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## Memory, Storytelling and the Digital Archive: Revitalising Community and Regional Identities in the Virtual Age

**Keywords:** Yarncommunity; *pararchive*; canon; archive; repertoire; storytelling; digital heritage; nostalgia; identity; voice; authority

### Introduction

There seems to be a consensus that memory – be it at local, regional, national or even international level – tends to be framed by institutions and people in positions of authority, particularly political and public cultural organisations as well as elites and professionals of one kind or another. One consequence of this is that favoured and dominant versions of memory may be circulated that might be inaccurate or misleading while alternative ones – perceived to lie outside of what is considered to be the ‘norm’ – may be discredited or excluded altogether (Urry 1995; Katriel 1999). In this scenario, another consequence is that communities and the wider public get their past framed for them in a way that may or may not relate to their experience and knowledge of their past (Crooke 2007). This is further exacerbated by the difficulty to establish relationships between communities and institutions with a view to working towards redressing this situation in a sustainable fashion beyond one-off collaborative ventures.

In seeking effective ways to approach these problems, this article sets out to discuss how heritage-focused community activists on a project entitled *Pararchive*<sup>1</sup> that took place over an eighteen-month period (October 2013 to March 2015) engaged with processes of memory-making and meaning production using digital heritage resources in conjunction with two key institutional project partners: the BBC and the Science Museum Group. This engagement took the form of storytelling in community technology lab workshops and performance among other things. In doing so, the article draws on the notions of ‘canonization’ and the use of the archive as a reference (Aleida Assmann 2008), the archive and repertoire (Taylor 2003) and on participant observation, semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews, the study of documentary evidence and on insights gained from evaluative workshops to highlight the interplay between history, (cultural) memory and identity in two regions in the U.K. These constitute Stoke-on-Trent (West Midlands of England) and the Isle of Bute (West Coast of Scotland) represented by two differently situated heritage community groups: *Ceramic City Stories* (CCS) and *Brandanii Archaeology and Heritage* (BAaH) respectively.

The former is focused on local, national and international shared heritage stories particularly around glass, ceramic and heavy clay production relating to Stoke-on-Trent while the latter documents the vanished culture of crofting and small agriculture using social history and archaeology around which the identity of the Isle of Bute has been built. Both groups were selected because a) they represent regions which were famed for their economic prosperity owing to distinct heritage in their heyday (post-Second War to the 1980s) followed by considerable decay; b) they are committed to seizing the initiative in mapping, exploring and recording the respective shared (hi)stories that define the identity of their communities and regions, and c) they are situated in very different locations, exhibit different storytelling foci and ways of working and were very keen to be a part of *Pararchive*. In retrospect, this

combination provided rich insights into how the urban-rural/remote divide in cultural heritage work can be bridged effectively through digital connectivity<sup>2</sup>

This article focuses on three core objectives, namely a) the interrogation of official versions of memory and (hi)stories in Stoke-on-Trent and the Isle of Bute, b) the telling of (hi)stories from an experiential vantage point in order to make the past come alive and in doing so, highlighting and celebrating the respective and associated identities, and c) the enriching, sharing and showcasing of specific (hi)stories and identities to ensure their ongoing relevance for posterity and the attempt to preserve memory in a manner that communities can relate with on *Yarn* ([www.yarncommunity.com](http://www.yarncommunity.com)) – an interactive online platform co-designed by the *Pararchive* project for storytelling, collaborative community research and creative expression.

### **The Canon, Archive and Performance and their Relation to Cultural Memory and Identity**

Historical debates about cultural representations of the past have tended to be characterised by a rigid dichotomy between history and memory, two illustrative examples among many being Maurice Halbwachs' conception 'of the former as abstract, totalizing, and "dead", and of the latter as particular, meaningful, and "lived"' (Erll 2008, 6) and Pierre Nora's assertion that 'history obliterates real memories' (Tilley 2006, 27). By contrast, contemporary scholars perceive this polarity as unhelpful in making sense of the past in meaningful and in sometimes multiple and inevitably contentious ways. The key argument is two-fold: first, that there may not be a singular and obvious past out there, but rather perhaps multiple versions of it, the successive reconstruction, reinterpretation and representation of which are key to facilitating (diverse modes) of remembrance which, in turn, shape cultural identity in innumerable ways over time. Second, history and memory have always overlapped, something that renders a clear-cut distinction unhelpful in making sense of the past and its representation (Weissberg 1999; Taylor 2003; Dean, Meerzon and Prince 2015).

It is in this sense that I use the notion of (cultural) memory in this article. I make use of Erll's (2008: 2) definition to refer to memory as 'the interaction between the present and past in socio-cultural contexts' spanning personal, community, regional, national and even transnational acts of remembrance and associated 'invented traditions' with a view to making sense of the past and to constructing identities. Drawing on John Locke's work, she posits that 'memory and identity are closely linked on the individual level' in the sense that 'identities have to be constructed and reconstructed by acts of memory, by remembering who one was and by setting this past Self in relation to the present Self' (Ibid., 6). Below I find it helpful to discuss three factors that condition the interplay between history, memory and identity in more concrete terms.

