



**Community Archives and Heritage Group Annual
Conference
Wednesday 15 July 2015,
University College London
Conference Report**

By Jenny Marsden, Barnaby Bryan and Georgina Orgill, UCL

Over 130 delegates attended the Community Archives and Heritage Group Annual conference, which was co-hosted by the Department of Information Studies at University College London.

Keynote

The conference keynote address was given by Michael Wood, Professor of Public History at the University of Manchester. In his address, Professor Wood gave the inside story on *The Story of England*, a major community heritage project filmed and broadcast on national television in 2012. Designed to tell the story of a village throughout the whole of English history, Professor Wood explained it had been a deliberate move to choose somewhere in the provinces, and so Kibworth, in the East Midlands, was chosen. The project was influenced by E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, and also local historian William George Hoskins, who had suggested national history could be told through the history of local places.



The Story of England involved family stories, oral histories, archaeology, archival research, work in schools, and local groups (e.g. metal detectorists). Professor Wood showed how this diverse approach helped to build up a picture of the history of the place, and in particular allowed people to explore the pre-documentary history of the village. Project workers and volunteers also paid minute attention to local archival material, discovering a deep-rooted community over hundreds of years.

Professor Michael Wood
keynote speaker
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Professor Wood emphasized the huge role the community of Kibworth played in successfully building up a rich and comprehensive picture of the village and the people who had lived there.

Professor Wood reported that the positive response to the project, both from Kibworth villagers and television viewers, had encouraged the Heritage Lottery Fund to allocate funding for similar projects focused on 'sharing pasts'. In terms of future projects, Professor Wood was keen to take the basic idea to a big urban environment with a multi-cultural history. He made the interesting point that local history can also be global history, referencing a project on the history of Rochdale where schoolchildren had been able to take their family history back to the Indian subcontinent within two generations, opening new vistas for discovery.

To conclude, Professor Wood attested to the value and meaning such public history projects give to our present. He spoke of how a shared sense of the past encourages empathy – to the extent that the project in Kibworth almost (but not quite!) managed to reconcile the traditional divide between 'the posh ... and the not posh'. The Q&A session, though brief, was lively, with Professor Wood acknowledging the huge amount of planning required for *The Story of England*. He recommended his chapter 'The Humanities And Public Service Broadcasting: A History Film Maker's View' in *The Impact of History?* (Routledge, 2015) for those seeking further information.

"Michael Wood so enthusiastic an ideal speaker for this event"

The Prefab Museum

The next presentation, on the Prefab Museum and Archive, was given by Elisabeth Blanchet and Jane Hearn. The Prefab Museum was based on the history of prefab homes built in the UK following the end of World War Two. As well as showing how the Prefab Museum and Archive related to social history, art, culture, architecture and education, the presentation highlighted some of the tensions that can arise when working with communities, particularly those in transition. Blanchet explained how her interest in prefab homes had been sparked by the contrast between the (planned) temporary status of prefabs and the enormous attachment to these homes expressed by the people who lived in them.

With prefabs everywhere threatened by regeneration, Blanchet and Hearn wanted to promote and share the history of these highly successful community spaces. With the support of community



Elisabeth Blanchet and
Jane Hearn
The Prefab Museum
©Lauren Golding

members, they organised tours of a prefab estate and house in Catford, London, before receiving a grant from the Arts Council to create a pop-up museum. Although the museum was very popular with some members of the community, and attracted large numbers of visitors, the project as a whole became caught up in tensions between the local residents association and the local authority, culminating in an arson attack on the museum. Despite this, Blanchet and Hearn were continuing to build the archive, and an alternative home was being sought for the prefab museum. An interactive map of prefabs across the UK and Europe had been developed, allowing people to explore stories and histories of prefab homes online until a physical space could be made accessible again.

Threads of Time project

The third presentation introduced delegates to the Threads of Time project, run by Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies. Based on a community of interest, rather than a community of place, this project provided an interesting contrast to the preceding presentations. Threads of Time encouraged both amateur and professional textile artists to use the archive as a resource for artistic inspiration. An artist involved in the project, Jojo Taylor, shared her experience as a participant, showing delegates photographs of her archive-inspired artwork. Of particular interest was a sound, light and textile installation based on archival material from an asylum. The archival records from the asylum were all written by medical professionals, and this meant that the women's voices could not



Jojo Taylor
Threads of Time project
©Lauren Golding

**“Engaging, transferable,
relatable”**

speaking directly through the archive, which Taylor saw as the biggest restraint exercised on them in the asylum. Taylor represented this by removing the women's mouths in her artwork.

Awards

The conference included the presentation of the Community Archive and Heritage Awards.



2015 Award winners
©Lauren Golding

The best new group was the Khizra Foundation, who won for their new project Everyday Muslim, a five-year project to create a central archive of Muslim lives, arts, education and cultures from across the UK. The judges were particularly impressed by the wide reach of the project. The award for best website went to Ryde Social Heritage Group. The judges felt they had evolved to meet the needs of their community with an extremely comprehensive website that felt fresh and was updated regularly. The inspiration category award went to Newlyn Archive. They had succeeded in bringing together two communities through sharing local material with children and their parents. This intergenerational link was deemed a simple but inspirational idea that could be exported to other archives. The overall winner and winner of the innovation category was the Milford Street Bridge Project.

