

## **Project Information**

### **Jute, the golden fibre of Bengal and an empire monopoly How the sweat of Bengal cultivators facilitated the expansion of the trade of the British Empire (1830-1940) – project end: April 2025**

#### **Community participants and support**

The project will recruit about a dozen community participants, who will receive a range of training and support to deliver the project. They will explore and share how, for more than one hundred years, jute became a British Empire monopoly and the primary fibre for making sacks and bags that carried raw materials, food, commodities and manufactured products in ships that moved across the world's oceans to major cities and ports in all the continents.

It is a voluntary role with an opportunity to discover and share a significant heritage, mostly unknown to the wider public. The community participants will receive the following support to deliver the project.

- Travel and volunteers' expenses – upto £300 per person for the duration of the project to cover refreshment, lunch, journeys, etc.
- Childcare support – up to £40 per time \* ten times = £400 per person (maximum)
- Respond to needs, if possible, as and when required
- Create opportunities for networking and sharing and access to experts in the field.
- Set personal environmental sustainability goals.

#### **Background**

For over a century, jute was the most used carrier material associated with the global trading operations of the British Empire. This project will help reveal this forgotten but significant heritage that connected Bengal, Britain and many parts of the world for a long time through the British Empire and the contributions of Bengal to British prosperity during the heyday of its power. It will also engage with colonial narratives regarding jute production by poor cultivators of mainly present-day Bangladesh and manufacturing in Dundee and Calcutta (Kolkata) to understand its heritage from multiple perspectives.

Historically, what is now Bangladesh was the native home of the jute fabric and produced the vast majority of the material used worldwide to transport and carry goods. In terms of manufacturing, two cities - first Dundee and later joined by Calcutta (Kolkata) - became the prominent locations in the world where the machine transformed the fibre into yarns and textiles in mills after mills set up to feed the ever-hungry packaging and carrier needs of the expanding world trade, mainly through the reach and operations of the British Empire.

## **The project**

The project will be delivered by community participants recruited from diverse East London and Dundee communities. They will receive training on archival research, interviewing skills, decolonising colonial narratives and visit heritage institutions, such as British Library, London Metropolitan Archives and Dundee Heritage Trust. These institutions and online resources, such as British Newspaper Archives and British History Online, have records of jute history and the British Empire.

The community participants will explore Dundee's jute history and its local impacts; study jute imports, exports and factories in East London; undertake research on historical jute growing areas in present-day Bangladesh and the role of jute in the worldwide expansion of British trade and commerce. They will also make some jute products – both recreations of past products and creations of new items - using raw jute and jute textiles from Bangladesh. The items recreated could include, for example, gunny bags, hand-produced crafts, famous paintings on jute canvas and a 'Coolgardie safe' (invented in the mining area of Western Australia in the 1890s for preserving fresh food), which utilised jute as a heat transfer mechanism. The new creation would involve using jute from Bangladesh to produce, for example, bags and crafts based on inspiration from historical learning.

In Dundee three participants will, respectively, look at the history of jute processing in Dundee from producing yarns into finished textiles and its impacts on the city; lives of the women who worked in the industry; interview ten surviving workers or descendants who can share real and inherited knowledge of experience of working in the jute industry and living in Dundee. In London, similarly, three participants will, respectively, look at the jute docks/factories in East London; women workers in Stratford and Barking; interview Bangladeshis with their experience of Jute before coming to the UK.

Further, three participants will respectively research into the historical jute growing areas in present day Bangladesh and the process of cultivation, harvesting and manufacturing; role of jute in the worldwide expansion of British Empire trade; economics of jute. The final three participants will work with members of the community to recreate twelve jute products from the past.

Some older members of the local Bangladeshi community in East London have experience of working with jute, before coming to Britain, from harvesting the mature plants to processing, making ropes and producing bags and crafts. Their knowledge and skills and as well as that of experts will be utilised to provide participants with training on rope making, using jute fibre to produce bags and crafts and other useful

things to create an item of their choice, using jute from Bangladesh, based on a jute product during the days of the British empire and some creative pieces based on inspiration from historical learning.

## **Benefits**

This initiative provides an opportunity to discover, share and promote a common, forgotten and deeply connected heritage of Bengal and Britain. This heritage is especially significant to East London with its long British Empire connections and, after the ending of the Empire, slowly emerging as the location with the largest Bangladeshi-origin population in the UK.

Discovering the contributions made by Bengal cultivators to world trade and Britain's prosperity during the heyday of the British Empire will help reframe references within Britain's multi-culturally diverse society and enable the development of a better appreciation of the contributions of Bengal cultivators to the prosperity of the British Empire while showing how the cultivators gained very little from the process and suffered much from indebtedness and frequent famines.

Understanding the role played by Dundee and the Irish women who worked in large numbers in the jute factories involved in spinning threads and weaving textiles will also help understand their role in expanding the worldwide trade of the British Empire. In addition, London Docklands' vital role in importing, storing, exporting and re-shipping raw and manufactured jute from factories in Stratford, Barking and Dundee will be better explained and contextualised.

At the end, the outcomes encompassing the complex and unequal stories of jute - the poverty and exploitation in Bengal and the growth of Britain's economic and military might - will be shared widely through a project completion celebration, a printed book, interview recordings, virtual reality immersive videos, a touring pop-up banners/jute products exhibition and a theatrical piece.

For further information, please email: [heritageproject@stepney.org.uk](mailto:heritageproject@stepney.org.uk)

