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Laura **King**

LIVING WITH THE DEAD

Memories, Histories, and the Stories Families Tell in Modern Britain

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This book is truly collaborative in another way; throughout the process of research and writing, I've worked with a whole range of amazing collaborators who shared an interest in the question of where memories of the dead live. We've explored that question in many ways, as well as through this book—exhibitions, market stalls, artistic installations, picnics. The first and foremost of these collaborators is Ellie Harrison. Ellie's care-led approach and creative ways of thinking about grief and remembrance, through her 'Grief Series', have changed the direction and ideas of this project many times—I owe her a lot. I also learnt lots and benefited from the help and expertise of Antony Ramm, Matthew Bellwood, Patrick Bourne, Ross Horsley, Tim Procter, Jackie Depelle, Natalie Pithers, Pushpa Kumbhat, Jane Robinson, Susan Pitter, and the members of Leeds Dying Matters partnership.

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I gave many papers as I struggled with what this book should be about, and the discussions were brilliant—there are too many to mention (it's been a long process), but those conferences and workshops helped clear my confusion at so many points. Coaching from Vik Turbine and Julie Scanlon was also deeply

helpful in working out the direction I was taking, and how to make this book my own. Students on my MA module Death, Dying and the Dead, as well as my PhD students, have also shaped the project throughout, through many debates and questions about our relationship with the dead.

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Fifteen Families (in Order of Appearance)

Jean Barker

Jean, born in 1933, spent all her life in Leeds. Her family experienced a series of deaths in her childhood; a brother and sister (Jim and Mary) died as young children, and two brothers (Alan and Arthur) died in military service during the Second World War. Her dad, William, died shortly after, in 1945, and her mum, Edith, in 1963. Jean didn't take part in our family history group, but had written a short memoir for Leeds Libraries, took part in two interviews, contributed to our exhibition, and allowed me to look through her family archives. Jean died in 2020.

Bill Rollinson

Bill was born in 1946 and grew up near Walsall, West Midlands, before moving to Leeds as an adult. He had done bits of family history research prior to working with us, but managed to get much further during our collaboration. He grew up with one sister and one brother, with his parents William and Lillian, but found out about another sister (Eileen) who had died as a baby before he was born, and was keen to research the circumstances of her life and death, as well as going further back into his family's past.

Geoff Hardwick

Geoff came along to our group with Vanessa Manby, who had supported him on another project, Seacroft Stories. Geoff was born in 1955, has one sister, and has lived in Leeds all his life. His parents, Clarice and Henry, had split up when he was about 11, and he had lost contact with his dad. His mum was from Leeds, and his dad was born in Hull. Geoff had very little knowledge of his dad's family, and exploring this side of his family was a priority in his research, as well as continuing to remember his mum, who died in 1990.

Maureen Jessop

Maureen has lived in Leeds all her life, and was born in the city in 1950. She is an experienced family history researcher, and has also contributed to a number of

local history and heritage projects in and around Leeds. Maureen has researched both sides of her family, learning about her mum's family's roots in Steyning, West Sussex, going back to the 1730s. One story that had been particularly important in her mother Mary's family was that of 'poor Harold', her mum's brother who died aged 10 in 1931.

Carolyn Huston

Carolyn was born in 1951 and grew up in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Her parents moved there shortly after their marriage in the late 1940s, and had two children, Carolyn and her sister. Carolyn has family connections to Yorkshire, Scotland, and Devon. She has inherited a lot of objects, photos, and documents from her family, and members of previous generations had done family history research, something she has continued for many years, taking part in courses and writing up her research to share with her family.

Laura King

I grew up mostly in Bearwood, on the edge of Birmingham, in the 1980s and 1990s. I came to work in Leeds in 2012. My dad, Phil, was born in Blackheath, West Midlands, the youngest of six siblings (his older siblings, in order, are Cath, Joe, Colette, Brendan, and Sylvia). His parents, Anne and Joseph, came to England from Belfast in 1937/38. Anne was Catholic and Joseph was Protestant, which led to their leaving Ireland. My dad, aunts, and uncles knew their maternal family well, particularly their aunts, and were told about their maternal grandparents, Catherine and George Wright. They had little contact with, and knew little of, their dad's family.

Sarah Sykes

Sarah was born in 1971 and has lived in Leeds all her life. She now lives in Farnley, in west Leeds, and is surrounded by places that remind her of her relatives who have since died. She grew up in nearby Bramley, living with her parents and next door to her mum's twin sister, with whom she was very close. Sarah also found family connections to Sherburn in Elmet, to the east of Leeds, and Norwell Woodhouse in Nottinghamshire. Sarah works for the University of Leeds Libraries, and enjoys sharing her interest in history with her son.

John Hague

John, born in 1949, grew up in Sheffield with his brother and parents, Jack and Jean, and moved to Leeds as an adult. John learnt more about all four of his grandparents through his research, and their backgrounds, including how his paternal grandfather, Alfred, was brought up by his sister after his mother's death, and how his maternal grandmother, Nellie, lost her fiancé in the First World War.

Sue Child

Sue was born in 1945, and is 'Leeds through and through', as she puts it. Sue has been involved in several local and community research and heritage projects, such as at Temple Newsam near Leeds, and also volunteers as a children's storyteller. Sue's parents, Elsie and Len, both died in 1980, shortly followed by her grandparents, Maud and Alf, whom she was close to. These deaths were part of the spur to start recording and researching her family history. Being able to pass this knowledge on to her children and grandchildren is important to Sue.

Cherril Cliff

Cherril was born in 1952 and has lived in Leeds all her life. The eldest of four siblings, she experienced a very difficult childhood, and had worked hard to create a totally different kind of family life for her two daughters and her grandchildren. Her parents had been 'dysfunctional', neglecting her and her siblings. Her meals were often provided by her Nana Duffield, who lived across the road from Cherril with her grandad Sydney, who died when she was around 3 years old. Nana Duffield died when Cherril was around 16 years old. Cherril is a prolific writer, and was interested in exploring her family history as a source of inspiration for her fictional writing.

Katie

Katie was in her late twenties when she worked with us. She knew bits about her family history from stories, and wanted to find a way to better record and preserve it. She collaborated with her grandmother, Dorothy, in this work, and they were interviewed together for our project. Katie, Dorothy, and Alf, Katie's grandfather, are pseudonyms.

Eric

Eric was born in 1940, and grew up with his parents and one brother in York, in a house his parents, Charles and Olive, had built for them in the 1930s, and in which they lived for the rest of their lives. Eric has spent most of his adult life in Leeds, and is married to Marie. Eric and Marie do family history research and attended our group sessions together. Since retiring, Eric has volunteered for local charities, such as for Yorkshire Air Ambulance.

Janet Coles

Janet, born in 1948, is an experienced researcher: she worked at the University of Leeds in adult education research before retiring in 2013. Janet grew up in York, and moved to Leeds as an adult. Her parents were Freda and Ted. Janet has researched her family for years, and during our collaboration she chose to particularly focus on researching her female ancestors, her grandmothers and great-grandmothers. She has found family connections to London, Yorkshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Cornwall, and to the Huguenots in northern France in the seventeenth century.

Marie

Marie, born in 1949, grew up in Middlesborough, in north-east England. Her parents, Mary and Sidney, were from Cambridgeshire, and moved to Middlesborough in 1947 and then to York in 1960. Her mother died in 1967 when Marie was 17. Marie is married to Eric, and like him, has done lots of voluntary work since retiring, particularly for breast cancer charities, as well as her family history research.

Paul Cave

Paul, born in 1978, grew up in Leeds and still lives and works in the city, for the University of Leeds. He is an only child, and became interested in his family's history when he found a photo of a family party, and realized he knew little of the people in it. Paul was reflective about the joys and limits of family history, enjoying it as an intellectual challenge as well as a way to find out more about his family. Paul and his partner have had a baby since we worked together, and Paul was pleased he would be able to share his knowledge of his family with his son in time.

1
The Living and the Dead

Opening

Ghosts haunt our day-to-day lives. Our everyday is pitted with the presence of the dead: the former residents of the houses and streets in which we live; the previous owners of objects we use, whether we knew them or not; in our tastes and choices, of music, of food, of our habits, quirks, and phrases.

A Christmas pudding recipe handed down over four generations, still used to this day.

A plastic clothes peg kept as a reminder of a beloved aunt.

A telling of stories sculpted through many retellings over many, many years into a smooth narrative, sometimes contested, summing up why a family left their home country.

This book is a way to explore the relationship between the living and the dead within families in modern Britain and beyond. Families, in every possible shape and size, broadly defined by emotional as much as biological links, are where we learn about history, inherit from our ancestors, and forge a relationship between the past and present through which we shape ourselves.[1] Families are a pivotal space in which memories and histories are made and remade, perhaps the most important memory community.[2] Families provide those pasts we can use to create sense in our own lives.[3] This book charts this process, the yarn of family history, its warp and weft, its weaving into intergenerational relationships, and brings the dead into focus. It asks how and why the dead and traces of the past are the raw material from which families are made, and how the past is used to imagine a particular vision of families in the present and for the future. How do the dead matter in everyday life? How do families choose to remember—or forget—those who have gone? How is the past passed on—or not?

