

CARROTS, CRAIC, COMMUNITY

THE IRELAND FUNDS HELP FOLKTOWN MARKET BRING NEW LIFE TO A FORGOTTEN CORNER OF BELFAST

IT IS 10:45 ON A THURSDAY MORNING IN BANK SQUARE, one of the oldest sections of Belfast. 30+ vendors are setting up their stalls for Folktown Market, Belfast's first independent outdoor market to be granted a license in 400 years.

For the founders of Folktown Market, the wait that went into establishing the market at times felt like another 400 years. Under a charter originally granted by King James I, the rights to operate a market belonged to the City Council. However the dream of the Folktown Market founders, that this once-neglected area could become a gathering space for Belfast residents from all communities, persevered.

"It took six years to negotiate and build this idea," says Folktown Director Joby Fox. "But we stuck it out and now it's a reality."

The vendors have been carefully chosen with an eye to quality products and fair-trade.

As the market begins to hum with activity, a jazz band plays and the rich scent of roasted chicken pulls shoppers from the nearby Castle Court Shopping Centre to explore this previously-ignored city square. Local office workers come down for a sandwich and parents with strollers move through the avenue of stalls to pick loaves of locally-baked bread. Many people are strolling through Bank Square for the first time.

"We're proud of this area," says Joby. "It's only recently that people have started coming to Bank Square. This neighborhood is in the mouth of the Falls and the Shankill. And it's one of our greatest strengths that the market is drawing people from both communities because we have an objective to connect the city together. Maybe someday we can take the wall down that is in between them."

Another aim is that the market will serve as a catalyst for the regeneration of the local community.

"The beauty of it is that we're honoring an area that has been underused and we are creating employment at the same time," says Joby. "The Ireland Funds grant really helped us. It put us on our feet. Also, the endorsement of The Ireland Funds made us a serious proposition to other funders, which was key."

The Folktown Market is off to a great start having launched in 2015. Joby is already looking to the future. "I have a renewed interest in the future as I now have a 13 month old son. I hope when he's my age, he can come down here to this area, and enjoy the market, and the music. That's what I really hope for: that when he's my age, we'll still be here."



Center: Folktown Director Joby Fox