

# Cotton Queens: Childhood Memories

Photograph by Humphrey Spender © Bolton Council  
From the Collection of Bolton Museum

In 2019, a community arts group, the Cotton Queens, was set up to bring together a diverse group of women from in and around Bolton. The aim was to support members in developing their knowledge, skills and confidence through creative writing and performance by engaging with cultural and historical archives of the Bolton area and its community.

In the first phase of the project, the women researched the lives of mill girls by examining the Worktown Collection of Mass Observation, which provides an insight into the experiences of Worktown women at work in the mills, in the home and on holiday in Blackpool. After researching the local archives, the group wrote and produced a radio play,

performed live at Bolton Museum and also took part in the University of Bolton's Worktown Festival in 2020. In the second phase of the project, the group has written poetry; participated in the 'Whitman on Walls' transatlantic Walt Whitman event held at Bolton Museum; written and filmed drama scenes with a focus on the lives of Worktown women and has also interpreted their childhood memories through knitting. They have shown that lifelong learning is fun, achievable, rewarding and can promote wellbeing. Being part of the group shows that anyone can learn new skills and contribute to preserving the stories of women from the local Bolton community.

The aim of the 'knitting project' was to produce a collaborative and

creative piece of work that captures personal memories of childhood in and around Bolton. Participants were asked to think of a childhood memory and then knit a square, choosing colours to represent the memory in a meaningful way. A framed 'blanket' of these knitted squares has been created, with each square visually representing the childhood memory of the individual. The project spans across several generations and members have enjoyed remembering grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters in their knitting. Remembering the 'small' helps to provide a better understanding of values and beliefs as well as social connections.