

TWIN CITIES: BRADFORD AND SKOPJE

Town twinning is a concept whereby towns or cities in geographically and politically distinct areas are paired, with the goal of fostering human contact and cultural links. Skopje and Bradford became twinned in 1963, shortly after the Skopje earthquake. A team of 150 staff and students from the Bradford Institute of Technology (now University of Bradford) responded to the Skopje earthquake by gathering aid from the city of Bradford and the subsequent reconstruction work in Skopje. This fostered a link between the University of Skopje and Bradford Institute of Technology, culminating in town twinning and a postgraduate course in Yugoslav Studies at the Bradford Institute of Technology. In addition to being twin cities, Bradford and Skopje both share a common history and relation to the textile industry.

Bradford rose to prominence during the 19th century as an international centre of textile manufacture, particularly wool. It was a boomtown of the Industrial Revolution, and amongst the earliest industrialised settlements, rapidly becoming the "Wool Capital of the World". The city also became prominent for cotton dyeing. Between 1825 and 1830 great improvements were made in dyeing techniques, especially as a result of the introduction of machinery for preventing worsted goods from shrinking and for drying pieces over hot cylinders rather than just leaving the material to hang in the open air. One of the dyehouses in Bradford, Edward Ripley & Sons Ltd, became one of the largest piece dyeing firms in the world. Thus, colour became important in the development of the textile industry and today Bradford holds the unique Colour Museum. The museum is situated in a former cotton mill in the centre of Bradford, and includes an exhibition on technological developments in the coloration industry. The textile sector in Bradford fell into a terminal decline from the mid-20th century. Since then, Bradford has faced similar challenges to the rest of the post-industrial area of Northern England, including deindustrialisation, economic deprivation and housing problems. However, today a spirit of rebirth has taken hold and Bradford is one of North England's important cities, with modern technology, chemicals, engineering, academic and financial sectors replacing the 'dark satanic mills' image of the Industrial Revolution.

Skopje grew rapidly during Yugoslavia and became a major industrial centre for the South-central Balkans region. Skopje is the place where most of the industries of Macedonia are situated. Particularly important is the textile industry. Like in many Eastern-European countries, this industry has become a major employer (over 20% of the country's workforce) and an important contributor to the GDP. Cotton thread and fabric, wool yarn, fabric and knitted fabric are the main products. This production is mostly export oriented, to countries such as the Former Yugoslav republics, Greece, Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, and Austria. After the fall of Yugoslavia and the subsequent independence of Macedonia, many of Macedonia's industries declined. The textile sector was no exception to this. Employment in textiles and apparel, traditionally one of Macedonia's main industries, went from 64,000 in 1989 to 26,000 in 2002. Yet in recent years it is precisely this industry that has grown and created jobs. However, with the emergence of countries like China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, India and many other cost competitive Asian countries in the global textile arena, the future success of this industry is becoming uncertain. Some predict that EU membership for Macedonia would mean the end of low-skilled textile production. Macedonia may be unable or unwilling to compete in what is sometimes referred to as the global "race to the bottom" in textile production. Nevertheless, for the time being, the textile boom has invigorated the economy and provided much needed jobs. Even if this growth is not sustainable in the longer term it may contribute in a wider sense to Macedonia's economic development.