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Last set of tenter frames in England, at Otterburn Mill, to be restored thanks to National Lottery funding

Otterburn Mill have been on tenter hooks recently waiting to announce an exciting project taking place at the former textile mill in Northumberland. The tenter frames at Otterburn Mill will undergo essential restoration work, thanks to a £85,158 grant from The National Lottery Heritage Fund. The project, made possible by National Lottery players, will see the structure restored with the help and support of several organisations and individuals.

The plans include carrying out a series of repairs on the tenter frames, with works being completed by North-East restoration specialists, Historic Property Restoration, under the guidance of National Trust Conservator, John Wynn Griffiths and with the help of Architects, Insight Architectural Design. The frames are believed to date from the late 1800's or early 1900's and the work will ensure that they last for many more years to come.

"We are overjoyed that the restoration project has been made possible" says Otterburn Mill owner, Euan Pringle. "The tenter frames at Otterburn Mill are extremely important in remembering the industrial heritage of the country and it's essential that they are preserved".

The tenter frames at Otterburn Mill are the last set of field tenters, with intact beams and hooks, in England. Research conducted by Dr Graham Cooper confirmed the historical significance of the frames at Otterburn Mill stating that “in this country, there are no largely intact field tenters still standing in their historical setting, except at Otterburn” and that “the Otterburn Mill field tenters are a unique relic of a fundamental process essential to the manufacture of woollen cloth, a trade that had a profound impact on the historical prosperity of this country.”

Field tenters were principally used to appropriately stretch, dry and align patterns after the manufacturing process notably shrank and distorted the cloth. They could also be used to dry woollen cloth after washing or dyeing to prevent the cloth from shrinking excessively. The common phrase ‘on tenterhooks’, which means to be in a state of suspense, came from the textile industry.

As well as funding from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, the project has received support from Ray Wind Funds Community Benefit Fund, Northumberland National Park Authority’s Communities Fund and The Barbour Foundation.

Commenting on the support for the project, Nigel Owen from Otterburn Mill said, “We are extremely grateful to have received funding and support from all organisations involved in the project and hope that this will encourage members of the public to visit the last set of frames in England”.

Helen Featherstone, Director, England, North at The National Lottery Heritage Fund said: “It is no secret that the North played a significant role as a powerhouse for the textile industry, which is why we are delighted to support Otterburn Mill with this fantastic project to restore the last surviving tenter frames in England. It is very exciting to know that, thanks to National Lottery players, these unique relics of our rich textile heritage will be preserved for years to come, while the story of the mill is shared with local people and visitors from further afield through creative and engaging activities.”

The project will also work with local theatre company, November Club, to showcase the history of Otterburn Mill. November Club will deliver an immersive theatre experience on site at Otterburn Mill in June 2025. A series of spaces within the mill, many usually off limits to visitors, will be artistically transformed and will host performances that interpret moments from the history of the Northumbrian mill. November Club will work alongside local residents and Otterburn Primary School to discover and inspire stories.

"Otterburn Mill holds a storied past, deeply intertwined with the fabric of Northumberland's history," says Joe Hufton, November Club's Artistic Director and CEO. "Through this production, we aim to celebrate its heritage while inviting audiences to immerse themselves in the vibrant tapestry of its narrative."

Restoration work at Otterburn Mill will begin soon, and the Northumbrian mill invites everyone to visit and find out more about the project. Otterburn Mill is open between 10am – 4pm, seven days a week. As well as exploring the history of the tenter frames, visitors can enjoy delicious food in Rena’s Country Kitchen and can also visit the shop selling outdoor and country clothing.