Drawing on the work of Jakob Burckhardt which characterises remnants from past epochs into "messages" (often framed by individuals and institutions of authority and therefore susceptible to manipulation) and 'traces' (mostly marks and/or objects perceived to reveal an authentic past and understood to be undistorted by authoritative figures), Aleida Assmann

(2008) devises an interesting conceptual instrument that theorises how two different modes of memory relate to the past. One is active through rendering the past come alive in the present while the other is passive through preserving the past. Actively circulated memory, Assmann posits, carries messages in the form of particular works of arts, texts, places, persons, artefacts and myths that can be repeatedly re-read, appreciated, staged, performed, and commented upon following a complex and meticulous selection process she terms 'canonization' (Ibid., 99). The resultant canon, Assmann asserts, is imbued with a distinct symbolic significance that not only sets it aside from other cultural artefacts, but that it is also inscribed in the memory of a given society. Assmann adds that the canon does not remain fixed but rather is kept in active circulation through iterative reinterpretation by successive generations.

Assmann specifies three aspects that act as conduits for the active circulation of memory: religion, art and history. With respect to religion, she alludes to saints who 'are remembered not only by stories and images but also by their names, which are inscribed into the calendar and reused for the naming of those who are born on these respective days' (Ibid., 100). Similarly, Christian churches render the past alive through 'commemorative sculptures on the walls' and 'architectural styles, traditions of images, and continuously and periodically repeated liturgical rites and practices' (Ibid.). Selected key works of art, Assmann argues, not only form the base on which intellectual disciplines are founded and university curricula taught from generation to generation, but that such works are subject to circulation through performance and exhibition in public spaces in much the same way as (national) versions of the past and symbols are 'taught via history textbooks [and] also presented in the public arena in the form of monuments and commemoration dates' (Ibid., 101). To this I would add geographical maps too.

In contrast to actively circulated memory, Assmann discusses passively stored memory as embodied in preserved materials that are 'deprived of their old existence and waiting for a new one' (Ibid., 103), owing to the fact that they are 'no longer needed or immediately understood' (Ibid., 106). To clarify the scope of this mode of memory, Assmann makes reference to the (ancient) role of archives, describing 'their primary function [as serving] the ruling class with the necessary information to build up provisions for the future through stockpiling' (Ibid., 102). She then distinguishes between political archives (which 'served as tools for the symbolic legitimation of power' and for disciplinary action against ordinary people) and historical archives (which 'store information which is no longer of immediate use') (Ibid., 103). Assmann adds that the former 'may enter into the new context of the' latter assuming 'they do not disappear altogether' as time elapses (Ibid.). Overall, despite the differences in the ways the canon and the archive relate to memory, Assmann does not see both as pitted against each other but rather as interactive in facilitating processes of memory-making. I return to this point in the discussion of an illustrative story told on the Isle of Bute.

Like the canon and archive, performance plays a crucial role in influencing how we respond to and remember the past. In her discussion of how performance - or what she terms the 'repertoire' - transmits cultural memory and identity, Taylor (2013, 24) argues that embodied practices - whether verbal or non-verbal - express a range of traditions and customs from the

past that are ‘transmitted “live” in the here and now to a live audience’ often with the aid of mnemonic means. That at the core of such practices are acts like ‘gestures, orality, movement, dance [and] singing’ which not only stimulate ‘individual agency’ as reflected in the urge of the present participants and/or audience ‘to discover’ or ‘to find out’, but that such acts call for the latter to ‘participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by “being there,” being part of the transmission’ (Ibid., 20). In doing so, the repertoire – just as the canon discussed above - often draws on archival material and preserved artefacts for enrichment as we shall see later in the discussion of *Gladstone 2013 Fired Up!*.

Moreover, according to Taylor, the repertoire demonstrates multifaceted significance by both giving scope for ‘alternative perspectives on historical processes’ (Ibid., 20) in ways that the archive, for example, may not be able to and providing an additional platform for cultural expression to the often omnipresent and inherently hegemonic written and/or text-based work. For Taylor, therefore, the use of the repertoire in this way not only facilitates the circulation of ‘communal memories, histories and values from one group/generation to the next’ (Ibid., 21), but it also contributes to the conservation of memories and the consolidation of identities. In the following, I discuss how the interplay between the canon, archive and performance played out in the effort to make use of digital heritage resources to reinvigorate the cultural memory and animate the identities of the regions of Stoke-on-Trent and the isle of Bute through heritage-focused storytelling projects of two respective community groups.

#### **A Bottom-Up Approach to Preserving Cultural Heritage and Celebrating Identity**

Many initial studies scoping out cultural memory had consistently found that institutional versions of the past not only took precedence over community and alternative ones, but that the former invariably suppressed the latter (Urry 1995). In some cases, oppositional representations of the past were reportedly discredited or even excluded altogether (Crooke 2007) paving the way for the construction and promotion of hegemonic versions of the past that might - in part or wholly - not have resonated with diverse communities and publics (Taylor 2003). This appeared to be the case in many mainstream memory institutions such as museums and galleries whose material displays were often seen to omit a meaningful engagement and representation of local and community histories owing primarily to institutional acquisition and preservation protocols and their associated implicit agendas (Weissberg 1999) and ideological predisposition (Katriel 1999).