[1] Astri Erll, 'Locating Family in Cultural Memory Studies', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 42, no. 3 (2011), 303–18, doi:10.3138/jcfs.42.3.303; Radmila Švarícková Slabáková, 'Family Memory as a Prospective Field of Memory Studies', in *Family Memory: Practices, Transmissions and Uses in a Global Perspective*, edited by Radmila Švarícková Slabáková (Routledge, 2021), 1–24; Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[2] Slabáková, 'Family Memory', 1.

[3] Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Women* (Virago, 1986).

So, this is a book about dead people, though it is not a book about dying or death. Most history books are about the dead, of course. In its focus on the past, history by its nature is an analysis of the actions, beliefs, emotions, and existence of the dead, and as such, is always an implicit act of remembrance. As Saidiya Hartman puts it, 'history is how the secular world attends to the dead'.[4] The world of the historian—academic, professional, or family—is one of remembering those who have died through processes of 'recovery' or reconstruction, whether we knew those people or not. Whether we study those visible in public life or those people whose lives leave less trace—the labourer, the housewife, the child—we as historians have a particular kind of relationship with the dead. Working with the dead is at the crux of our profession as academics, and at the crux of our research whatever kind of historian we may be.[5] But perhaps less than scholars from other disciplines, such as anthropology, we rarely think about this relationship with the dead and acknowledge how fundamental it is to our work.

Everyone is part of this process.[6] History and the dead viscerally matter in public, and some people are remembered over others.[7] The question of how to remember the dead came into focus in the wake of a global pandemic which took the lives of millions, and through protests like Black Lives Matter, especially visible in the mass demonstrations of 2020. In Britain, these protests demanded a more honest reckoning with the nation's past, to better remember those who had died and been killed, particularly by the hand of the British state.[8] Erasures and invisibilities take place because lives are not thought to be worth much: the lack of memorials to those who have died through enslavement is one example.[9] The lack of empathy and attention paid to the deaths of refugees is another.[10] There are the dead whose names were not recorded on a gravestone because they ended up in unmarked graves. There are lives misremembered: the erasure of a person's gender identity or sexuality after their death.[11] Campaigns from the decades-old

[4] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), 18. Also see Hans Ruin, *Being with the Dead: Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness* (Stanford University Press, 2018).

[5] On the relationship between historian and the dead they study, see Julia Laite, 'The Emmet's Inch: Small History in a Digital Age', *Journal of Social History* 53, no. 4 (2020), 977–9, doi:10.1093/jsh/shy118; John H. Arnold, 'The Historian as Inquisitor: The Ethics of Interrogating Subaltern Voices', *Rethinking History* 2, no. 3 (1998), 384–5, doi:10.1080/13642529809408974; Katie Barclay, 'Falling in Love with the Dead', *Rethinking History* 22, no. 4 (2018), 459–73, doi:10.1080/13642529.2018.1511105.

[6] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 20th anniversary edn. (Beacon Press, 2015), 2.

[7] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2016).

[8] For a recent discussion of the failure to acknowledge such a past, see Olivette Otele, 'Today We Remember the Tragedy of Slavery, but the Culture War That Denies Britain's Past Continues', *The Guardian*, 23 August 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/aug/23/world-remember-slavery-britain-imperial-history?CMP=share_btn_tw.

[9] See the Memorial 2007 project, https://www.memorial2007.org.uk/ [accessed 18 May 2023].

[10] For example, see Peter Gattrell, 'Refugee Lives, Refugee Deaths', Refugee History, http://refugee-history.org/blog/2020/9/11/refugee-deaths-refugee-lives [accessed 18 May 2023].

[11] On such post-mortem discrimination in the contemporary American context, see Stephenson Brooks Whitestone, 'A Qualitative Examination of Discrimination after Death: The Distortion and

Remember Oluwale, which fights to memorialize the life of Nigerian-born David Oluwale who was hounded to his death by police officers in Leeds in 1969, to campaigns for memorials, remembrance days, and apologies to those killed through the violence of British colonialism illuminate the deep political and emotional importance properly remembering the dead has today—and that not remembering can be an act of violence.[12] Such campaigns demonstrate how race, class, sex, gender identity, migration experience, and sexuality, amongst other factors, deeply affect the way in which the dead are memorialized and whether they are publicly remembered at all. Not everyone has that privilege of being remembered.

But what of the more personal relationships we have with those who have died? Here is a politics at work too, where local and national histories interact with the intimate worlds of families to influence who gets to have an afterlife in death, and how. Here we find a politics of remembering or choosing not to, a politics of being remembered, and a politics of what counts as history. These are politics which work at the level of the family, the community, the nation, and beyond. These are politics of class, gender, race, and sexuality, but they are also politics of the family, the personal, in which there is violence, abuse, and difficult relationships. There are estrangements, and there are exclusions. Sometimes it is better to forget.

This book illuminates the everyday relationship between the living and dead within family life, paying attention to these politics, by examining the role of active and passive processes of remembrance, their nature and impact on individuals and family relationships.[13] This book examines the practices by which families choose to 'keep alive' their dead, and what role and agency the dead had within families' lives. It thinks through the afterlives of the dead, sometimes within frameworks of religion and faith, but often within the day-to-day worlds of the lives of the living. The relationships between the living and the dead are many and complex.[14] This book considers the words, the objects, the spaces, the practices, the emotions, and the senses of remembering, creating a multi-layered world of families' intergenerational relationships and sense of their own past. In

Erasure of Transgender and Other Marginalized Post-Mortem Identities' (PhD thesis, University of California Santa Barbara, 2022), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/62w472b0; Stephenson Brooks Whitestone, Howard Giles, and Daniel Linz, 'Overcoming Ungrievability: Transgender Expectations for Identity after Death', *Sociological Inquiry* 90, no. 2 (2020), 316–38, doi:10.1111/soin.12357.

[12] See, for example, Remember Oluwale, https://rememberoluwale.org/ and Memorial 2007, https://www.memorial2007.org.uk/ [both accessed 18 May 2023].

[13] As Ellis notes, death and dying are everyday and mundane, whilst Holmes shows us how the practices of connection with the past through the material are significant in their regularity. Julie Ellis, 'Thinking beyond Rupture: Continuity and Relationality in Everyday Illness and Dying Experience', *Mortality* 18, no. 3 (2013), 251–69, doi:10.1080/13576275.2013.819490; Helen Holmes, 'Material Affinities: "Doing" Family through the Practices of Passing On', *Sociology* 53, no. 1 (2019), 174–91, doi:10.1177/0038038518777696.

[14] Vinciane Despret, *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind*, trans. Stephen Muecke (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 5.

exploring the relationship between living and dead, we can make visible the processes by which families construct and understand their own histories.

The approach of this book is to focus in on the small-scale, the micro, the individual. This book is about fifteen families. These small stories are not necessarily representative of a wider population, society, or group, and cannot represent a bigger whole. Each story must be understood on its own terms, rather than exemplifying a bigger pattern.[15] But in juxtaposing a small number of examples, we can start to understand the meaning of the living–dead relationships in families' lives, the place and power of remembrance practices, and the impact that these practices and relationships have on multiple generations. Family history and national and international histories are deeply connected, and blur the lines between history and memory, and private and public.[16] Here, I follow the links families have made to 'bigger' histories, if they made them, but centre my perspective at the heart of those families' everyday lives, using ideas and thinking from microhistory and 'small story' approaches.[17] Indeed, it is only through the detailed examination of such small stories that we can get a grip on the slippery, fluid, emotional, and complex art of memory, with its forgetting as much as remembering. This means dealing with uncertainty as much as establishing what we can know about families' emotional dynamics and private, intimate practices.[18]

Collaborative Critical Family History

I developed a new methodology to explore these questions, of the meaning of the dead and the past in family life, one which by the end of writing this book, I came to describe as collaborative critical family history. Drawing on the work of Christine Sleeter, who coined the term, critical family history means placing individual family histories in frameworks of power structures within and beyond the family.[19] My project took a collaborative approach to this method, bringing

[15] As Laite writes, every single person matters, and social historians should stop trying to make every story part of a bigger picture. Laite, 'The Emmet's Inch', 965. Also see Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, '"The Singularization of History": Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge', *Journal of Social History* 36, no. 3 (2014), 701–35, doi:10.1353/jsh.2003.0054.

[16] Li writes about the close connections between family and nation in China, though this blurring of boundaries occurs in numerous national contexts. Na Li, 'Family History in China at a Crossroads: Family Narratives, Personal Memory, and Public History', *Journal of Family History* 44, no. 4 (2019), 449–69, doi:10.1177/0363199019845931. Also see Katie Barclay and Nina Javette Koefoed, 'Family, Memory, and Identity: An Introduction', *Journal of Family History* 46, no. 1 (2020), 3–12, doi:10.1177/0363199020967297.

[17] The idea of 'small stories' is inspired by microhistory as a methodology, but remains distinct, in that it does not claim to exhaustively examine every aspect of the person or practice discussed.

[18] Julia Laite, 'Radical Uncertainty', History Workshop Online, 16 September 2020, https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/public-history/radical-uncertainty/.

[19] Christine Sleeter, 'Critical Family History: An Introduction', *Genealogy* 4, no. 2 (2020), 64, doi:10.3390/genealogy4020064. Also see Christine Sleeter, 'Critical Family History', https://www.christinesleeter.org/critical-family-history [accessed 3 May 2023].

together family historians, family histories, and academic and non-academic researchers. I, along with fellow academic historian Jessica Hammett, worked with a small group of family historians, broadly defined as those researching or interested in researching their own relatives' and ancestors' histories. By the end of the project, I was researching my own family too—an academic and family historian simultaneously.

