

THE WORLD AROUND US — HISTORY · P4–P7

An Tionscal Línéadaigh — Belfast's Linen Industry

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Key facts

1

Why Belfast?

Belfast became the world's largest linen-manufacturing city in the 19th century because of: water power from the Rivers Lagan and Farset; the damp climate (ideal for spinning linen without the thread breaking); access to flax grown in Co. Louth and Armagh; and cheap labour.

2

The wet spinning process

Invented in 1825 by James Kay (modified for Belfast by Thomas Mulholland). Flax fibres are spun while immersed in hot water — fine linen thread can be produced mechanically for the first time. Transformed the industry.

3

The mill girls

Women and girls (some as young as 8-10) made up most of the linen mill workforce. The mills were hot, humid, and noisy. 'Doffers' — girls who replaced full bobbins — started at the youngest age. Deafness and respiratory disease were common.

4

'Linenopolis'

Belfast's nickname at the peak of the linen era (mid-19th century). The largest linen city in the world — 100,000 workers. The linen industry built much of Victorian Belfast.

5

Decline

Cotton and synthetic fabrics replaced linen in the 20th century. The last major Belfast linen mill closed in the 1990s.



6

Legacy

The Linen Quarter in Belfast city centre preserves Victorian mill buildings. The Irish Linen Centre in Lisburn tells the full story. Belfast's linen was used for the first aeroplanes — the Wright Brothers' Flyer used Irish linen wing fabric.