However, the recent past has witnessed a burgeoning body of scholarship that has observed attempts in and by mainstream memory institutions to reverse this state of affairs. These have comprised perceived shifts ranging from the mere presentation of artefacts and collections and the production of experiences (Hein 2000) to attempts to facilitate diverse engagement in interpretive processes within institutional spaces (Hooper-Grenhill 2000) to one-off collaborative ventures in which conventional memory institutions have invited specific communities and the public to take part in selecting, describing, arranging and interpreting artefacts and collections (Tallon & Walker 2008; Flinn 2010) to the increasingly growing phenomenon of crowdsourcing in memory institutions – both on and offline (Owens 2013; Ridge 2014). Whilst these initiatives may be viewed as a significant step towards facilitating



an inclusive and broader engagement with and preservation of the past, they are mostly developed and executed in a top-down manner meaning that communities and the public may not always participate on their own terms.

This is compounded by other threats such as the demolition of heritage resources in the form of buildings and sites, especially in the wake of ubiquitous post-industrial regeneration development projects that are not only erasing significant traces of the past, but also displacing whole communities. Cases in point include Emma Bridgewater's account of the perceived demolition frenzy in Stoke-on-Trent below while other illustrative examples further afield comprise communities in *Salford 7* near Manchester and *District Six* in South Africa (Cassidy 2012). As we shall see below, although there seems to be a consensus among local communities that particular historical buildings and sites have degenerated into a state beyond repair, local authorities are nevertheless often criticised for haphazardly sanctioning the demolition of such resources supposedly because they are deemed unfitting of the new modern urban built environment. The loss of such resources in this way is aggravated by the fact that people from older generations that witnessed and experienced key historical events are dying out. With their deaths crucial knowledge, memories and stories of the past vanish.

All these factors present a huge challenge of acting swiftly to think about and devise effective ways of determining 'what to remember and how' (Weissberg 1999, 12). The 'what' and 'how' questions were at the core of the *Pararchive* project, conceived to respond – among many other things - to the challenges discussed above through facilitating engagement with and use of public archival and heritage material online. One of the project's overarching goals was to explore how individuals and communities might take ownership of cultural and historical materials in which they are represented, combine these with their own media (film, photographs and other ephemera) and make use of archival resources to give voice to their own stories, contribute to a shared collective memory and construct their own identities. Another closely related overarching goal was to establish collaborative working relationships between heritage community groups and public cultural institutions, the thinking being that any attempt to redress the balance in the construction and representation of the past has to involve multiple stakeholders to have any chance of succeeding. To this end, technology laboratory workshops and other community engagement activities were devised.

The technology laboratory workshops held with the project community groups provided a space which community group members exploited to tell their own versions of the past outside institutional realms, making use of and curating an array of resources drawn from a variety of sources mostly situated in the communities and regions in which they felt rooted but also from shared cultural and historical sources farther afield. In some of the workshops and steering project meetings, project partners from the Science Museum Group and the BBC were in attendance to provide detailed information about how their institutional artefacts and resources of interest and relevant to CCS and BAaH could be accessed.<sup>3</sup> Initial workshops were designed in such a way that conversations and activities happened 'offline' in order to solely focus on members' storytelling interests and to identify any possible connections between these without the distraction from digital gadgets. A key strategy was the use of laminated maps and timelines not only to document and make members' (hi)stories visible,

but also to stimulate the process of remembrance, something that was instrumental in aiding the (re)interpretation and (re)articulation of their life stories (and those of their families, friends, relatives and neighbours) which in many instances pointed to a shared past and a collective identity.

At the end of each workshop the conversations and activities undertaken were reflected upon, recurrent patterns and connections in the stories told searched, sources from which artefacts had been drawn assessed, activities for next workshops discussed and planned, the progress of each individual member's storytelling project monitored, and support and encouragement offered where needed. Later workshops were structured around story-building exercises in a 'paper prototyping' process. The idea was that a story or an idea was broken into the smallest atomic element possible. Such elements were in the form of a block or an event, information (metadata about dates, places, people), artefacts (which enriched and/or supported the story such as photographs, birth certificates, maps or even audio-visual content) and connectors (which link the blocks and/or events together). It is from this input that the early interactive prototypes of the digital resource were developed, tested by members, other project stakeholders and later numerous invited individuals and community groups.<sup>4</sup> The early prototype versions were reworked iteratively by the technology team whose responsiveness to the needs, interests and motivations but also anxieties and concerns expressed ensured that stakeholder needs were put first before technology, something that made *Yarn* genuinely open, easy to navigate and intuitive to use for as many people as possible.

Some of the emergent and recurring themes from the technology lab workshops revolved around archaeology, dairy farming, conservation of natural resources and landscapes, wildlife, urban greening, history of family work and the creative industries, activism, young people and pottery, reminiscence and memory, digital and music heritage, and the exploration and digitisation of archives. I find it helpful to illustrate how the workshops worked through the lens of a selected (hi)storytelling project originating in Stoke-on-Trent that made effective use of the canon and archive in two important ways: First, to make the past (working) life of a mother in the Potteries during the Second World War visible in the present, and second, to demonstrate how memory – in Jan Assmann's words - can provide 'knowledge about oneself, that is, one's own diachronic identity, be it as an individual or as a member of a family, a generation, a community, a nation, or a cultural and religious tradition' (2008, 114).

Entitled *Catherine Hayes, Aynsley China & Longton Life in the 1950s*, the story told by Jane - a member of CCS – focused particularly on both the school life of Jane's mother (Catherine Hayes) and the two years she spent working at *Aynsley China*<sup>5</sup> in Longton<sup>6</sup> in the early 1950s before leaving to start nurses training. This part of her mother's past was the least known to Jane who drew on a number of sources, particularly oral histories through conversations with family and other informants as well as studying accessible original documents and collections to gain an understanding of the early influences on Catherine's life during World War Two and to find out how she experienced working life in the Potteries. Jane contacted the school Catherine attended and was very fortunate to obtain a DVD copy of the digitised school registers and logbooks that related to the time her mother was there.