This methodology, which felt different and new as we worked our way through our collaboration, allowed us to collectively explore several family histories from the inside out. By collaborating with family historians, we could open up new knowledge and expertise. By bringing together fifteen families in this book, I've been able to compare, to think across and between families, whilst simultaneously understanding those families and the individuals within them on their own terms. And through self-reflection on the relationship between historians and their subjects, as much as what happened in the past itself, I've been able to unpick the ways in which memory and history function on an intimate level, the very way in which histories are made. But this is a flawed methodology too. I wanted to think about how we remember the dead, how we connect to the past—but when I advertised the opportunity to get involved in the project, I didn't talk about forgetting. I sought what was celebrated and made visible within families, without paying as much attention to the need to let go of parts of the past, to edit and erase. I think I would set up the project in a very different way if I were to do it again, though I hope in the process of writing I've started to think more about those omissions and the need to forget. Part of the self-reflection of such a methodology means addressing that for me, family and family history are happy spaces, and I framed them as such in establishing this collaboration with family historians. For others, of course, families and their histories can be far from positive.

Whilst historians such as Charles Tilly acknowledged the value of family history approaches over thirty-five years ago,[20] there is still relatively little collaboration between academics and family historians, even as family history research as a practice has become increasingly studied. Tanya Evans's work, such as with descendants of those helped by The Benevolent Society in New South Wales, Australia, has been pioneering.[21] Other projects are starting to use and value the expertise of genealogists and family historians, or to make contact with the descendants of those they study.[22] Mike Roper, in particular, has taken this

[20] Charles Tilly, 'Family History, Social History, and Social Change', *Journal of Family History* 12, no. 1–3 (1987), 319–30, doi:10.1177/036319908701200118.

[21] Tanya Evans, *Fractured Families: Life on the Margins in Colonial New South Wales* (UNSW Press, 2015).

[22] Current/recent examples include: Railway Work, Life and Death project, https://www.railway-accidents.port.ac.uk/ [accessed 12 October 2022]; Chandan Mahal's PhD project in collaboration with the Royal Geographical Society and people whose relatives were displaced by the partition of India and Pakistan, 'Family History, Ancestral Place and Diaspora: Material Culture and Community

approach, in a project that ran at the same time as my own, involving co-research with descendants of those involved in the First World War, as well as interviews and use of his own family history, paralleling much of my own methodology.[23] There is a rich and growing seam of academic work drawing on academic historians' own families.[24] Beyond academia, many projects put families and family history approaches at the heart of their historical project: one example in Leeds is the Jamaica Society's series of exhibitions remembering and celebrating the Jamaican community. In their first exhibition, Eulogy, curator Susan Pitter centred families' stories of their older relatives who migrated to Leeds in the 1940s and 1950s, a generation which was dying out at the time of the exhibition.[25] The intergenerational relationships between family members formed the core of these projects, which linked individual family histories with national and global histories of the British Empire and decolonization, Jamaican independence, and global Jamaican diasporic culture.

But such an in-depth collaboration, between two academic historians, Jessica and me, and a small group of family historians, remains rare. My collaborative project yielded interviews with our family historians, and access to their private family archives, their research, and their writings about it.[26] In practice, collaboration involved meeting once or twice a month in small and whole group

Heritage for People of Punjabi Descent in London' (PhD thesis, Queen Mary University of London, 2022); Hester Barron and Claire Langhamer's work with descendants of Mass-Observation contributors, published in *Class of '37: Voices from Working-Class Girlhood* (Metro, 2021); Jane McCabe's project involving those who had ancestors in the Graham's Homes in India, written up as *Race, Tea and Colonial Resettlement: Imperial Families, Interrupted* (Bloomsbury, 2018); Sian Anthony's work connecting the knowledge of descendants with burial sites and graves in a cemetery in Copenhagen, detailed in 'Materialized Genealogy: From Anonymous Cemetery Populations to Creating Alternative Narratives about Individuals and Family Burial Space', *Genealogy* 2, no. 3 (2018), 27, doi:10.3390/genealogy2030027. For more current projects involving collaborative methodologies, see the Historians Collaborate network, https://historianscollaborate.com/ [accessed 12 October 2023].

[23] Mike Roper's Afterlives of War project culminated in the book *Afterlives of War: A Descendants' History* (Manchester University Press, 2023).

[24] Some particularly rich and important examples include Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (C. Hurst & Co, 2013); Hazel V. Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (Verso, 2019); Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*; Alison Light, *Common People: The History of an English Family* (Penguin, 2015); Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagran: A History of Stories* (University of Washington Press, 2004). Such work is now becoming more common at PhD level too, such as Shauna Bostock-Smith's 'From Invasion to my Generation: The Lived Experience of an Aboriginal Family Group over Several Generations' (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2021).

[25] 'Announcing the Eulogy project', Jamaica Society Leeds, 22 February 2019, https://www.jamaicasocietyleeds.co.uk/eulogy-announcement/. Also see Susan Pitter (ed.), *Eulogy* (Jamaica Society Leeds, 2019).

[26] For more on this methodology, see Laura King, 'Family Historians, Collaboration and a New History from Below Methodology – or, Sharing History over a Cup of Tea', History Workshop Online, 6 March 2019, https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/family-childhood/family-historians-collaboration/; Laura King, 'Working with Family Historians – Remembering and Forgetting Our Ancestors', Living with Dying, 14 May 2018, https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/2018/05/14/working-with-family-historians-remembering-and-forgetting-our-ancestors/; Laura King and Jessica Hammett, 'Family Historians and Historians of the Family: The Value of Collaboration', in *Making Histories*, edited by Paul Ashton, Tanya Evans, and Paula Hamilton (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 237–50.

meetings, almost always with both Jessica and me, to visit archives or libraries, undertake training, or simply share findings, or the brick walls our family historians were hitting in their research, over a cup of tea and a biscuit. The group naturally split into two, with some preferring a daytime meet up, and some an evening slot, which meant the group conversations were often small, with usually eight or ten people as a maximum. Sometimes our conversations focused on genealogical detail, on figuring out what a listed cause of death on a death certificate might mean. At other points, we had more critical conversations about the way particular parts of our families' histories were preserved or could be hidden. Often, we thought about our own priorities as researchers, and questioned why we were interested in some periods, some places, some people, or some subjects over others. Importantly, we let our family historians' own priorities shape the direction of the collaboration throughout.

Each participant took part in at least one interview, and often more. Some interviews were with both Jessica and me, and some we conducted individually, partly chosen because of the nature of our individual relationships with our collaborators, and partly so that Jessica and I could compare our approaches. These interviews were largely led by the family historians themselves, without following any sort of structure. Some participants looked to us to ask questions, whereas others led us through a family tree or used their collections of documents and objects to steer the conversation.

As well as a recorded interview or two, I also either visited each family historian's home to look at their family collections or asked them to bring things to show us, which often enabled a different kind of conversation to the slightly more formal nature of an interview. I took photos of whatever they shared, if they gave me permission to do so, and many of these conversations led into a collective working out of how and why things, documents, details, and stories did and didn't get shared within and beyond their family. Many shared family trees via Ancestry or other websites, as well as other documents and findings, and one or two shared access to collections of photos or documents they had stored online.

We also invited the family historians to join us in writing about family histories. Eight historians wrote up some aspect of their family history as a booklet; seven of these were deposited at Leeds Local and Family History Library.[27] We paid for the printing of the booklets, and gave a broad brief, inviting the family historians to write about any aspect of their family history. We also invited members of the group to write for our project website. Seven writers did so, some

[27] Sue Child, 'Pontefract Lane: Five Generations' (2018), 942.819 LIV; Janet Coles, 'Three Remarkable Women: The Lives of My Great Grandmothers' (2018), 942.819 LIV; Eric, 'Charles and Olive: Two Lives Intertwined' (2018), 942.819 LIV; John Hague, 'My Grandparents' (2018), 942.819 LIV; Geoff Hardwick, 'In Search of Fame and Fortune…' (2018), 942.819 LIV; Maureen Jessop, 'Life on "The Bank": My Family's Story' (2018), 942.819 LIV; Sarah Sykes, 'Journey to Leeds' (2018), 942.819 LIV. All held at Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.

more than once.[28] All of this writing was revealing too, in both the content that our family historians chose to include, but also in the way they framed their relationship with their ancestors. These activities took place from 2017 to 2018, but work has continued. I published an article featuring the family of one group member, Maureen Jessop, with her significant and valuable input.[29] Two others, Janet Coles and Sue Child, have recently written short pieces for an edited collection.[30] All but one or two group members, therefore, wrote something about their family history, either for our project or for themselves, or both. As I wrote this book, I sought their feedback on specific bits of it; one or two have read small extracts of my writing that told some part of their story. My own family have read some of the sections about my ancestors.

