



Dr John Church steps down as Chair of Axminster Heritage

After over 25 years' endeavour which has seen the Axminster Heritage Centre develop from a vision into one of East Devon's best-regarded attractions for tourists and residents alike, on 23 January 2023 Dr John Church stepped down as Chairman of Trustees of Axminster Heritage.

It was Dr Church who took the initiative to recognise the approaching 250th anniversary of the completion of Thomas Whitty's first carpet, resulting in a series of events and celebrations in 2005 which brought the whole community together, and culminated in the establishment of Axminster Heritage as a charitable trust.

Fellow trustee Andrew Moulding recalls that despite many setbacks during the various phases of the project "it was John's tenacity that really kept things on track, when many others would have given up! His dedication and drive to succeed have earned him the respect and admiration of the people of Axminster, and by bringing together and encouraging people with a wide range of skills and knowledge to contribute towards the venture, the legacy he has created will live on in the town for generations to come."

A crucial step came when the Trustees, with the financial backing of Devon County Council, were able to purchase the former Whitty family carpet factory building on Silver Street, with the objective of renovating it and establishing a centre of excellence which would collect, display and disseminate information and objects associated with both Whitty carpets and those made by Harry Dutfield's Axminster Carpets factory, which had brought carpet-making back to Axminster in 1937, after a gap of 99 years.

Whilst the building was being restored Axminster Heritage merged with the old Axminster Museum, and brought their skills and resources on board. When the ground floor of the Heritage Centre re-opened in 2019 as the culmination of the restoration process, Axminster got a museum covering the full range of the town's heritage. Laurence Hitchcock, another trustee, and formerly chairman of the old town museum, paid tribute to how "the combination of modern facilities in a truly historic setting has created a wonderful asset, of which the whole surrounding area can be really proud".

Although John Church always stressed and acknowledged the substantial support and encouragement of many local friends and colleagues, and the financial backing provided by multiple charities (including from Dr Peter Bradshaw - one of Thomas Whitty's descendants, various charitable trusts, East Devon District Council, the 'Making it Local' fund and the crucial support of the National Lottery), his fellow trustees and volunteers all recognise that it was John Church's energy, enthusiasm and drive which provided the 'golden thread' which is woven all the way through Axminster Heritage.