Jane was overwhelmed to learn about the exact date when her mother began school and to know that Catherine was listed as an 'Official Evacuee' following the family's move to the Potteries after their house in Belvedere, London – her place of birth - had been bombed. Although it is widely understood that the war years were very disruptive for people's everyday life, to Jane the logbooks revealed a different picture which shows that in many ways school life continued much as usual, with day trips and music lessons, visits by the school nurse and Christmas parties. Reading through this information helped Jane understand more about what daily life was for her mother as a young girl. Furthermore, Jane obtained invaluable information from an aunt who lives abroad but offered to share her childhood memories from when she was about eleven years of age. Of the aunt's shared memories, Jane remarked that 'what she had to say was of course from her perspective; that of a young girl of 11 or 12 years of age, but her memories are remarkably detailed and add colour and a very personal flavour.'

Following valuable advice and details about pertinent local knowledge from the technology lab workshops, Jane wrote an article in a daily regional newspaper called *The Sentinel*, with an appeal for information about Catherine's working life at *Aynsley*. Of the responses received, one was particularly interesting because it came from an elderly woman who had actually worked with Catherine. The woman talked to Jane about what Catherine was like and about the people Catherine worked with. Of particular significance was that Catherine – who worked as a lithographer<sup>7</sup> - actually did not like the lithography workshop and had begun to train as a gilder. Having taken part in a *Community-in-Residence*<sup>8</sup> event at Blythe House, Science Museum, London, Jane – along with a number of other members from the CCS and BAaH – had a rare opportunity to see and study a range of collections comprising among other things ceramic and pottery objects and hospital and/or nursing equipment. These would not only have been familiar to Catherine, but it could well be that she actually had a direct involvement in their production and/or decoration as well as their use.

Jane's story underlines how memory makes us conscious of our identity over time, orienting us personally and collectively in terms of our future, our past, or both (Ibid., 109). Moreover, for Jane – and for the rest of us - not only does 'knowledge about the past [gain] the properties and functions of memory if it is related to a concept of identity', but that '[r]emembering is a realization of belonging, even a social obligation [that requires us] to remember in order to belong' (Ibid., 113 – 114). The DVD entailing the digitised registers and logbooks that documented Catherine Hayes' school life and the oral stories about her working life serve to illustrate two key points: First, that archival material and oral (hi)stories can be viewed as 'a kind of "lost-and-found office"' (Aleida Assmann 2008, 106) for what may not be needed at a particular point in time but that can 'be recovered and reclaimed for the canon' (Ibid., 104) at a later point. Second, that historical materials 'do not "have" a memory of their own (Jan Assmann 2008, 111) but that they only trigger our memory when an interaction takes place 'between a remembering mind and a reminding object' (Ibid.). One might argue then that when this interaction takes place either on the terms of an individual or those of a community or even region, this not only helps conserve memory meaningfully, but it manifests and consolidates both a personal and collective sense of identity.



### Stoke-on-Trent and the Isle of Bute

Stoke-on-Trent and the Isle of Bute are both regions in the U.K characterised by different industrial pasts but share three commonalities: First, they once enjoyed economic prosperity and a national (perhaps even international) reputation followed by substantial decline. Second, members from both CCS and BAaH demonstrate a deep rootedness in and an emotional attachment to these regions despite industrial decay based on the stories told. Third, the respective group members – most of whom possess extensive local knowledge - not only perceive themselves as key stimulants to memory-making processes, but they also see themselves as bound by an ambition to take responsibility for issues and concerns that matter to them, particularly contributing to the conservation of endangered cultural and historical assets and resources in their locales and seizing the initiative in mapping, exploring and sharing the (hi)stories that define the identity of their neighbourhoods.

### Stoke-on-Trent

Stoke-on-Trent (often abbreviated as Stoke) is famously known for its pottery industry. Rice (2010, 26) noted interestingly that Stoke ‘means pottery [and] is known as the Potteries in the way that Detroit is called Motown.’ Rice notes further that ‘[s]uch an overriding connection with its principal product is rare.’ Tristram Hunt - the Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent Central – agreed with this sentiment remarking that very few cities in the world are named after their industries. In emphasising the need to look after the cultural heritage of the Potteries, Hunt went further and stated that Stoke ‘is where the industrial revolution began and it is where some of the greatest innovations of British history started.’<sup>9</sup> Hunt was not only alluding to a two-hundred year history of pottery and ceramic manufacturing in the city’s once iconic pot banks with their bottle kilns, but also to the flourishing cotton, glass, coal and iron industries in the region. For a city described in this way, it seems surprising that Stoke does not seem to enjoy a good reputation – at least outside the West Midlands of England.

Stoke - Rice observes - is characterised by ‘poverty and grime, the industry has been poisonous and debilitating, underpaid and often unprofitable for its owners, and has in the last twenty years shrunk by four-fifths’ (2010, 13); that Stoke ‘is alleged to be the city with the lowest quality of life in England, one of the least desirable places to live in Europe. It is a joke ... Smoke-on-Trent [...] a basket case, a hopeless situation’ (ibid., 17); that ‘without pots Stoke is nothing [...] It is rather a group of Staffordshire villages whose geological situation above easily accessible deposits of clay and coal made it the perfect place to make and fire pottery’ (ibid., 27). On top of all this, Rice concludes by noting that the population of Stoke suffers from health, academic achievement and crime issues at rates that surpass the national record (ibid).