The group involved fourteen people, plus Jessica and me: thirteen were examining their own family history, and one person, Vanessa, joined to support another, Geoff Hardwick. Two members, Eric and Marie, were a married couple. There was a mix of knowledge and experience, from those who had been researching their family history for decades to those totally new to the practice. Some brought their professional skills, such as in digital technologies, to the mix, whilst others found research very difficult. I also interviewed a further participant, Jean Barker, whose memoir I found in Leeds Local and Family History Library. An active family historian, she allowed me to look through her family collections, and shared lots of her research with me over time. Though Jean didn't attend our group meetings, I learnt a great deal about her family and her research through several separate conversations.

Most of the group were over sixty, but we had a minority of younger members too. Our additional participant, Jean, was the eldest, aged 85 when I interviewed her. About a third of the group were men, and the rest were women. Most had grown up in working-class areas, and were from working-class backgrounds, though the majority had experienced some sort of social mobility and were now in a higher income bracket than their families had been when they were children. All group members were from predominantly white British family backgrounds. As well as being just a small group, these characteristics of the group further demonstrate why any conclusions drawn here are not necessarily applicable to a wider population.

Though I refer to fifteen families throughout the book, this process meant learning about the lives of the relatives and ancestors of fifteen people over often

[28] These are available at: https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/category/family-historians/ [accessed 10 August 2022].

[29] Laura King, 'Remembering Deceased Children in Family Life: The School Case of Poor Harold (1920–31)', *History Workshop Journal* 93, no. 1 (2022), 225–44, doi:10.1093/hwj/dbac006.

[30] Sue Child, 'Florence Kate and the Library Chair', in *Inheriting the Family: Objects, Identities and Emotions*, edited by Katie Barclay, Ashley Barnwell, Joanne Begiato, Tanya Evans, and Laura King (Bloomsbury, 2025); Janet Coles, 'A Mantelpiece of Memories', in *Inheriting the Family*, edited by Barclay et al.

200 years, or five or so generations of each individual—many interlinked and related family groups over many decades. We were working here with not just individual memories, but also the collective memories held within families over generations.[31] This approach means paying attention to the relationship between family members who never knew each other personally, whose lives did not overlap, as well as remembrance practices for loved ones known intimately over many years. By examining the worlds of families across generations from this insider perspective, even if as researchers we can only ever achieve a small glimpse of them, we can get at the invisible and intangible, and start to catch sight of what has been forgotten as well as what has been remembered.

The aim was to learn not only about long-deceased relatives, but also about how the relationship between living and dead family members changes over time. By focusing on objects as well as written documents, things held in private as well as public archives, and on an ethos of collaboration, this is a methodology going beyond the restrictions of the white, patriarchal, elite processes which shape established archives.[32] This process of critical contextualization harnessed the family historians' wish to go beyond having just a list of names and dates of their ancestors, turning attention to the way hierarchies of power, particularly around class and gender, affected what records there were of our ancestors' lives and the many gaps that remained.

This methodology was rich for both our family historians and for us as academic historians. It allowed me to focus on the way histories were made in families, the silences and gaps, and the relationship between past, present, and future. I try to consider the 'sense of the past' as much as history as 'what happened'; and indeed as Raphael Samuel points out, these are indivisible.[33] In the combining of familial and academic expertise, we were able to feel for that sense of the past and its construction over time, of how families are sources of forgetting and erasure: the castigating of those relatives or ancestors deemed to be a source of shame, because of criminality, abuse, illegitimacy, or a whole host of reasons which change with social attitudes.

Beyond the core of fifteen families, including my own, we worked with others, involving collaborators who loaned objects to our exhibition on *Remembrance* at Abbey House Museum in Leeds, most notably Amanda Reed, who shared family history practices and rituals around death amongst Gypsy and Traveller groups.

[31] On collective, communicative, and cultural memory, see Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*; Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[32] Serena Dyer, 'State of the Field: Material Culture', *History* 106, no. 370 (2021), 282–92, doi:10.1111/1468-229X.13104; Liz Gloyn, Vicky Crewe, Laura King, and Anna Woodham, 'The Ties That Bind: Materiality, Identity, and the Life Course in the "Things" Families Keep', *Journal of Family History* 43, no. 2 (2018), 157–76, doi:10.1177/0363199017746451z.

[33] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (Verso, 2012), 35–6. Also see Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.

We thought through our research questions with artist Ellie Harrison, of the Grief Series, whose seven artistic works on death, grief, and remembrance have involved many stories, including her own, of how we remember the dead.[34] Ellie and I also researched together, and shared our materials from archives and from participants. Moreover, surrounding these families is years of research into autobiographical and family history materials, totalling hundreds of accounts, to be found in libraries and archives across the country. These stories, from autobiographies, memoirs, and written family histories, do feature occasionally here, yet to give space to the individual and to fully explore the depth and meaning of any family's experience, I have foregrounded the collaborative family history material over this archival research. But these writers are here, too, informing the questions, themes, and ideas of this research. These many hundreds of accounts, across many hundreds of libraries, are remembrance too, seeking to put on record the lives of all sorts of people before those memories and personal records are lost.

My Family and Other Families

One way to understand history as dynamic, used, and usable is to put ourselves in our professional academic work more. Why not, as historians like Katie Barclay, Nimisha Barton, Tracey Loughran, and Emily Robinson ask, *use* our emotional and subjective relationships with those we study, dead or alive?[35] As Jodie Matthews has shown, working with our own emotions as researchers, such as shame, is needed to fully understand those archives necessary to our work.[36] As scholars like Gaiutra Bahadur, Hazel Carby, Hartman, and Carolyn Steedman have highlighted, sometimes it is those intimate relationships with history which can reveal the most.[37] For me, that meant developing relationships with the families whose stories I told, and using less 'traditional' research methods, going beyond the archive, the interview, and the written text to consider objects and places, and my own emotions and senses as part of the research process.

I also—eventually—turned to my own family. I had been somewhat reluctant to do this during the eighteen months we worked most closely with our group of

[34] For more information, see www.griefseries.co.uk/ [accessed 18 May 2023].

[35] Barclay, 'Falling in Love'; Nimisha Barton, 'Pushing the Boundaries: Power, Privilege and the Problem with Inclusion', *Gender & History* 36, no. 2 (2024), 775–89, doi:10.1111/1468-0424.12651; Tracey Loughran, 'Blind Spots and Moments of Estrangement: Subjectivity, Class and Education in British "Autobiographical Histories"', in *Emotion and the Researcher: Sites, Subjectivities, and Relationships*, edited by Dawn Mannay and Tracey Loughran (Emerald Publishing, 2018), 245–60; Emily Robinson, 'Touching the Void: Affective History and the Impossible', *Rethinking History* 14, no. 4 (2010), 503–20, doi:10.1080/13642529.2010.515806.

[36] Jodie Matthews, 'Romani Pride, Gorja Shame: Race and Privilege in the Archive', *Oral History* 49, no. 2 (2021), 57–68.

[37] Bahadur, *Coolie Woman*; Carby, *Imperial Intimacies*; Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*; Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*.

family historians. A fear of being self-indulgent, perhaps, centring myself as the academic. A concern about putting the time, money, and energy I had into working with these family historians rather than diving into my family's own past. I was happy to share information about my family when anyone asked, but I didn't at first consider them to be part of the story I would tell. But this has changed: I have added my own family's story to the mix. This move is not without risks: claims to authority as both an academic historian and as a member of a family I'm studying could be seen as incompatible. Yet, in engaging with such forms of subjectivity and positionality, I think I can get nearer the meanings of the stories I tell in this book, whether they are my own or not.[38]

We can investigate families through a whole range of research methodologies: interviews, collaborative research, invitations to write, use of archives, whether institutional or personal. I feel like I truly did get to know the fourteen or so families of the historians I worked with. But however much we do as researchers, we can never know more than a fraction of how a family functions. And so, to think through how families remember the dead, I have turned to the family I know best: 'the Kings', though its members have many surnames. They are my dad's side of my family, who I grew up seeing regularly through my childhood. An Irish Catholic migrant family, there were six siblings, my dad the youngest, scattered across Birmingham, the Black Country, and the Midlands beyond. We had relatives back in Ireland and in the USA and Canada, but these six siblings had stayed relatively near their childhood home of the Black Country, for their working lives at least. Their sons and daughters, a relatively modest subsequent generation of eleven cousins, including me, have lived all over the UK at different points, and around the world too. Before these generations there were my dad's mother's family—Anne, known as 'Nanny King', her siblings, and their Irish family before them, the Wrights. My dad and his siblings hadn't known anything of their father's family: Joseph, their Protestant dad, had been estranged from his family for marrying a Catholic, had separated from Anne in the 1950s, and had died in 1962. This mix of Irish Catholic heritage with a bit of Protestantism, a bit of Scotland too, and a bit of the West Midlands gave us a fusion of approaches to death; I grew up regularly going to funerals as a child, unlike most of my friends, and went to visit my grandmother when she was laid out after her death, when I was six. But much of the Irish way of doing death, from the community-wide wake to the family's own preparation of the body, had faded away through decades of English life. This family, the one I will always know best, forms the fifteenth of the families who are at the centre of this book.

[38] Tracey Loughran, 'Distance, Intimacy and Identification: Reflections on Writing a History of Trauma', in *Museums, History and the Intimate Experience of the Great War*, edited by Joy Damousi, Deborah Tout-Smith, and Bart Ziino (Routledge, 2020), 136–50.

