme, son, Ben, who graduated this year from Ulster University with a degree in International Travel and Tourism Management, joined the business. Ben is also a commercially endorsed RYA advanced powerboat skipper.

Abhainn invested in a second boat, named Stormborn, inspired by the nickname of *Game of Thrones* character Daenerys Targaryen, played by Emilia Clarke.

Lynn said: "Our boat was used quite a bit for filming during *Game of Thrones* with actors

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It's time to showcase your crafty side

NI is home to a wealth of creatives, with an initiative this month hosting a range of programmes to celebrate local talent. By **Arlene Harris**

FOR generations, people across Ireland – north and south – have been incredibly gifted at crafting and we continue to have a strong global reputation for the quality of our craftsmanship.

But sadly, what was once part and parcel of many lives is now a rarity. To celebrate the highly talented and creative people who are still producing wonderful pieces, a range of diverse programmes are being held as part of August Craft Month.

In collaboration with the Design and Crafts Council of Ireland and Cork Craft and Design, Craft NI is excited to host over 100 events across the province.

From jewellery designing to pottery making and glass blowing, many talents can be admired.

Craft NI director Katherine McDonald says: "It will provide the opportunity for people to get to know our talented makers and learn about the craftsmanship and skills needed to produce their beautiful pieces."

She believes it will highlight the need for society to become more eco-aware as some pieces are meant to stand the test of time.

"There is an increasing consumer interest in sustainability and it's wonderful that we have craft makers this year, through their workshops and demos, who are shining a light on the processes behind the craft," she says.

"These aren't throwaway objects but are thoughtfully made, while trying to waste as little as possible. They're for keeping."

Professor Jane McCann is sharing her expertise through shirt-making classes, which she runs in her own home. They are suitable for over 16s and those with a "love of timeless clothing" and a basic knowledge of sewing.

The focus is on producing garment shapes from a basic shirt block which will be "ageless and inclusive, have potential for embellishment and personalisation, be adaptable and of an enduring style as opposed to transient fast fashion".

Prof McCann says: "I have been running these one-day workshops at home with my collaborator in the Wool Works (Craft NI) and Reflections (Ards and North Down) exhibitions, Sirpa Mörsky, from Finland.

"They have been really popular, and we will no doubt offer the same workshop next year during Creative Peninsula/ August Craft Month.

"We would expect to offer two levels next year as several participants have expressed interest in

taking their personal shirt developments further."

Prof McCann, who launched performance sportswear design at the University of Derby and won the Sir Misha Black award for innovation in design education is passionate about the need to preserve traditional crafting skills.

"Since returning to Northern Ireland in 2012, I have been instigating and contributing to design-led projects to celebrate our linen heritage," she says.

"Linen Futures 2015 brought together makers and practitioners from Wales and included Sirpa Mörsky.

"Linen Futures paved the way for my role as textile expert and international collaborator for Northern Ireland's Linen Biennale 2018 and my concept for the Biennale Conference attracted speakers from UK, Europe and beyond, including the invaluable contribution of Mary Mullin of the Lucienne and Robin Day Foundation.

"The conference culminated in Fashion Showcase with the work of local designers as well as student collaboration between the China Women's University, Beijing, and Belfast Metropolitan College.

"My brief focused on the need for ageless, non-transient style to acknowledge the durability and relative sustainability of linen."

Prof McCann adds that her practice has been "enriched through developing co-design methodology", bringing together industry, academia and end-users, where new shared language may explain novel hybrid processes which inform innovative product development.

She also designed for DuPont for four years, and while leading research and Smart Clothes and Wearable Technology in Wales, she became involved with a group of textile-oriented craft makers.



Craft works: Professor Jane McCann and colleague Sirpa Mörsky at the Reflections exhibit. Below, Chris Weiniger, general manager of Donegal Yarns woollen mill, and Finnish textile artist Niina Hiltunen

Then having worked with linen/flax, she decided to follow on with wool and over the years, together with Mörsky, produced 12 garments merging influences from Ireland, Wales and Finland.

Their collaboration, Wool Works, which opened in Cardiff in September 2019 and was in Finland in 2020, will be exhibited at Craft NI until August 27.

"Wool Works celebrates the importance of wool as a natural fibre which is under threat, due to it primarily being a food by-product, with farmers hardly able to afford to shear their sheep," she says.

"Hands-on craft work can represent and promote a diverse range of skills from knit and weave to feltmaking, to natural dyeing and many forms of embellishment (with embroidery, applique and print) for a breadth of applications.

"Our exhibition includes clothing with knitwear and woven constructions, bags, textile art and illustration, a Mourne Textiles wall-hung rug, as well as a wool composite chair to show potential uses for wool moving forward."

Crafting isn't just about creating something beautiful as during the exhibition, participants can also learn about its benefits for mental health.

"I asked Craft NI, and also Ards and North Down, to invite Niina

Hiltunen from the Modus Group in Finland to speak about her own practice involving engagement with wider communities in the country on experimental weaving with the purpose of promoting wellbeing," says Prof McCann.

"Niina works with inclusive age groups including those who may have mental health issues, and those with dementia and even blind participants.

"Prior to leading demonstrations and workshops, I took Niina, as well as Sirpa and Welsh feltmaker, Mandy Nash, to Donegal yarns in order for them to incorporate donated fibres and yarns – with unique Donegal colours and texture – into their subsequent workshops.

"This also highlighted the importance to the industry in realising the potential for the supply of materials at a scale accessible to craft makers.

"For example, feltmaking can incorporate certain waste materials from the wool spinning process.

"Both the Wool Works and Reflections exhibitions show examples of the added value in collaborative working.

"In particular, Reflections showcases amusing 'textile selfies' produced in Zoom format.

"Over the period to the pandemic, the MaP (Makers and Practitioners) Group met, and

continue to meet, every Thursday morning to link Wales, Finland and Northern Ireland with textile-oriented craft as the focus in supporting each other.

"This regular liaison definitely leads to a greater sense of well-being."

Prof McCann believes August Craft Month is important in so many ways, and notes that without events like this, there is a danger of age-old skills being lost.

"The MaP Group is made up of retired and middle-aged members – all female," she says.

"Also, the workshops have only attracted one or two younger participants, so I would say that there is a significant threat of skills being lost.

"August Craft Month gives extra focus to planning collaborative engagement in both exhibition and associated workshop and demonstration themes.

"It enables liaison with other practitioners as well as greater engagement with the local and wider community.

"I am happy that Craft NI and Ards and North Down recognise the value to the local community in making links to makers and practitioners outside Northern Ireland."

For more information on August Craft Month, see www.craftni.org and www.augustcraftmonth.org

'There is a real threat of skills being lost'