In the 1700s, Derry and the surrounding region prospered as a linen town and trading port. From the middle of the 1800s the city experienced an industrial revolution in distilling, shipbuilding and shirt-making.

Derry prospered in the textile trade for many years with factories dominating the cityscape. A female workforce powered much of the industrial development and produced some of the finest shirts in the world. The decline of the linen industry from the 1830s played a significant role in the birth of the shirt industry as there was a plentiful supply of skilled female labour. The rapid growth of cities in Britain and the growing fashion towards cotton shirts, circumstances were favourable for the establishment of a shirt industry.

The introduction of the factory system in the 1850s contributed to the city’s expansion. The invention of the sewing machine in 1853 and the arrival of several Scottish business men ensured that the shirt industry was factory based. The number of shirt factories in the city increased from 9 in the 1860s to 38 by 1902. By 1926 the city had 44 factories employing 8,000 of the 45,000 population. By 1900 the assembly line approach to shirt making increased effectiveness to meet global demand, with each worker specialising in a particular aspect of production.

To celebrate the opening of David Hogg’s and Charles Mitchell’s ‘Shirt Factories in Derry reached its peak in the 1920s when, together with their outworkers, 18,000 people were employed. The city became one of the largest and well recognised producers of shirts across Europe.

Strabane’s most fruitful period came with the building of the canal and the coming of the railway. Situated in rich agricultural land, Strabane became an important market town. The introduction of linen manufacturing in the early 1700s led to a period of rapid growth.

Strabane was an important railway junction and as a manufacturing town it was one of the busiest towns in the North of Ireland. The shirt industry was developed upon a large scale, and several firms had factories in the town.

The shirt industry was factory based. The mill was the centre of the business, and the factory was surrounded by a network of outworkmen. Each outworker was responsible for a specific task, such as cutting, sewing, or pressing. The finished product was then sent back to the factory for inspection and packaging.

The linen thread spinning industry, established on the riverside in 1835, continued in production for over 150 years under the direction of generations of the Herdman family. It was the largest single commercial enterprise occupying a complex of buildings in the rural landscape of west Ulster.

The first recorded evidence of a factory is for 1848, a Barrack Street Factory owned by James Kennedy. Factories were also evident on Church Street and the Derry Road. Gourlie & Sons Shirt making Factory on the Derry Road opened in 1865. Abercorn Factory, also known as Porters Factory on the Derry Road, received a Royal Warrant for its Grosvenor Shirts in 2013. Continuing the same level of skill and commitment to quality which once made Strabane a shirt manufacturing center in Ireland. The factory closed in 2000.