Looking at my own family has been particularly valuable in getting at the intangible and subconscious, the tiny everyday things that harked back to a particular relative, along with the silences, forgetting and lack of remembering, and the reality of blurred boundaries of what 'family' is. When I hear 'Lola' by the Kinks I think of my Uncle Phil—my aunt's ex-husband—whose memory I also nod to when we occasionally have 'double egg and chips' for tea, or in my family's references to 'his Bobness' (Bob Dylan). When I make a cake I think of Gwen, my childminder and a grandmother in all but name and biology, whose memory also lives on through my family's reuse of some of the unusual and characterful phrases she would say: 'that'll come sharp' when we banged our heads, 'choke up chicken' or 'did it have bones in it?' in response to a coughing fit, or 'did a motorbike just go past?' if someone farted. The memory of my Nanny King, who died when I was six, lives on in my family in her phrases too, a mix of colloquialisms that reflected her Irish background with a mix of living in Ireland, Scotland, and the Black Country: 'scundered' was to be disgusted or horrified at something (her version of the Scottish 'scunnered'), 'clockering' was the horrible sound made when bringing up phlegm, or she'd simply come out with, philosophically, 'och aye, one day nearer the grave'. My dad repeats these phrases, as well as 'Jesus, Mary, and Joseph and his beloved saints' at any hint of surprise, although he's a committed atheist, despite his mother's best efforts and own unwavering Catholicism. The voice of my maternal grandma lives on in our family; 'steady the buffs', she'd say. And her mother, my great-grandmother, 'Great', too. 'Ooh dear', my dad repeated recently to my daughter, with an accent and emphasis reminiscent, I know, of 'Great', as she was known, even though I barely remember her. Any equivalents from the families studied here are difficult to grasp; such fleeting and often barely noticed ways of connecting with the dead might not come to mind even in response to being asked about remembering the dead. Here are the practices that form their own archive of doing, embodied practices repeated over generations.[39] Here is the value of working *with* family historians and my own family: that we each bring a particular perspective and knowledge to our research as insiders. I have accessed as much as I can of the families I worked with through collaboration; I can bring more again with a perspective on my own family.

My own family shows us a truth about every single family: that the word defies definition. If we look at families as defined by emotional ties, rather than biological ones, the forms a family could take are endless.[40] Families are about

[39] Sally Alexander, '"Do Grandmas Have Husbands?" Generational Memory and Twentieth-Century Women's Lives', *The Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (2009), 159–76, doi:10.1093/ohr/ohp078; Emily Baughan, 'Reading Penelope Leach in Lockdown', 11 April 2023, https://emilybaughan.substack.com/p/reading-penelope-leach-in-lockdown [accessed 21 April 2023].

[40] Joanne Begiato, 'Family and Household', in *A Cultural History of the Home in the Renaissance*, edited by Amanda Flather (Bloomsbury, 2020), 35–58.

meanings rather than structures.[41] Foregrounding emotions opens up a focus on relationships between employers and servants, and same-sex relationships as familial.[42] The use of DNA for family history research is further disrupting assumptions about family forms.[43] In this book, I often focus on relatives linked biologically, because the family historians I worked with had strong emotional links with their biological kin. Family history can privilege heteronormative, nuclear family patterns, as genealogists link parents and their children many times over, guided by the information and records available, and often spend less time on wider kin and friends.[44] But as any family shows, families are not simply parents and children. Family history can help undo presumptions about what a family looks like, and show how family is constantly shifting, and never fixed.[45] My family historians included others too; family is throughout this book a complex and often contradictory concept. Gwen, of the cakes and characterful phrases, was during my childhood as close to me as any grandmother, as much as it was also an economic relationship; she was paid for her work looking after us. Family friends spent Christmases with us and were as much family members as those linked by biology. And families are selective and partial—my dad's family were all his mum's side, given he never knew his dad's family at all. A focus on family history from within should and does allow historians to write critical, political histories of the family which unpick the power dynamics, inclusions, and exclusions of these relationships.[46]

My family—like any family—also has its 'secrets' and ruptures which break this heteronormative family form. Such secrets take many forms over different families over time—such as children who were conceived before marriage and from fathers different to those they were brought up by and who were named as their father. Amongst the group of fifteen families I study here were many such 'secrets' and 'anomalies', as well as close kin-like relationships with friends, from informal and formal adoption, abortions, fostering and illegitimacy to bigamy, from 'aunts'

[41] Jennifer Crane, 'Agents of Change? Families, Welfare and Democracy in Mid-to-Late Twentieth-Century Europe', *Contemporary European History* 32, no. 2 (2023), 173–85, doi:10.1017/S0960777322000145.

[42] On queer families in the past, for example, see Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[43] Matthew Stallard and Jerome de Groot, '"Things Are Coming Out That Are Questionable, We Never Knew About": DNA and the New Family History', *Journal of Family History* 45, no. 3 (2020), 274–94, doi:10.1177/0363199020906853.

[44] On the heteronormative focus of seeking historical roots, see Jarrod Hayes, 'Queering Roots, Queering Diaspora', in *Rites of Return: Diaspora Politics and the Politics of Memory*, edited by Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller (Columbia University Press, 2011), 47–54.

[45] Ashley Barnwell, '"Given it is all so remote from us": Family Secrets, Ancestral Shames and the Proximities of Emotion', *Emotions and Society* 1, no. 1 (2019), 83–98, doi:10.1332/263168919X15580836411869; Tanya Evans, 'Secrets and Lies: The Radical Potential of Family History', *History Workshop Journal* 71 (2011), 49–73, doi:10.1093/hwj/dbq065.

[46] Stéphane Gerson, 'A History from Within: When Historians Write about Their Own Kin', *Journal of Modern History* 94, no. 4 (2022), 898–937, doi:10.1086/722420.

who were actually (mums') friends to those who became estranged from their families. These patterns reflect what happens in families all over. Familial ties between non-biologically related kin and between groups linked by other commonalities—such as sexuality—also draw on multiple ways of continuing relationships between the living and dead over long time periods, from the passing on of knowledge and stories to more formal archiving practices. Building on insights from queer theory, we can think about families that are chosen, and families that are unchosen, and think through how emotions, archives, memories, and stories make a family, whether it is linked by biology or not.[47]

Addiction, mental health issues, abuse, and violence also run through the families in this book, including my own, as with most families. Focusing on my own family has allowed a fuller and freer understanding of how families, their dead and their histories work on an everyday basis—over time, through difficulties as well as good times, and in the structures and practices that defy easy definition or categorization. Charting these experiences is not easy—analytically or emotionally. Ethically, I can't share all these experiences and stories here, from my own family or others. There are some things that must, for now, remain out of the history I write. But throughout, these experiences are in the background, even if they cannot appear on the page.

Time and Place

It is difficult to neatly define the period of study covered in this book. These kinds of histories defy being boxed in. Time works differently in families. As soon as I started to explore any family's memory practices, that family's own timescapes were what mattered, rather than my choice of period, or indeed any conventional periodization we use as academic historians.[48] Families are a space in which past, present, and future interact, in which the past enters the present frequently through direct and inherited memories and stories. Thinking with memories means conceptualizing time differently. History in families is not measured in years, but in generations and people's lifespans—the 'length and breadth' of relatives, as Alison Light puts it.[49]

[47] Eliza Garwood, 'Queering the Kinship Story: Constructing Connection through LGBTQ Family Narratives', *Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (2023), 30–46, doi:10.1177/14647001211059521; Rachel Gelfand, 'Between Archives: Yerushe, Intergenerational Collaboration, and Aging in Queer Family', *Radical History Review* 2021, no. 139 (2021), 200–10, doi:10.1215/01636545-8822687. Also see the Family Camera Network: https://familycameranetwork.org/ [accessed 18 May 2023].

[48] On families' timescapes, see Joanne Begiato, 'Moving Objects: Emotional Transformation, Tangibility and Time Travel', in *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History*, edited by Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles (Oxford University Press, 2018), 229–42.

[49] Alison Light, *Inside History: From Popular Fiction to Life-Writing* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 150.

When thinking about the dead, there are several timeframes at work: there are the lifespans of the people being remembered, whether those are days or decades. Memories of any relative might be first-hand or inherited and can reach well back into the nineteenth century and right up to the twenty-first.[50] A second way of thinking about period is the time at which relatives and ancestors had died. In this book, I analyse people who had died throughout the twentieth century—and occasionally back into the nineteenth century, and forward into the twenty-first. Those who died most recently often insisted on being heard; whilst I might have originally thought the project was about the earlier twentieth century, relatives who had died since, and right up to 2023 when I was writing this book, refused to be left out. As I opened my dad's own small collection of family things, a folder of my uncle Brendan's documents fell out onto my lap and so were the first thing I looked at: he had died in 2019.

This book is about the present in which connections to the dead are made and sustained, as well as what is being remembered. This book tells a historical story but is also about how history matters within the present. Here, I'm thinking about multiple 'presents': the moment at which individuals take a historical decision to pass something on—from an object to a piece of information. This means this book must go right up to the present day, and indeed into the future, as it is about how a group of fifteen individuals and their families continue to remember, preserve, and pass on their family histories. It is about how that group of fifteen individuals, including me, reflect on that very process. The future was very much in the mind of many of our family historians, as they considered how they would be remembered, and how future generations would—or would not—know about relatives and ancestors. The present in which a person is writing or assembling their family history is part of the story, both directly, as those historians often bring their story right up to date, or reflect on their family today, but also more indirectly, as they construct their history, whatever it might look like, in the social, cultural, political, and emotional context of the present day. The book works with what Megan Doolittle, drawing on John Gillis's work, calls 'the layered meanings of family time', how past, present, and future are cyclical and elastic within family life.[51]

Confining this book to a place is similarly difficult. Leeds is a starting point; all the people I worked with, and I too, lived and/or worked in Leeds. Leeds, the largest city in Yorkshire, expanded significantly in the industrialization of the nineteenth century, like so many, and several of our family historians had

[50] Some of my collaborators had family trees dating back much earlier than the nineteenth century, though information about relatives was almost always much scarcer before the mid-nineteenth century, with little detail beyond the dates and names of relatives.

