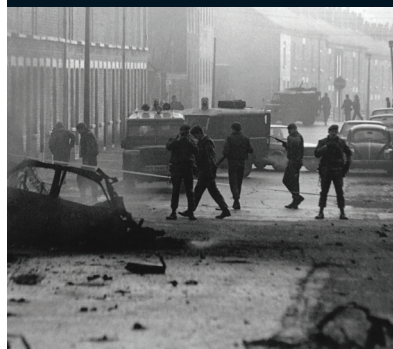


# Museums Journal



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## Museum of...

# Flame Gasworks Museum, Northern Ireland

Laura Rutkowski discovers what's setting visitors' minds alight at this independent museum



**Where** The Flame Gasworks Museum is located 10 miles north of Belfast in Carrickfergus, Northern Ireland.

**What** The coal gasworks was fully operational and provided gas for Carrickfergus from 1855 until 1967. It was then used to distribute gas piped from Belfast until its closure in 1987. Carrickfergus Gasworks Preservation Society (GPS) turned it into a museum in 2002. There used to be more than 100 gasworks in Ireland but now Flame is one of three left in Britain and Ireland.

**Collection** On show are 19th and 20th-century gas-related items – from cookers, water heaters and stoves, to pokers, irons, a gas-powered radio and even a rare children's Mickey Mouse gas mask. The library houses books and photographs related to the gas industry.

**Highlights** The museum lends out pieces from its collections. In an episode of BBC One's *My Mother and Other Strangers*, "there was a lovely long shot of our white and grey enamel stove", says Helen Rankin, the honorary secretary of the GPS. One of the museum's cookers can also be seen in TV series *The Fall*. Flame is popular with paranormal investigators as well. "We had them in the basement and there was a little scream from behind," says Brian McKee, the chairman of the GPS. "There was a young girl wearing a red cape. I turned around and looked, and it was a fire extinguisher with a red cover." And TV ghost hunter Ray Jordan spent two days filming there.

**Help at hand** Around 13 volunteers do guided tours and maintenance on the two-acre site. It is run in partnership with Carrickfergus Borough Council

**The coal gasworks is only one of three remaining in the UK and Ireland**

and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

**Budget** Flame receives grants from the council and the Department of the Environment. As admission is free, donations from the public are always welcome. "It's a three-legged stool," says McKee. "If any of the legs go, we go." The museum applies to the Northern Ireland Museums Council for projects and also invests in training programmes – for example, caring for metals and documentation – for its volunteers.

**Sticky moment** "There's something every week, but it's usually financial," says Rankin. "Funding is always a priority." The gasworks is funded by Mid and East Antrim Borough Council and the Department of

Heritage, which owns the site, and it has a 99-year lease to be run as a museum.

**Survival tips** "The volunteers keep it going, especially Brian," says Rankin. "He's dedicated to it. He's here every day to open up and keep the thing running."

**Visitors** The museum's marketing budget is small, which means it depends on word of mouth. It drew more than 5,000 visitors last year, but usually the figure hits the 2,000 mark. According to Sharon Mushtaq, the development officer at Flame, the museum had a bumper year partly because of its participation in the Pop-Up Emporium – a craft, food and farmers market that has been held at the gasworks monthly since September 2016. Afterwards, visitors are more inclined to go back for a tour. Several English and international tour groups also visit Flame. Printed guides have been produced in nine languages, including Polish, Greek and Italian, most of which have been translated by visitors from their respective countries after being asked to do so by the volunteers.

**Future plans** For the gas library, the volunteers are digitising more than 800 maps, drawings and plans that they salvaged when the Belfast gasworks closed. The digitised images will then be accessible through the museum's social media channels. "It's a big job, but worthwhile," says Rankin. Ultimately, the aim of the museum is to "survive, keep going, and keep improving".

*Laura Rutkowski is a freelance journalist*