In the description of her first encounter with and impression of Stoke as recently as the mid-1980s, Bridgewater (2010, 7) recalls seeing ‘whole terraces of houses tumbling down, chapels beaten into tyre-change workshops and rudely tattooed with graffiti, old factories out of whose broken windows and roofs pigeons flew out in clouds as [she] passed.’ In between her trips to and from Stoke since then, Bridgewater recounts that ‘huge gaps would appear

from one week to the next as another Victorian factory fell foul of the bulldozer [...] and all the while whole communities consisting of schools, pubs, churches, chapels and parks as well as factories have been flattened, as if they were never there. In a final gesture just about all the friendly bottle kilns have been pulled down as well.' (ibid., 10). All these factors have contributed to the way Stoke has been framed and perceived outside Staffordshire, something that prompted local heritage groups to counter the negative discourse – among many other issues - by highlighting, promoting and celebrating the unique cultural heritage of the Potteries and its people. An illustrative example was a year-long community project<sup>10</sup> in 2013 that brought together the hitherto relatively fragmented heritage community sector and diverse publics around a number of activities that culminated in a performance that re-enacted and celebrated the region's unique cultural heritage.

### *Gladstone 2013 Fired Up!*

In an effort to bring 'communal memories, histories and values' (Taylor 2003) of the Potteries to life in various creative ways, highlight and celebrate the pottery industry, contribute to the production of oral and visual records based on living memories and to reach out to a wide section of people in and out of Stoke who would not normally (have the opportunity to) engage with the region's past, *Gladstone 2013 Fired Up!* exploited the interplay between the archive and repertoire to weave together archival film from the Staffordshire Film Archive, materials held by Gladstone Pottery Museum, anecdotal accounts of former pottery workers and local industrialists with original poetry, music, drama and dance. The bulk of activities that preceded the performance comprised rigorous research into the history of the Potteries, interviews and oral history recordings with former pottery workers and local ceramic industrialists and a host of workshops that explored innumerable ideas and aesthetic elements through which a range of key historical aspects and representations came to be conveyed. More importantly, the workshops provided local community members with an opportunity to contribute their input in the form of experiential knowledge and shared memories. These activities – and the final performance - took place in the courtyard at Gladstone Pottery Museum in Longton.

The choice of this venue was crucial because the museum housed one of the most prominent china pottery factories in the heyday of the pottery industry and as such, became one of the first British industrial buildings to be saved from dereliction and pending demolition after its closure. It is worth noting that the building would probably not have been conserved into a working museum had it not been for the bitter protests against demolition and huge efforts of a local industrialist and a number of volunteers to fight for and secure its preservation.<sup>11</sup> From a performance vantage point, the museum can be said to have provided an authentically historical environment allowing performers and the audience not only to imagine what the past working life of the potters was like, but also to relive it there and then in that space. Overall, an analysis of the performance shows that it was organised around a number of interrelated themes that covered different aspects of the working life of the potters, three of which I focus on below owing to space constraints.

*Who'd be a Potter* was a theme that comprised a traditional ballad merged with a short melody played live on tea cups narrating the hazards faced by Victorian potters, particularly the prevalence of lead poisoning (commonly known as potter's rot) and the exposure to fine dust particles the gradual inhalation of which gradually fostered lung damage (Sekers 2009, 30). Also, a series of rhythmic pieces of music and corresponding actions and movements inspired by recorded sounds produced by the machinery in the engine room of the Gladstone Pottery Museum were performed not only to replicate the monotonous nature of pottery work, but also to demonstrate how workers operated in unison like a large functioning machine. Strikingly, the audience was invited to take part in the actions and movements and to even dress up like the potters did. Likewise, another theme entitled *Weary* made use of rhythmic acts and movements to highlight the often, extremely harsh and difficult working conditions of child potters that constituted 'long hours, bleak discomforts, extremes of temperature, miserable diet and fierce punishment' (ibid., 30) although these improved following a parliamentary enquiry<sup>12</sup> into the state of child employment in mines and pottery factories among others.

*Pictures at the Museum*, the third of the three themes, paid tribute to the traditional skills now practised by the museum demonstrators but that are under threat of extinction if not preserved. To put this in a wider context, of the two-hundred factories still operating in the region as recently as the 1970s, only about thirty survived into the 1990s. The loss of four-fifths of the pottery industry has meant that twenty-thousand jobs have been lost between 1998 and 2008.<sup>13</sup> The massive redundancies mean that key skills have been lost to the industry – in some cases perhaps forever, especially where former pottery workers have died. A particularly highly skilled and well-paid trade thematised was that of saggar-making.<sup>14</sup> The performance devised saggar-drumming as a mnemonic tool the association of which will have inscribed evocations of this craft in the minds of both performers and audiences perhaps in a way that no other medium might have been able to. This, one might argue, points to a shared memory and collective identity 'imagined [and relived] in a historically and materially specific way' (Tilley 2006, 12).