[51] Megan Doolittle, 'Time, Space, and Memories', *Home Cultures* 8, no. 3 (2011), 245–64, doi:10.2752/175174211X13099693358753; John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 82–3.

connections to its major industry, textiles and clothing, which fuelled Leeds's growth. Others could tell the story of the local area through their relatives who had worked in mining in the surrounding towns and villages, or agriculture in the countryside surrounding the city. Like many major cities, it also has a history of poor health, of overcrowding and poverty, well into the twentieth century, a history which our family historians could also populate through stories of relatives lost to disease and malnutrition. It is a city that has been shaped by migration, markedly in the nineteenth century by Irish incomers and Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe, followed by significant communities from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Caribbean.

Some of the group had lived in Leeds their whole lives, whilst others had grown up elsewhere: a mining village in the West Midlands, or rural Southern Rhodesia (as it was then). Going back a generation or two pushed our map outwards, as our group of fifteen had connections across the four nations of the UK (throughout England, many Irish connections, unsurprisingly, slightly fewer in Scotland, fewer still in Wales). Most had relatives abroad, with significant connections to Canada, the USA, and France. Families do not stay put, and cannot be boxed into a place, any more than they can be fitted within a neat period.[52]

Living with the Dead

In the chapters that follow, I focus on the histories, memories, and stories relayed within fifteen families, through seven themes. From perhaps the most immediate way of connecting with the dead, through a grave or a site of an individual's remains, I move through the way families create a presence for the dead in homes and through material things. I examine how photos and documents relating to the past help keep a sense of the dead alive through a person's image or through a recording of their name and some aspect of their life. I think through how the writing of and about the dead creates a continued relationship with the living, and I take in the process of research itself as a point of connection with relatives personally known and those the researcher has never met. I finish the book by considering the slippery, shifting, and perhaps most important thread between the living and dead: stories. By examining this range of tangible and intangible practices within families, and the emotions and sensory experiences around them, I try to capture the breadth and complexity of the living–dead relationship.

[52] As Stabile notes of eighteenth-century America, focusing on 'the way remembrance actually works' and abandoning chronology and a focus on a specific place is a rich approach. Susan M. Stabile, *Memory's Daughters: The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cornell University Press, 2004), 13–14.

By thinking creatively about what cannot be seen in archives, by using different kinds of methodologies to get within families as far as that is possible, and by paying close attention to the intangible, the internalized, the felt world, we can build a much richer picture of the relationship between living and dead. By focusing on the dead, we can see the many languages and registers through which families talk about death on an everyday basis, even if conversations about dying remain uncomfortable within British society. Families have continued to find ways to engage with death and the dead, even if those ways are quiet and unspectacular. Death and the dead are woven into the very fabric of family life.[53]

Remembering the dead can take many forms: a resurrective remembrance, a conscious, active, regular attempt to 'keep alive' a relationship with the dead; a sense of presence, a quieter process of everyday connection by being surrounded by traces of the dead; ceremonial moments, in which the dead are brought to mind through rituals, often on special occasions; and incidental connections to the dead, through chance encounters with a place, a choice of wording, a smell, taste, or the sound of a piece of music. Memory of the dead can relate to a person's remains, that person's name, or a sense of that individual's 'personhood', their existence after death.[54] Remembrance can be deeply internalized and individual, a lone activity, or a shared and communal experience. It can be painful, and it can be unwanted.

But our relationship with the dead is much bigger than remembering. It is about the fusion of the past and present within everyday and family life, the way our individual and collective pasts shape and can be used for the present and future. Our families' inescapable dead are the roots, the trunk, the branches of the trees through which families construct themselves. Some do so explicitly, using the very idea of a tree to create something whole from the traces of the past that surround us in our families. Some don't engage with their family's history explicitly—they don't research it, they aren't interested—but nevertheless are surrounded by the past within their family life, as the past, present, and future overlap in the rhythms of family life. Others might reject family—as people, as a concept—altogether. In whichever scenario, the past is mediated through our family, and the family is constructed through the past, processes which inform and permeate who we are and how we place ourselves in the world. The dead, the archive, and memories of the past are ways to help create ourselves, as the dead

[53] As Julie Rugg has noted, the suggestion that there has been a 'disengagement' from death and the dead in recent decades, by historians such as Pat Jalland, is based on a focus on extraordinary deaths and the grander public rituals around death. Julie Rugg, 'Choice and Constraint in the Burial Landscape: Re-Evaluating Twentieth-Century Commemoration in the English Churchyard', *Mortality* 18, no. 3 (2013), 216, doi:10.1080/13576275.2013.819322.

[54] Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

'work' for the living.[55] These are processes of invention and imagination, the moulding of truths and facts to create a workable and useful version of ourselves, our families, and our histories. Family memories do not have to be 'true', but serve a specific purpose in creating and shaping a group, family identity.[56] The dead are idealized, stories change and are exaggerated, things—both tangible and intangible—get lost.

In examining the processes of history-making within families, this book is about the afterlives of the dead. The dead remain present. Families' pasts are a tool for the making of individual and collective identities. And through a methodology of working within families, and with family historians, we can get inside those very processes, the processes by which history is intimately made.

Living with the Dead: Memories, Histories, and the Stories Families Tell in Modern Britain. Laura King, Oxford University Press. © Laura King 2025. DOI: 10.1093/9780191915697.003.0001

[55] As Sarah O'Brien notes of those taken away from their families, such as women in Magdalen laundries in Ireland, the construction of selfhood through family is also taken away, and people are left without a framework to construct and contextualize their own life through autobiographical time. As she puts it, 'family life tends to provide a critical mnemonic infrastructure'. Sarah O'Brien, 'Remembering Nora: Interpreting the Oral Testimony of a Magdalene Laundry Survivor through the Lens of Collective Memory', *Oral History* 50, no. 2 (2022), 41–51. Also see Delyth Edwards, *Cultural, Autobiographical and Absent Memories of Orphanhood: The Girls of Nazareth House Remember* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). On the idea of the dead 'working', see Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*.

[56] Erll, 'Locating Family', 307.

2
Graves

A Family Grave

In the mid-1960s, the Wiggins family sought to create a memorial for the family members they had lost. Four out of nine Wiggins siblings had died young: two children, Mary and Jim, as infants, and two young men, Alan and Arthur, in service in the Second World War. In the 1960s, Jean Barker (1933–2020, née Wiggins) and her family sought to unite these four with their deceased parents through a stone memorial at Leeds General Cemetery, a site less than a mile from where the family lived across various addresses in the Woodhouse and Hyde Park districts of the city. Stone as a material provided the possibility of something durable and lasting. But the family were thwarted. When I interviewed her in 2018, the timeline wasn't entirely clear in Jean's mind. She recalled what had happened in the wake of her mother's death, in 1963:

> you see my mother's grave, they have decided to mow over it, turn it, you know, and we were very cross because we had got a stone made and she wanted to put, we wanted to put, mum on it and dad and the two children that were lost [yeah] and we said we will put that and then we will put Alan and Arthur on, and I couldn't because they wouldn't let us have a grave anymore [oh], it was just a plot, you couldn't put a stone on.[1]

At the time the family were arranging this memorial, the University of Leeds was turning the cemetery into a green space. Having taken over the site in 1956, the process of contacting plot owners took place from 1964, with some limited compensation offered to plot owners who filed a claim. The university removed most headstones and memorials in 1968–9, and the site reopened as St George's Fields in 1969 as part of the university campus.[2] This process marked a 'transfer of

[1] Jean Barker, interview with Laura King, 16 May 2018.

[2] For more information on the history of the cemetery, see University of Leeds Special Collections, https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/482805 [accessed 18 May 2023]; Imogen Gerard and Kelsie Root, 'The Dead and the Living Interconnected on Campus', Living with Dying, 28/7/2017, https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/2017/07/28/the-dead-and-the-living-interconnected/.

territory', with families unable to accurately locate the gravesites of their relatives or use the space to remember their loved ones in the way they had planned.[3]

I asked Jean more about this episode in the family's history when I returned to interview her: she recalled that her mother had wanted a memorial for all the family members who had died, but Jean thought she and her siblings had only started this process when her mum, Edith, died herself in 1963, aged 68. Remembering her mother meant remembering her siblings alongside her. Jean recalled 'we really thought we'd get a memorial at last and clear the debt'. By this time, plans to wind down the cemetery were well underway, though a few burials were still taking place.[4] Jean recalled that it was her brother, Jack, and sister, Ruth, who took the lead:

> we were willing to pay for it because all the family were grown up and earning wages. We'd got all this arranged, we got the funeral director whoever he was to get it all carved. It wasn't finished, but it was carved. Then there were, big hooha in the university, I don't know what it was about, I was too young to know. But, they said they were taking part of the, the graveyard for the university grounds, and there were people, with half graves there, you know. Oh we were livid. Well my elder brother and sisters—I couldn't do owt. Jack and Ruth created about it and said, you can't do that, we've got a stone cut, you know for my mam and that. And it's, but it's university property now. And I remember.

