Swanskin Seafarers of Sturminster Newton.

In January of 2022 Sturminster Newton Heritage Trust was awarded a grant by the Association of Independent Museums and the National Lottery to research "The Swanskin Seafarers of Sturminster Newton".

The Swanskin Seafarers were people living in Dorset 1600 to 1700s who left for the fishing grounds of the North Atlantic, particularly the Newfoundland coast. The Mill in Sturminster Newton had a dual role during this period. One building producing flour and the adjoining building was the Hammer Mill and pivotal in the production of the Swanskin, a thick, coarse, white fabric supplied to the fishing trade because of its warmth and waterproof quality. Records of this period show that production of this wool fabric was the main occupation of the majority of the remaining population. When production declined in the late 1700s, early 1800s there was a migration of Dorset people to the new settlements in Newfoundland.

The New Stories, New Audience Grant from AIM/ NLHF enabled the SNHT to partner with Emerald Ant, a local arts company, local historian/ author Roger Guttridge and MDO Vicky Dewitt to engage with the local community, specifically students at the local High School to research and represent this little-known story. It also provided an exciting opportunity to reach out to students in Twillingate, Newfoundland where many Dorset migrants had settled. The local students were given the opportunity to take part in skills development workshops to produce images and music soundtrack for a shadow puppet film interpreting the story and design new factual interpretation boards for the Mill and Museum.

The project started with local author Roger Guttridge. Sharing his knowledge of this period of Sturminster Newton history and personal anecdotes ignited enthusiasm in the pupils at the Sturminster High School and a group of students in J.M. Olde's Collegiate in Twillingate Newfoundland. The project caused great interest both sides of the Atlantic. The Twillingate pupils were amazed that they had such a direct link with an important period of local history when they discovered that many of their group had Dorset surnames and further research revealed that one student had ancestors traced back to Sturminster Newton. They are currently tracking more family trees.

For many years there had been no evidence here that any garments made from swanskin had survived. Once word of the project was out in Twillingate, an owner of a private museum in an even more remote part of Newfoundland, Change Island, contacted the Collegiate to send photographs, videos and information about a pair of Swanskin mittens in his possession. The video confirmed that people in Newfoundland still retain strong elements of a Dorset accent. The guides at Sturminster Mill were envious of the discovery of the mittens. Imagine then, their thoughts, when a second pair appeared. This time by courtesy of a grandmother of the Newfoundland student directly descended from Sturminster Newton.

Students in Sturminster were able to explore the Mill and realise it's significant role in the production of Swanskin. They have been surprised to discover that the local workhouse had a role in the story. Migration was not always voluntary, children, the same age as today's young students were often apprenticed to the fishing trade or merchants and sent out to Newfoundland for seven years. This was sometimes via The William William's Trust, which is still active today in supporting student activities. They have visited the Dorchester Archives to follow the stories using original documents with archivists to help them and receive input from a graphic designer about using text and images to create eye catching information boards.

The project produced many unexpected anecdotes for all the students. Dorset soil, used as ballast in ships is still evident in Newfoundland gardens today to grow vegetables, Newfoundland ponies are descended from New Forest ponies, the story of Newfoundland and Labrador dogs arriving in England and the realisation that Swanskin was used for underwear!

The project culminated with a presentation evening in July at the Mill. Visitors were able to listen to lively folk music provided by New Scorpion, the musicians who had worked with the pupils. Refreshments provided by the Trust included two huge fish shaped loaves to link with the Seafarers, which were made by local baker, Steve Oxford, using Sturminster Flour. Students, who had already volunteered 500 hours between them for the project, were able to show visitors their new boards inside the Mill. At dusk, Elliot Wagner-Hale, one of the pupils, unveiled the outside board and the shadow puppet film had its first viewing. The film was first projected on to a screen on the outside Mill wall. When it was fully dark the film was shown again, this time with an extra image being projected directly on the stonework to make use of the texture.

Work on the project will continue after the summer when the SNHT hope to collect Oral Histories from migrants who have made their home in Sturminster Newton in recent years. The Trust will continue to collaborate with the High School looking at reasons for emigration in the 1800s and the parallels with modern day migration.

To view the film, visit the Sturminster Newton Trust website, Museum page.

Interpretation boards are on display in the Museum and the Mill, opening times on the website.