All in all, the performance appears to have avoided the temptation of idealising and romanticising the cultural heritage of the Potteries by tempering acts with a degree of realism that performers and audiences alike will have related to easily. This is particularly enhanced by the fact that the performance took place in the physical setting which presents a 'highly codified environment that gives viewers pertinent information [about a] historical period [in conjunction with associated items such as] furnishings, clothing, sounds and style [all of which] contribute to the viewer's understanding of what might [have] conceivably transpire[d] there' (Taylor 2003, 29). Equally important is the collation of a wide range of materials and resources prominently featuring community and local anecdotal accounts that informed the performance, thereby making it a space with a three-fold significance.

First, *Gladstone 2013 Fired Up!* can be seen as a space in which 'non-hegemonic views may be postulated [...] where alternatives may be proposed [and] new meanings *made* (Counsell 2009, 8 emphasis in original). This can be interpreted as an attempt to counter the sort of

‘historical facticity’ reinforced by hegemonic structures to ‘sustain the fiction that the past is told “as it really was”, and [in doing so] ignore questions of point-of-view and ideological inflection in narrative constructions of the past, which would point to the possibility of alternative or oppositional readings of it.’ (Katriel 1999, 107). Second, the performance can be viewed as a space for the people of Stoke to ‘reflect back upon themselves upon the relations, actions, symbols, meaning, codes, roles, statuses, social structures [...] and other sociocultural components which make up their public selves’ (Fine and Haskell 1992, 8). Third, it can be seen as a conduit for ‘knowing and learning’ [...] ‘for the encoding and presentation of information about [the Potteries] in order to construct a personal and social image’ and for ‘the sharing of identity’ (Ibid., 8–9). Ultimately, the re-enactment of actions, practices, roles and customs ‘produces a shared memory [...] that is operative in the present, not only in the past’ (Weissberg 1999, 17-18). We now turn to the Isle of Bute.

### **The Isle of Bute**

Described as the ‘epitome of the geology of the globe’ already in the late eighteenth century (M’Neilage 1881), the isle of Bute has historically been famous for its unique natural history, especially its archaeology, geography, botany and agriculture. Over the centuries, all these features have contributed to a varied, distinctive and fascinating landscape scenery that has had a significant impact on the social, cultural and economic fabric of the island. Dating from the early eighteenth century, for example, this scenery not only attracted prominent artists and elites of one kind or another, but it also gradually became a popular tourist destination throughout the nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century when tourists flocked to the island annually ‘in the quest of health and recreation’ (ibid.). A by-product of this – in conjunction with climatic conditions and a landscape that favoured agriculture (Proudfoot and Hannah 2000) - was that it spurred the growth of crops and the rearing of livestock among other things which became key constituent elements of the rural economy of the island and henceforth shaped its identity, especially dairy farming.

Long before dairy farming achieved crucial importance in the U.K - from the 1870s onwards, it had become the staple of Bute’s economy already by 1803 when the first Ayrshire cows<sup>15</sup> were introduced on the isle from the neighbourhood (ibid.). Since then, this breed has long become associated with Bute mainly because island farmers significantly and successively improved their herds, something that over the decades earned the breed a very good reputation as highly productive in terms of milk yields and as commercially viable with regard to its adaptability, resilience, feeding and breeding (Ecles 1927). All of these factors appear to have played a role in facilitating efficient and successful dairying in Bute and Scotland as a whole (Department of Agriculture for Scotland 1952; Walker-Love and Day 1971). As such, it perhaps came as no surprise that as early as 1856, a selection of Ayrshire cows originating from herds in Bute took part in a major dairy exhibition in Paris where a cow won a bronze medal as one of the best cows in milk (M’Neilage 1881). The breed continued to perform relatively well at dairy exhibition contests until the 1960s (Capstick 1951), most notably at the Royal International Dairy Show widely well-known as the London Dairy Show<sup>16</sup> held at Olympia, London from the late 1870s.



Until the 1960s, not only did dairy farming on the island thrive, but the success of the Ayrshire breed came to be associated with the identity of Bute. Livelihoods came to be built on dairying, a phenomenon that gradually influenced settlement patterns and individual buildings, and further bolstered the island's economy. The Scottish Milk Marketing Board played a key role in this since its inception in 1933.<sup>17</sup> After decades of relative prosperity, however, dairy farming receded mainly as a result of milk quotas imposed by the then European Economic Community following overproduction from the mid-1980s onwards, the disbandment of the Scottish Milk Marketing Board and the ensuing milk price instabilities. Following significant economic decline – first in the tourist sector – and then in dairy farming, the island has experienced social deprivation and associated factors like outward migration since the 1990s. Consequently, much of the island is now characterised by a sprawl of derelict and abandoned farm houses most of which date back to the fifteenth century. Settlements have – either partly or wholly – been deserted (Proudfoot and Hannah 2000) and with this whole communal (hi)stories have vanished.

This state of affairs – among many other factors – motivated BAaH members to capture some of the island's past<sup>18</sup> within the context of the *Pararchive* project in a bid not only to reflect on the possibility of restoring some of the abandoned farm houses and buildings for potential reuse, but also to document a rapidly vanishing but shared past and to revitalise the isle's communal identity. To this end, Paul – facilitator of BAaH – told a story that was inspired by run-down farm houses and lost livelihoods, focusing particularly on a prominent farm that was known as *Ambrismore* before it was flattened recently to make way for eco-friendly residential units. Drawing on a synthesis of the canon and archive in the form of photographs, maps, building plans, newspaper articles, archival and home-made film footage, Paul sketched out the origins of the farm, charting the etymology of the farm name and highlighting the functions of key units on the farm as well as the iterative changes made to them as dairy farming evolved through the decades.