Jean had actually been in her thirties at the time this took place. I think her saying she was 'too young to know', later adding 'I was only a kid' and again that she was 'only eight or nine', mistakenly remembering her age at the time, reflects her sense of a lack of agency and control, a lack of power to help get the memorial the family wanted.[5] In fact, she herself wrote a letter to the solicitors, following a newspaper article in the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. Jean asked whether their headstone, costing nearly £50, would be removed shortly after installation, and noted the family had previously 'enquired deeply' and received reassurance that though the

[3] Tina Richardson, 'Hiding the Bodies: Geographic Repression in Higher Educational Space', *Space and Culture* 22, no. 4 (2019), 464, doi:10.1177/1206331217751777.

[4] Thirty-five burials took place in 1963, and 295 in the 1960s as a whole, much fewer than in previous decades. See https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/Leeds%20General%20Cemetery%20Burial%20Registers%20Index?selection=Leeds%20General%20Cemetery%20Burial%20Registers%20Index&archiveDescriptionIndex=unknown&archiveLatest=1960&archiveLatest_min=1960&archiveLatest_max=1969 [accessed 18 May 2023].

[5] Jean Barker, interview with Laura King, 7 June 2018. For a discussion of the meanings of misremembering ages, see Keira Gomez, 'Misremembering and personal truth: trauma and healing in family history', talk at 'Telling Small Stories, Telling Big Stories' workshop, online, available at https://historianscollaborate.com/family-history-workshops/ [accessed 16 September 2022].

site would be turned into a park, all gravestones would be kept.[6] This was not the case: plans for removing all stones were well underway by the late 1950s.[7] There is also a record of Jean's sister Ruth phoning to make enquiries, but no further details about their claim and complaint are recorded in the university archives.[8] No compensation was paid to the Wiggins family.[9]

Overall, Jean remembered feeling 'a bit disgusted'. The family were told they could use a book of remembrance: Jean retorted 'When they said you can go to the library and see the name in a book, I thought, gee wizz, that's a treat, you know. It's nothing is it?' She remembered they had 'Nowhere to put a pot or flowers, not even a square cut out, didn't leave nothing, just grassed it over. It's, it's wrong you know […] That was the university for you.' I can't find any evidence that a book of remembrance was created; plans for it are the only records I've identified.[10] Jean felt that though the family had enough money to pay for a memorial stone, they hadn't had the resources to make any further challenge to the university on this point, to get the space to remember their loved ones that they'd wanted. When I interviewed her in 2018, Jean had ended up feeling unsure even about where her mother was buried: whether she had indeed been buried at Woodhouse, and whether the bodies of those who had been buried there had been dug up and taken away. 'I really don't understand what happened there', she added.[11]

A stone would have united these six family members, who had died between 1928 and 1963. Families have long brought relatives together in family graves. Such a practice, of family members in the same plot and gravesites as near each other as possible, reflects an emphasis on the family in death as well as life. Such positioning gives a sense of reunion in an afterlife of some sort.[12] Family lineages are reasserted and strengthened.[13]

[6] Letter from Jean Barker, date stamped 2 November 1964, A13(1), in MS421/6/2/1/13, Leeds General Cemetery Collections, Special Collections, University of Leeds.

[7] Letter dated 2 July 1958, in box 4/4, MS421/6/1/2, Leeds General Cemetery Collections, Special Collections, University of Leeds.

[8] Note A3(9), in MS421/6/2/1/3; table A26/9 and 10, in MS421/6/2/1/26; table A3, in MS421/6/2/5; index card for Mrs R. Pyrah, reference A3/9, in MS421/6/2/9, all Leeds General Cemetery Collections, Special Collections, University of Leeds.

[9] Compensation was only paid for loss of burial space and the termination of maintenance contracts. See Q&A document sent to interested parties, in box 1/4, MS421/6/1/2, Leeds General Cemetery Collections, Special Collections, University of Leeds.

[10] See letters in box 2/4, MS421/6/1/2, Leeds General Cemetery Collections, Special Collections, University of Leeds.

[11] Jean Barker, interview with Laura King, 7 June 2018.

[12] Julie-Marie Strange, '"Tho' Lost to Sight, to Memory Dear": Pragmatism, Sentimentality and Working-Class Attitudes towards the Grave, c.1875–1914', *Mortality* 8, no. 2 (2003), 144–5, doi:10.1080/1357627031000087398.

[13] Sian Anthony, 'Materialized Genealogy: From Anonymous Cemetery Populations to Creating Alternative Narratives about Individuals and Family Burial Space', *Genealogy* 2, no. 3 (2018), 27, doi:10.3390/genealogy2030027.

Six Deaths in the Family

Jim, officially James, had died at nineteen months old in 1928, before Jean was born. Jean, in her memoir, described how he had been admitted with malnutrition to the hospital, where he developed whooping cough and died.[14] Six others share his plot: his maternal grandparents, William and Emily Balmforth, and his uncle John Balmforth, plus three others whose connection to the family is unclear.[15] Ten years later, in 1938, the family lost Mary, aged 3, the youngest of the nine. She died of pneumonia: this event Jean remembered, as well as that Mary was 'just like a little angel'.[16] Jean thought she recalled the funeral, the 'little box like a shoe box, and that was for Mary', and the horse and cart that took it away.[17]

Mary and her parents, Edith and William, were buried in the same plot.[18] Jean's dad died when Jean was little too, in 1945. A tram driver, his health deteriorated as he fought chronic tuberculosis, and though he had improved through summers in a convalescent hospital, the death of his two sons, Alan and Arthur, during the Second World War 'properly finished him'. Jean recalled a particularly upsetting and 'cruel' episode in which her parents had been sent a bill for a pound after their son's death, to cover the cost of a military blanket lost in the confusion of war. In different accounts, Jean recalled this once as a blanket of Alan's and once belonging to Arthur. Both times, once in her memoir and later in an interview with me, she described her dad's fury with the same phrase, that he 'went berserk', when he went to the war office in Leeds to give them a piece of his mind, despite his frailty.[19] It was an episode that stuck in the family's collective memory. He died the following year.

Alan and Arthur had died within weeks of each other in 1944. The British state during the Second World War purposefully used language of heroism and military sacrifice to compensate for families' lack of control and ownership of their relatives' dead bodies, for both civilian and military deaths.[20] As in the First

[14] Jean Barker (née Wiggins), 'Childhood As I Remember It', [n.d.], LQPB BAK, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.

[15] These could have been friends: they lived nearby, and the burials of the Milnes took place between the burials of the Balmforths and Jim Wiggins. But as Strange notes, grave space was often sold and exchanged between families—a pragmatic move which did not render the emotional relationship between living and dead relatives any less meaningful. Strange, '"Tho' Lost to Sight"'. Note—William's name has been mistakenly noted as 'Bamforth' in the original register. Plot 14199, Leeds General Cemetery Burial Registers Index, https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/Leeds%20General%20Cemetery%20Burial%20Registers%20Index?archiveLocationOfOriginals=%2214199%22.

[16] Barker, 'Childhood As I Remember It'.

[17] Jean Barker, interview with Laura King, 7 June 2018.

[18] Plot 4832A, Leeds General Cemetery Burial Registers Index, https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/Leeds%20General%20Cemetery%20Burial%20Registers%20Index?archiveLocationOfOriginals=%224832A%22.

[19] Barker, 'Childhood As I Remember It'; Jean Barker, interview with Laura King, 7 June 2018.

[20] Julie Rugg, 'Managing "Civilian Deaths Due to War Operations": Yorkshire Experiences during World War II', *Twentieth Century British History* 15, no. 2 (2004), 154, doi:10.1093/tcbh/15.2.152.

World War, families were often unable to repatriate the dead, and had little say in where they were buried and what their graves might look like.[21] Alan, at nineteen, had been serving in the Royal Air Force and had been killed during a bombing raid over Germany. He was buried in a temporary gravesite near Berlin and moved to a permanent cemetery built after the end of the war. Arthur died aged 24 whilst serving in what was then Burma. He was buried in a British military cemetery in then Rangoon. Jean felt the loss of these two brothers particularly keenly and had spent a lot of time finding out more about their service and experiences abroad. She had travelled to visit Alan's grave in Berlin with her cousin, in 1996, with support from the British Legion. Jean had visited the crash site and cemeteries. She wrote an account of this visit for her records, noting 'At both of these cemeteries I saw Alan in his flying suit. A lad of 19 whose pals called him "smiley". I knew he knew I was there.' Jean laid a wreath on his grave, and read a poem she had written, 'Love's sweet effects', a copy of which she kept in her records, and another copy she left in an envelope attached to the wreath.

Jean had also visited memorials to Alan's squadron, which had been based in Waddington, Lincolnshire. In 1993, Jean wrote up an account of a visit which included meeting the squadron leader in the local pub. Jean described how it felt like a 'time warp':

> I just felt that Alan would have been there [at the pub] whenever he had the chance. Perhaps trying to forget the war for a few hours. I know if I had shut my eyes I would have been surrounded by young airmen, laughing and joking as though there were no tomorrow. As chillingly for many there was no tomorrow.

