

'Linen is meaningful in Belfast': how an old industry is weaving the city a new identity

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

1. What fabrics are the clothes you are wearing made from?
2. Do you prefer to wear natural fabrics, such as cotton, or manmade fabrics, such as polyester and Lycra?
3. What does the phrase sustainable fashion mean to you?

2 Key words

a. Find these words in bold in the article. Then match them to the following definitions.

mallets

star turn

cobbled street

aesthetic

bewitched by

affinity

revival

aligned with

heritage

anchoring

repurposed

brisk trade

creasing

maritime disaster

the Troubles

1. _____ : completely fascinated and charmed by something or someone
2. _____ : a performance or performer that receives the most attention and praise in a show
3. _____ : tools with a heavy head, used for hitting things such as pegs or balls
4. _____ : having the same goals, values, or ideas as someone or something else
5. _____ : an event at sea where a ship sinks or is badly damaged, often with loss of life
6. _____ : a return of interest in something that was popular in the past
7. _____ : changed from its original use to serve a new purpose
8. _____ : relating to beauty, art and the way things look and feel

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9. _____: a period of violent political conflict in Northern Ireland, mainly between the 1960s and 1990s
10. _____: the technique of using one image or idea to give structure and meaning to everything around it
11. _____: a natural connection or feeling of understanding between people or things
12. _____: a road or path made from small round stones, typical of older towns and cities
13. _____: (of material) developing unwanted folds or lines
14. _____: the traditions, buildings and culture that a society has had for a long time and considers important
15. _____: (of a business) selling a lot of products in a short space of time

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. The region's industrial _____ is celebrated in a series of museums and restored buildings.
2. Walking along the _____ of the old town, Abby stopped to look in the shop windows.
3. The documentary explored the causes and lasting effect of _____ on communities across Northern Ireland.
4. Kieran felt an immediate _____ with the other musicians in the group – they all shared the same passion.
5. The young impersonator gave a(n) _____ doing hilarious impressions of celebrities and politicians.
6. The old factory has been _____ as a community arts centre.
7. Our wedding photographer has a very distinctive _____ – she always uses natural light and cool tones.

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8. Ian's values are completely _____ those of the organisation, which is why he's such a good fit.
9. The _____ of vinyl records shows that people still love the warmth of analogue sound.
10. To avoid _____ your clothes when you pack for a journey, always roll rather than fold them.
11. Wooden _____ are best for knocking tent pegs into the ground.
12. The _____ technique in the ad draws the viewer's eye to the central image first.
13. Street food vendors were doing a(n) _____ outside the stadium after the concert.
14. Davina was completely _____ the novel and couldn't put it down.
15. The _____ claimed hundreds of lives and led to major changes in safety regulations.

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Fabric that once defined Northern Ireland's capital is at the heart of its stylish revival, embraced by designers, royalty and heritage farmers alike

Jess Cartner-Morley

29 April, 2026

- 1 On a **cobbled street** in Belfast's Cathedral Quarter, next door to a coffee shop and opposite an ice-cream parlour that has a near-constant queue since going viral on TikTok, the elegant Kindred of Ireland boutique is doing a surprisingly **brisk trade** in yellow linen blouses and Donegal checked jackets finished with a length of rose pink linen tied in a bow at the neck.
- 2 Half a century after **the Troubles**, Belfast is finding a new identity through an industry that once defined it. Linen – the fibre that built its wealth and earned it the name Linenopolis – is being woven into a story of renewal. Almost a century after the postwar collapse of an industry that, at its peak, employed forty per cent of the working population of Northern Ireland, linen is returning as a marker of identity.
- 3 "Belfast has long been viewed through a very narrow lens, associated with division, trouble and violence," says Amy Anderson, the 32-year-old designer of Kindred of Ireland, an independent brand that she runs with her husband, Joel. "But the city has changed enormously over the last two decades."
- 4 Anderson's grandmother Winnie was a "millie", as mill-workers were known, in Moygashel linen mills. "Linen is meaningful in Belfast," she says. "Most of my generation here have relatives who worked in the linen industry, so the connection still feels real." This is more than a nostalgia trip, however. Anderson's modern **aesthetic** leans towards Japanese-inspired volume and asymmetric shapes, and the soft structure of linen is ideal for **anchoring** her architectural pieces.
- 5 Reviving the virtually extinct linen industry is a near impossible task. But Belfast – the city that turned the world's most famous **maritime disaster** into a tourist industry in the Titanic Quarter – has more **affinity** than most with struggle, and the linen cause has brought together an unlikely taskforce of cheerleaders, including the designer Sarah Burton, the Prince and Princess of Wales and the former blacksmith Charlie Mallon, who has **repurposed** his 150-year-old Magherafelt family farm for the regenerative growing and processing of flax, the fibre from which linen is made.
- 6 Mallon has bought and restored **heritage** machinery and hopes to be able to take flax all the way from field to fibre. Linen, prized for its beauty, durability and comfort, is "the original performance fabric", he says. Mallon's traditional machines are designed to preserve the long line structure of linen, so that the end fabric is less prone to **creasing**. Most modern linen is processed in China on "cottonising" machines that shorten the fibres and result in more creases.
- 7 Burton, then at the helm of Alexander McQueen, took her design team on a two-day field trip to Northern Ireland, which became the inspiration for the spring 2020 collection. Burton was particularly **bewitched by** a visit to the thundering 150-year-old machines at William Clark, the last factory where linen is still "beetled": hammered by wooden **mallets** to add strength and shine. A puff-sleeved ivory gown in beetled linen, with a distinctive lustre, made a **star turn** on the Paris catwalk.
- 8 Last autumn, Amy and Joel Anderson met the Prince and Princess of Wales, who visited Mallon Farm on a visit to Northern Ireland. The Princess of Wales has said she wants less media attention on her wardrobe, but made an exception to talk fashion with Mallon and with the Kindred of Ireland founders because of her interest in sustainable fashion and regenerative farming. Amy Anderson told the Belfast Telegraph the Princess was "deeply interested" and "asked very good questions".
- 9 The theme of Belfast's fashionable renewal also runs through Ashes to Fashion, an exhibition at the Ulster Museum which marks the 50th anniversary of a fire that followed an IRA bomb in 1976 and destroyed almost the whole of a 10,000-piece fashion collection. A 1712 quilt, which escaped the fire because it was being exhibited elsewhere, is displayed along with a collection curated since the fire, ranging from 18th-century silk ballgowns to modern pieces by Irish designers, including Philip Treacy, the Dior designer Jonathan Anderson and Kindred of Ireland.