The story then provided a brief account of the factors that fostered the decline of dairy farming, making good use of audio-visual archival material and online news content before making reference to possibilities of reusing the landscape in a way that sustains rural economies more generally. More pertinent archival material and collections identified in the storerooms of the Science Museum during the *Community-in-Residence* event alluded to above could have been a useful enrichment had it not been a key requirement to clear copyright first – a process that is ongoing at the time of writing. The resources included photographs and films; for example, the former included images of a milk delivery to evacuated school children, a woman in a dairy maid's costume using a traditional butter churn, and a Milk Marketing Board sales girl selling milk to holidaymakers on a beach. The latter included film strips showing milk and butter production processes and milk publicity campaigns raising awareness of the health benefits of dairy products.

Paul's story makes effective use of the canon and archive by drawing on historical resources that 'ha[d] lost their original "place in life" [but have now] entered a new context which gives them the chance of a second life that considerably prolongs their existence' (Aleida Assmann 2008, 103). Paul's engagement with the resources moves them from a state of dormancy and

inactivity in a historical archive to one in which they appear in a story that can be ‘repeatedly re-read’, thereby keeping them alive through ‘iterative reinterpretation’ (Ibid.). This, one might argue, could facilitate their re-entry into the consciousness of the community on the Isle of Bute and further afield, and in doing so help consolidate the island’s identity. To this end, where the canon animates the past with a view to augmenting cultural identity, this may be enabled by drawing on the archive as ‘reference memory’ (Ibid., 104) to enrich the active memory, and in doing so, avert its reductive tendencies. Likewise, ‘[e]lements of the canon can also recede into the archive’ (Ibid.). A key characteristic that the canon and archive share is that they are both mediated and are susceptible to different forms of manipulation.

One such form is associated with issues around access, veracity and perspective in relation to the engagement with archival material in the meaning-making process as Paul remarks:

I think the worst bit about it is when they’re [archival resources] locked away, but I would disagree that we have a responsibility to truth, because fundamentally I don’t believe there is a truth. I think the truth depends on where you’re standing a lot of the time, but what the opening up of this stuff does is allowing people to take a perspective on it and to tell their story from their perspective in that sort of way. So a bottle kiln, for example, could be a beautiful piece of industrial architecture to somebody and it’s a life threatening health hazard for somebody else. What is the truth in that? Well, there are two truths. So I think, critically, the point is about not having these things locked away, it’s about trying to get them out and in the open as much as possible and let people do a 360 degree view round about it and tell their perspective and get their perspective on it.

The issues of mediation and multiple truths came through very strongly across the project. As Paul’s comments indicate, the latter was often understood to mean that diverse accounts of a single event could be valid in their own right and that recognising this diversity only served to enhance the value of that specific event. Despite the complexity of issues around access and copyright, it is this understanding that led the project’s institutional partners to recognise the role that heritage community groups and activists can play in unlocking the potential of institutional assets and the value the latter can add to such assets and resources to ensure their ongoing relevance. Reflective of this was yet another spinoff pilot that delivered impact for both the Science Museum and CCS around the digital representation of the archival space and the development of virtual interactivity. A prototype virtual archive<sup>19</sup> was produced of collections stored in two carefully selected rooms in Blythe House, an approach that provided a test platform on which to explore the challenge faced in opening up museum and archive spaces to broader publics without compromising the integrity and safety of archival content. Not only has the Science Museum shown strong interest in deploying the prototype to enable the wider public to browse artefacts and collections in 3-D, but it is also considering using the prototype in its wider review of current storage facilities ideally with the input of heritage-focused community groups and interested members of the general public.

Ultimately, *Pararchive* was an experiment that addressed some of the aforementioned issues through bringing together public memory institutions, heritage community groups and activists, technologists and researchers to co-design a digital resource called *Yarn* ([www.yarncommunity.com](http://www.yarncommunity.com)) that is facilitating storytelling, historical research and creative expression. Not only is *Yarn* connecting communities and institutions virtually, but it is engendering collaborative working around the construction, articulation, understanding and

representation of the past for posterity and helping shape shared identities in a way that resonates with as many diverse publics as possible.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to show how the concepts of the canon, archive and repertoire can be applied to revivify collective consciousness and augment shared identity. Through illustrative storytelling examples<sup>20</sup> from Stoke and the Isle of Bute, we have seen how local heritage activists not only want to have a stake in how both they and their communities and regions are represented as this directly impacts on their lives and identities, but also how they are embracing effective ways of doing this. They are exploiting a host of digital heritage resources not only to merely make the past visible in the present in a way they can relate to whilst engaging in meaning production, but also to actively work towards promoting, marketing and consolidating the rich cultural assets of their locales and regions in an open and accessible digital space outside the influence of institutional forces.

The illustrative examples provided in this article demonstrate that through the process of (repeatedly) telling (hi)stories and re-enacting the past, not only do we produce new ways of understanding that past meaningfully, but we also remember, re-present and rediscover where we belong in it. This meaningful and productive way of engaging with our past – if done on individual and community terms – takes on a political dimension that is geared towards challenging perceived dominant forms of cultural construction, interpretation and representation. Such a dimension can be said to reflect ‘a multi-vocal account of the history, including not only those “fossilised” versions, but also multiple dissenting views of the past, by presenting historical figures and events from the viewpoint of a group (the people), and from the viewpoint of individuals who either represent and manipulate power or who only dream to overturn it’ (Dean, Meerzon and Prince 2015, 8). After all, it is these individuals and diverse community groups that are ‘intimately bound up with [memory and history] in which identities are constituted through particular forms of activity’ (Tilley 2006, 26) – storytelling and performance being key among many. Whether the ‘multi-vocal accounts’ are truthful or not is a question of perspective as we have seen.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Visit [www.pararchive.com](http://www.pararchive.com) for detailed information.

