

MADE IN SMETHWICK | community heritage and the Chance Brothers Glassworks

Johanna Ungemach, Project Coordinator, DigVentures and Manda Forster MCifA (4823), Director of Operations, DigVentures

When the Great Exhibition opened its doors on 1 May 1851 to millions of excited visitors, the Crystal Palace was itself an example of ingenuity and standardised production. The glass for the palace was manufactured by Chance Brothers Glassworks in Smethwick, itself an incredible feat, with 300,000 panes of glass produced in just six months. Importantly, the exhibition provided an opportunity for James Chance to showcase a new and pioneering product – lighthouse lenses. Over the next 100 years the firm supplied more than 2,400 glass lenses to illuminate the world. Chance Brothers became the world's leading glass manufacturer, creating a wide range of products in addition to lenses, including gasmasks and trench periscopes used during the First World War, as well as sheet glass and household domestic goods.

Founded in 1822, the factory eventually closed in 1981, and has since fallen into disrepair. The site is bordered by canals, roads and railway lines, with an iconic seven-storey building at its centre, built in 1847 and visible as you drive past the site along the M5. As well



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Grinding lighthouse lenses in the 1950s. Credit: Chance Heritage Trust

as being a significant employer in the area, Chance Brothers had a real impact within the local community, opening schools, churches, a park and a hospital. Many local people still hold personal connections to the glassworks having worked there themselves, through family members, or having memories of playing nearby as a child, demanding 'gobs' of glass for hopscotch. In 2015, the Chance Heritage Trust (CHT) was established with a vision to regenerate the glass works to protect and celebrate its highly significant industrial heritage and create a new vibrant urban community at the site.

In 2021 the Trust successfully applied for grant funding from the Community Renewal Fund to develop plans for the site's regeneration. As part of this feasibility work, a programme of engagement and consultation has been initiated, including events and activities for local people and an online programme for worldwide audiences. The 'Made in Smethwick' engagement programme is being developed by DigVentures and several delivery partners, including The Jessop Consultancy, The Living Memory Project, Dr Malcolm Dick and Dr Simon Briercliffe – as well as members of the Chance family, the CHT team and volunteers.

Activities are inspired by the built heritage and archaeology of the glassworks and its close neighbour, the Soho Foundry and Mint. The team will engage local people to explore stories of both sites, raising awareness of the incredible contribution the area made to industry, through training workshops, oral history sessions, family activities, local walks, and photography walks. As well as reconnecting

communities to local industrial heritage, the 'Made in Smethwick' programme will encourage local people to share memories, forge new connections, and shape proposals for their future.

An online series of Chance Conversations, open to all, will discuss the internationally significant role that Smethwick had in the industrial revolution, inviting expert panellists to



A view of the site today. Nestled between the M5, railway and canals, the seven-storey structure (seen here with scaffolding) and canal side buildings formed part of the extensive glass works. Credit: Aerial-Cam

discuss the pioneering new industrial methods developed at both Chance and Soho that went on to impact the world. As well as the heritage of industrial sites and their revival, we'll focus on environment, climate, and public health, as well as exploring themes of empire and commonwealth. We're also making participation opportunities international, recruiting a crew of citizen scientists to help discover and map Chance lenses and lighthouses around the world, with those local to lights adding to the map with photos and soundscapes.

The engagement programme will create an archive of stories, images, new research and memories that will keep the rich and diverse heritage of the area alive for many generations to come. Henry Chance, great-great-grandson of James Chance, is now Director and Vice Chairman of the Chance Heritage Trust. He is delighted the project is now going ahead:

'Despite closing 40 years ago, the Chance glassworks still continues to retain a place in the minds and the hearts of the people of Smethwick; both of those who had a direct association with the firm and those who benefited from the decades of community enhancement. The extensive programme of events and activities over the spring and summer will be an exciting opportunity for local people to hear the story but also to tell their own tales. This is heritage in action.'

This project has been funded by the UK Government through the UK Community Renewal Fund. The varied programme of events will run through May to July 2022. To find out more about the 'Made in Smethwick' programme, visit the website:

<https://digventures.com/projects/made-in-smethwick/>

To explore the work of the Chance Heritage Trust and their exciting plans, look them up at:

<https://chanceht.org/>

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Johanna Ungemach

Johanna is a specialist in the delivery of co-produced local history projects, and has been working with DigVentures since 2016. Johanna studied Sustainable Heritage Management at Aarhus University, focusing her research on *Collaboration, social inclusion, funding and sustainability of heritage: a case from UK archaeology*. She has successfully coordinated education programmes in Lancaster, Lindisfarne and Barnard Castle, working with local schools and organisations to bring nationally significant archaeological finds and heritage assets to life.



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Manda Forster

Manda is the Director of Operations for DigVentures, having worked previously at ClfA, the Institute for Ergonomics and Birmingham Archaeology. She specialises in archaeological project management, education and training, and designing and delivering community heritage projects. Having grown up in the Midlands and spent a good few years working in Birmingham, Manda is delighted to be involved in such an important heritage project.