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- 10 A temporary Kindred of Ireland boutique in central London is also planned. A six-week pop-up in Mayfair in 2024 was "commercial rocket fuel" for the brand, says Joel Anderson, who notes that Northern Irish businesses have full access to the UK market while also remaining **aligned with** certain EU single-market rules under the Windsor framework. "This is a practical advantage for product businesses like ours, alongside being part of the broader story of what makes this place distinctive."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article and choose the correct answers.

1. What does the text suggest about the current state of Belfast's linen industry?
 - a. It never fully disappeared and has continued on a small scale.
 - b. It collapsed almost completely, but is now experiencing a gradual return.
 - c. It was replaced by the tourism industry following the end of the Troubles.
2. What does the text say about Belfast's reputation?
 - a. It has always been known as a centre of fashion and design.
 - b. It has successfully replaced its industrial past with tourism.
 - c. It has historically been associated with conflict and division.
3. What connection does Amy Anderson have to the linen industry?
 - a. She trained as a weaver before becoming a designer.
 - b. Her grandmother worked in a linen mill.
 - c. Her family owned a linen factory in Belfast.
4. What is distinctive about Charlie Mallon's approach to linen production?
 - a. He imports machinery from China to modernise the process.
 - b. He uses specific machines that speed up production.
 - c. He is restoring traditional methods of manufacturing.
5. Why does linen processed on traditional machines crease less?
 - a. It is treated with a special chemical finish.
 - b. The long line structure of the fibre is preserved.
 - c. It is woven more tightly than modern linen.

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6. What inspired Sarah Burton's spring 2020 Alexander McQueen collection?
 - a. a two-day visit to Northern Ireland and its linen industry
 - b. a private tour of the Ulster Museum's fashion archive
 - c. a meeting with Amy Anderson at a trade fair in Paris
7. What does the Ashes to Fashion exhibition commemorate?
 - a. the decline of the linen industry after the Second World War
 - b. the destruction of a major fashion collection in a fire
 - c. the revival of traditional Irish textile crafts in the 21st century
8. What does Joel Anderson mean when he describes the Mayfair pop-up as 'commercial rocket fuel'?
 - a. It gave the brand a powerful boost in terms of sales and visibility.
 - b. It attracted significant media attention, but generated little direct revenue.
 - c. It allowed the brand to launch a permanent presence in London.

4 Key language

a. Read the article again and circle the odd word out. Then write a sentence to explain why.

1. nylon / cotton / linen / silk

Reason: _____

2. lustre / texture / shine / sheen

Reason: _____

3. T-shirt / gown / dress / suit

Reason: _____

4. flax / cotton / polyester / hemp

Reason: _____

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5. curated / selected / repurposed / assembled

Reason: _____

6. denim / checked / stripped / spotted

Reason: _____

7. quilt / blanket / pillow / duvet

Reason: _____

8. stage / catwalk / walkway / runway

Reason: _____

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Belfast has reinvented itself through its linen heritage. Can you think of a city or region in your country that has successfully rebuilt its identity around its industrial or cultural past?
- The article suggests that sustainable and traditional materials are becoming fashionable again. Do you think this is a lasting shift in the industry, or just a trend?

6 In your own words

a. You are going to design an outfit that represents your cultural heritage and present it to the class.

Think about ...

- what fabrics and materials you will use and why you have chosen these
- what patterns, colours or design features you will add
- what the outfit represents about your culture or identity

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Your presentation should include ...

- a sketch or description of the outfit
- an explanation of the cultural significance of your choices
- a short 'catwalk commentary' as if you were introducing the outfit at a fashion show

b. Present your outfit to the class. Be prepared to answer questions from other groups.