Following the presentation of the awards, delegates were given an opportunity to hear about the winning projects in more detail. The Milford Street Bridge Project showed the benefits of collaboration between heritage professionals and artists, as well as the importance of local people being engaged in projects and having a sense of ownership. The project received a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund and trained a group of volunteers who went out to record local people's stories. They asked questions about people,



places and businesses, and the stories that people told were translated into the mural that was painted onto the bridge, with lots of related events and an exhibition. The project received overwhelmingly positive feedback, and at the end of two phases, they ended up with an archive of material at the local history centre.

Milford Street Bridge Project.
winner of the innovation category and
overall winner
©Lauren Golding

The Community Archives and Heritage Group AGM concluded the morning session.

The afternoon saw further presentations on the winning projects and initiatives, kicking off with the Newlyn Archive. Next up were the Ryde Social Heritage Group, winners of 'Best Website'. Started in 2002, the Isle of Wight-based group had begun to transcribe inscriptions from the local cemetery and make these available online, reaching 320 records by 2004. Now, in 2015, after several revamps and developments, the website covers 5 local cemeteries and graveyards, and includes an astounding 15,000 individual records which make available the inscriptions themselves, biographical information, map references and photographs. The Group look forward to a further revamp in the near future which will bring improved search facilities and allow for more detail and depth of history. The Everyday Muslim project, partnered with the Bishopsgate Institute, aims to create the first British Muslim Archive in the UK by capturing and preserving stories and objects which expressed the history and experience of British Muslims, and making these publically available. So far the project has conducted 35 oral history interviews, and they held a symposium at the end of January bringing together different individuals and representatives from a range of community groups, museums and archives.

"Inspiring and interesting stories from which I found ideas popping into my head for my own archive"

British Chinese Workforce Heritage Project

The British Chinese Workforce Heritage Project was an ambitious three-year project undertaken by the British Chinese Heritage Centre. 150 volunteers were involved, filming, transcribing and translating ninety oral history interviews with members of the

British Chinese working community, representing diverse ages, backgrounds and professions and documenting their contribution to British working life. Interviews covered a range of subjects, from work and family to national identity, race and the community's future. Chungwen Li showed the conference a film including extracts from several of the interviews, which are available on the BCHC's website along with an impressive 3D timeline. Following the great success of this project, the BCHC is looking forward to its next initiative, building an archive of the British Chinese Armed Forces.



Chungwen Li
The British Chinese
Workforce Heritage Project
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University of Hertfordshire Heritage Hub

The University of Hertfordshire Heritage Hub then spoke about their work to connect community groups and volunteers with university staff interested in heritage to work together on heritage projects. Acknowledging that on points of detail, volunteers are unsurpassed;

"I am keen to learn from their experiences"

they emphasised the role of the university in helping volunteers to contextualise their specialist knowledge and provide support for

funding bids, highlighting the many non-financial assets which the university was able to share, such as building space and online access. When trust has been built, the partnerships and projects have proved productive and educational for both the community groups and university staff. One such project was that of the Alban Way, a former railway line now used as a cycling and hiking trail. Volunteers now take responsibility for caring for different sections of the line, adding information and embellishments as they wish – described as 'guerilla heritage'.

Verbatim Theatre

Next, Claire Summerskill, playwright and Artistic Director of the Artemis Theatre Company, introduced the conference to the concept of 'Verbatim Theatre' – performances in which the script is based entirely on the actual spoken word of oral history interviews conducted around a particular theme, the most recent example being LGBT asylum seekers. Summerskill highlighted the usefulness of theatre as a

"Fascinating, diverse"

medium for making often marginalised voices heard in other places, and stressed the need to interrogate one's own working practices and build sustained relationships with interview subjects. The latest play is planned to tour in May/June 2016, with funding for LGBT asylum groups to attend performances. Summerskill argued that Verbatim Theatre at its finest should be 'challenging and moving' – the extract which formed part of her presentation was certainly both of these.

Black Cultural Archives

Finally Victoria Northridge, Collections Manager at the Black Cultural Archives started the final presentation of the day with a brief history of the BCA, and an overview of its collection, which includes oral testimony, ephemera and a range of original archival material. The presentation moved on to focus on the role of volunteers, covering

"hearing experiences of volunteer/donor was interesting"

their recruitment, inclusion and retainment. Melba Wilson, a volunteer at the BCA and activist for Black Women's causes, presented a personal

account of her volunteering experience. She noted how phenomenally welcomed and wanted the BCA was in the community, while stressing the importance of making people feel welcome as they enter the building and discussing her own positive experiences as a welcoming presence. Wilson pointed out that the skills learned as a volunteer can be very helpful in others areas of one's life, pointing to her experiences conducting interviews and giving talks.

As well as celebrating good practice through the presentation of the Awards, the conference was an inspiring day, with the featured archives and projects providing plenty of ideas for delegates to take away with them and use in their services. In addition, and as hoped, presenters

shared many intriguing and amusing stories that had been

"Great Speakers, really relevant and inspiring content and projects"

discovered in the archives or through project activities. For many of the projects, from the very large to the very small, partnership working and collaboration had been the key to success. Another strong theme across the presentations was the great value that volunteers bring to community archives and heritage projects.

Overall, the evident enthusiasm for engaging with community and heritage groups to explore and reveal our shared pasts demonstrates a thriving community archives and heritage field in the UK.

"great content, great day - thank you"