<sup>2</sup> See also spinoff project <http://www.discoverbutearchaeology.co.uk/?p=992>

<sup>3</sup> Despite engaging with BBC archives, none of the stories illustrated used BBC material.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to members from CCS and BAaH groups and the other constitutive project community groups in Manchester, project institutional partners (The BBC and The Science Museum Group) trialled the initial prototypes and beta versions of the digital resource as did a range of interested individuals, university students and diverse community groups and local history groups in and around Yorkshire that we either approached to collaborate with or those that had heard about the project and expressed particular interest in using the resource for their work. Other stakeholders included a network of contacts we built from public galleries, libraries, archives and museums across the U.K through public engagement activities.

<sup>5</sup> Founded in 1775 by a local potter named John Aynsley, the factory – which has survived to date – has established itself as a leading British manufacturer of bone china ceramic ware worldwide for decades.

<sup>6</sup> Longton is situated to the south of Stoke-on-Trent and constitutes one of the six towns that encompass the latter, the other towns being Burslem, Fenton, Hanley, Stoke and Tunstall.

<sup>7</sup> Access the *Potbank Dictionary* for a detailed description of this trade at <http://potbankdictionary.blogspot.co.uk/p/l-m.html>

<sup>8</sup> This event took place within a pilot project that resulted from the project partnership with the Science Museum Group. Herein, CCS and BAaH spent a full weekend in November 2014 touring the storerooms of the Science Museum at Blythe House. The rationale for this was to investigate how a range of digital tools and devices can be used to improve access to stored collections that are shut away from the public. For full details, visit <http://ceramiccitystories.postach.io/page/science-museum>

<sup>9</sup> To listen to these comments, access the filmed version of *Gladstone 2013 Fired Up!* via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqTc1Y\\_MAEg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqTc1Y_MAEg)

<sup>10</sup> Following a number of popular school workshops entitled *Cogs in the Machine* conceived by Ellie Davies that drew on a mix of archival film footage and original music, poetry and dance in the re-enactment of the working lives of Victorian children in the Potteries, this project expanded the scope of the workshops to cover as full a picture as possible of the past of the pottery industry with a view to reaching a broader audience. The project was co-directed by Ellie Davies and Ray Johnson – the latter a key member of the *Ceramic City Stories* group. For further details, visit <http://elliedaviesmusic.co.uk/home/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/PRINT-READY-PROGRAMME-Gladstone-community-awp-1.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> In alignment with Stoke City Council's regeneration programme to render run-down sites attractive to developers, the iconic factory at Gladstone narrowly survived bulldozing only after Derek Johnson – a local tile manufacturer - purchased the site and handed it over to the *Staffordshire Pottery Industry Preservation Trust* for administration as a working museum. Unfortunately, other equally prominent factories have not been as fortunate.

<sup>12</sup> A Parliamentary Commission headed by Samuel Scriven in 1841 investigated – among many other things – the circumstances under which children were employed in a number of industrial factories including the Potteries. Scriven found that children often started work very early (between eight to ten years of age), worked up to seventy-two hours a week and were actually not employed directly by the factories, but more or less hired by workers to perform menial tasks (although some children were formally apprenticed to particular trades). The children's exposure to health hazards and the detrimental effect work had on their education led Scriven to recommend improvements in his final report which were adopted.

<sup>13</sup> See Nicholls (2011) and Lee (2012) for more details.

<sup>14</sup> For a full description of this trade (and other pottery crafts many of which no longer exist), consult the *Potbank Dictionary* at <http://potbankdictionary.blogspot.co.uk/p/s.html>

<sup>15</sup> Although there are conflicting accounts of the exact origin of the Ayrshire breed (that is whether Scotland or Holland), most accounts suggest that the breed did indeed originate in the Ayrshire region of which the Isle of Bute is a constituent part.

<sup>16</sup> Available documentation reveals that this show awarded prizes for milk yield, butter fat and appearance and provides a glimpse into the "behind-the-scenes" preparations for the event and the motivation behind participation. For more details, visit <http://www.lookandlearn.com/childrens-newspaper/CN571019-003.pdf> and consult Capstick (1951).

<sup>17</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the role of this board, see Monopolies and Mergers Commission (1992).

<sup>18</sup> There exist key initiatives on the island that have mapped abandoned farms and sites and documented traces of older remains. See, for example, Proudfoot and Hannah (2000). However, these have been primarily archaeological in nature, employing methods of excavation in contrast to storytelling applied by *Pararchive*. Both are now being used in tandem to effectively document the island's past in one space – *Yarn Community*.

<sup>19</sup> See <http://tomjackson.photography/interactive/blythehouse.html?html5=prefer>

<sup>20</sup> The stories recounted by Jane and Paul can be accessed on the *Yarn Community* platform via <http://beta.pararchive.com/stories/122> and <http://beta.pararchive.com/stories/127> respectively.

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