

Alton Mill opens doors for Heritage Days this weekend

The Alton Mill Arts Centre will be welcoming the public for a special collaborative event with Heritage Caledon Feb. 18 and 19. The magnificent Alton Mill, where Ontario's rural and industrial heritage collide with modern-day cultural innovation, hosts Heritage Caledon's 150 for 150 Project. Volunteers will be on site both days, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., with posters of pre-Confederation structures and buildings in Caledon, and conducting comprehensive historical tours of the Mill.

Gourmandissimo Café will round out the event by offering a special heritage menu, including traditional soups, shortbread and molasses ginger cookies, and a chef's special of Cod Cakes served with beet salad and greens.

Alton Mill is one of two remaining 19th century stone mills in Alton. Originally the Beaver Knitting Mill, renowned for the production of fleece-lined long underwear, the complex was converted to a rubber factory in the 1930s, producing such products as Mickey Mouse balloons for Disney and condoms for the Canadian military in the Second World War until 1982.

Abandoned for decades and derelict, the property was converted to an arts centre by Jordan and Jeremy Grant, proprietors of Seaton Group, a local land developer, in collaboration with Headwaters Arts, a regional non-profit arts organization. Extensive renovations took place between 2006 and 2009, with careful attention given to protecting the historic character of the site and environment. The lead architect on the project was Catherine Nasmith, with construction management from J.D. Strachan Construction Limited of King City.

Today, the interdisciplinary arts centre is a creative hub, home to two dozen artist studios, galleries, artisanal markets, wearable art, a year-round sculpture garden and café. The original water, steam and electric power equipment remained intact in the Turbine Room, which has been converted into a fascinating industrial heritage exhibit.

The restoration of the Alton Mill has been recognized with many awards, including an Achievement Award for Rehabilitation and Adaptive Reuse from The National Trust (2009), a Community Recognition Award from the Ontario Heritage Trust (2010), and a Globe and Mail Partnership Award for Best Entrepreneurial Partnership from Business for the Arts (2012).

With a goal of identifying 150 pre-Confederation buildings to celebrate Canada 150, Heritage Caledon has catalogued roughly 210 buildings and structures that date before Confederation in 1867, and are still standing today. Committee members photographed 178 of these and images have been assembled into posters produced by the Town of Caledon. Dating from the earliest period of settlement in the 1820s up until 1867, these buildings and structures are in both urban and rural areas across Caledon. Remarkably, 25 per cent of the structures are of log construction, most of which are still used as dwellings today. Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives (PAMA) collaborated by providing images of Caledon's earliest mapping, including Tremaine's 1859 Map of the County of Peel, an original of which was donated by the McClellan family of Alton.

Active for more than four decades, Heritage Caledon is a volunteer advisory committee comprised of residents with an interest in conservation, representatives from local historical societies, and the Caledon Town Council. In recent years, Heritage Caledon has worked in partnership with village associations and local historical societies to create 12 self-directed, online walking tours in Caledon, including three in Alton. For more visit caledon.ca/walkingtours

The 150 for 150 Project will remain on display at Alton Mill until Feb. 25. The Mill is open Wednesday through Sunday, and Holiday Mondays, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For more information about the history and restoration of Alton Mill, as well as current and upcoming events, visit altonmill.ca or follow the Arts Centre on Facebook.

This event takes place as part of a larger initiative by the National Trust for Canada, Heritage Stands the Test of Time, encouraging Canadians to explore the idea of a collective history passed down to the present day, and share the stories of past generations, throughout the week of Feb. 19. Visit nationaltrustcanada.ca for more.



A scene at Alton Mill taken during construction of the present-day Arts Centre, shows workers and artists recreating the image of mill workers posing for a photograph with the original three-storey facade.