On that visit, and on other occasions too, Jean took comfort from visiting the airmen's chapel in Lincoln cathedral and finding Alan's name there. Photographs of all these graves and memorials were carefully recorded in Jean's scrapbooks and folders about her family. Through her visits, as well as these recording practices, Jean found a way to connect to Alan, to 'see' him again, and to feel a strong emotional connection with him.

Though Jean wanted to visit her brother Arthur's grave in Myanmar, she felt the journey would be too long and the climate too hot for her. She felt very pleased when her granddaughter visited instead, in 2011. Jean wrote a note about this for her records, explaining that whilst on a year abroad as part of her degree, her granddaughter and her friends had been travelling in south-east Asia:

[21] On experiences in the First World War and Second World Wars respectively, see Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); Lucy Noakes, *Dying for the Nation: Death, Grief and Bereavement in Second World War Britain* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

> Georgie knew her great uncle Arthur was buried there, with the help of their tour operator […] they got visors [visas] to visit Arthur's grave. […] What a lovely thought!! […] Thank you Georgie I am sure Arthur knew you were there. Love Grandma.

Georgie had been provided with a wreath by the War Graves Commission, which she laid on the grave and photographed for Jean. Jean's photographs of this visit show a message left by Georgie: 'You were never forgotten and always loved x'. Jean had previously written to the military authorities to request a photo of the grave, both in 1992 and in 1996. In a note, Jean wrote of having a photo of Arthur's grave, 'I feel I have been to see him now.'[22] Yet fifteen years later, her granddaughter's visit held even more emotional significance. In our first interview, Jean's son interjected that this trip had been 'a big thing for my mum'. Jean said 'I am glad we had been, I felt like saying we have come here at last, you know, 'cause…I can't explain it really.' Though Georgie had been born decades after Arthur's death, the biological and emotional family tie between Georgie and Jean had meant that her visiting his grave was of great significance to the family, and especially to Jean. The 'we'—as Jean puts it, 'we have come here at last'—shows the ways in which the remembrance of kin via gravesites can be an intergenerational, family practice. Her granddaughter's visit was as significant as Jean herself visiting. Trips by family members to both brothers' graves were important because Jean felt Alan and Arthur could 'know' that someone from their family had been to 'see' them.

(Not) Reunited in Death

For Jean and her family, then, graves and memorials have been a crucial way to mark deaths and to continue to remember those they had lost. Graves and memorials have been particularly emotionally significant for Jean and her family because Jim, Mary, Alan, and Arthur all died at a young age, and because Alan and Arthur died overseas, in military service. Alan and Arthur's deaths were surrounded by a particular and well-established layer of community and national remembrance because they died military deaths; there were additional forms of remembrance for the family to engage with, often organized by the armed forces and the state. Yet, the family had mixed feelings about these: Edith, Jean's mother, had been ambivalent towards the roll of honour certificates sent to the family for Alan and Arthur after their deaths: 'Put them away. They're only pieces of paper' Jean remembered her saying.[23]

[22] Personal collections of Jean Barker.

[23] Barker, 'Childhood As I Remember It'. On the rejection of public forms of remembrance for the war dead, see Martin Bashforth, 'Absent Fathers, Present Histories', in *People and Their Pasts: Public History Today*, edited by Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 210.

Jean sought to actively remember these two men for the rest of her life. Proximity to the deceased could provide a consolation for loss, the materiality of the dead body the very reason why cemeteries could matter so much.[24] Many bereaved people felt strong attachment to the bodies of their dead, seeing them as sentient, as Jean did of Alan and Arthur. Her and her granddaughter's visits to their graves were for Jean a visit to them as beloved brothers. She felt as if she had communicated in some way with Alan and Arthur, on a spiritual level, even though fifty or sixty years had passed and their bodies would have been far through the process of decomposition.[25] Their graves, although—perhaps because—they were difficult to visit, were particularly special to the family, providing a way to connect spiritually and emotionally with them.

The family hoped a memorial stone at Woodhouse Cemetery would bring some of this emotional and spiritual meaning from Alan and Arthur's overseas burial sites to their home neighbourhood in Leeds, and allow the family to feel those connections more regularly. Edith, Jean's mum, had found ways to make these connections between her sons buried far away and their home:

> Mam once said her favourite hymn was "All in an April Evening". It was years later I learned why she loved it so. Arthur once wrote home very home-sick and said, "The Himalayas tonight Mam, are just like Woodhouse ridge on an April evening."[26]

Arthur had died far away from his home in Leeds. For his mother, her son's words, the lyrics of a hymn, and the scene of Woodhouse ridge, a green space not far from the family's house, provided solace and a way to remember her son as connected to his hometown of Leeds and to a place near the family, rather than where he died and was buried, in Burma. The unlikely linking of the Himalayas to a piece of woodland in Leeds, as steep a hillside as it might be, provided comfort to a homesick young man and in turn to his mother when he died. An initial comfort in the wake of his death, Arthur's mother then linked his relationship with his home of Leeds with a piece of music which then came to help her remember him in the years after his death.

A stone would also have united these deaths with the other deceased family members and brought a sense of longevity to the memory of these six people. The thwarting of this plan illuminates the ways in which graves and memorials matter to families. The letters from many families about the closure of the cemetery

[24] Julie Rugg, 'Further Remarks on Modern Sepulture: Twenty Years of Cemetery Studies and Eight Core Questions Defining Cemetery Research', *Eastern and Northern European Journal of Death Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022), 24.

[25] Julie Rugg, 'Consolation, Individuation and Consumption: Towards a Theory of Cyclicality in English Funerary Practice', *Cultural and Social History* 15, no. 1 (2018), 65, doi:10.1080/14780038.2018.1427339.

[26] Barker, 'Childhood As I Remember It'.

demonstrate those strong feelings. Whilst some welcomed plans to transform the site, as it had become neglected, others wrote of their 'deep distress'.[27] One letter ended 'Please don't do it', another with a postscript 'I hope you realise this is very upsetting'.[28] Relatives were troubled about their lack of access and ability to identify graves, their inability to be buried with their relatives, and the financial implications of the change of use of the site.

The Legacy of a Lack of Family Grave

In 2018, in our interview, Jean told me she hadn't visited the cemetery site for a long time. When Jean described the family's experience—I hadn't known about it before the interview—I was uncomfortably aware of my own position as a member of the university and wondered how Jean felt about that. Jean seemed happy to be candid about her anger over the university's actions in the past. But she also doubted her knowledge of the university takeover when I asked her questions, even when I reassured her that she was right about what had happened, and that what I was interested in was her family's response, something about which, of course, she knew everything and I nothing. I returned to the topic towards the end of our second interview, asking her whether she thought the university might find some way to make amends to families like hers, whose gravestones had been removed, and plans for further burials and memorials prevented. She said, 'I've no interest now', and on the question of any amends, said 'Oh I don't think they will. Too far gone.' She was philosophical about what had happened, summarizing 'that's life, love'.[29] Jean changed the subject, asking me about the audio recording I was making of the interview. Perhaps there was some suspicion here, though Jean seemed to enjoy our interviews very much and repeatedly asked me to return to talk more. She trusted me to borrow some of her family papers, to make copies in my own time, and invited me to take whatever I wanted.

Jean and her family's commitment to commemorating their relatives' deaths and remembering their lives shifted through Jean's life: at the time of each death had been the question of marking it, particularly for Alan and Arthur, buried far away. In the 1960s, following Edith's death, the family had returned to the question of memorializing their father and four siblings. And Jean had again returned to it in the 1990s, in her sixties, when she visited Alan's grave, and wrote for more information about and photos of Arthur's. Yet, ultimately, the choice of whether

[27] Letter A42(3), in MS421/6/2/1/42, Leeds General Cemetery Collections, Special Collections, University of Leeds.

[28] Letter A11(14), in MS421/6/2/1/11, and letter A25, in MS421/6/2/1/25, Leeds General Cemetery Collections, Special Collections, University of Leeds. Both original emphasis.

[29] Jean Barker, interview with Laura King, 7 June 2018.

and how to use 'their' cemetery had been taken away from them: 'we never really got an insignia for them', said Jean.[30]

While I'm writing about this family, I visit St George's Fields, as it now is. The original walls surrounding the site are still there, keeping the space either hidden from or protected from the busyness of the rest of the campus, or both, depending on your perspective. When relatives wrote in response to announcements about the university takeover, one of the key objections was the idea of the site becoming just another thoroughfare or student 'playground' on campus.[31] It's impossible to find the burial plot—the map on the university website is too difficult to decipher on my phone.[32] I look at the gravestones that have been repurposed to make up some of the paths, wondering what visitors must have made of them. Would you have hoped your relative's gravestone had been kept like this, rather than being crushed to rubble for landscaping the site? Or preferred that to the ignominy of being walked over by generations of visitors, students, and staff (like me) since? On these stones are burials recorded up until at least 1953: stones which had only been marked around ten years prior were taken up and reused for paths. Would the two security officers and their dog that stroll past as I read the names on these stones provide reassurance the space is being looked after, or be off-putting for any relatives visiting today?

The next day, I take a closer look at the burial map online and find plot 4832A, where Jean's parents and sister Mary were buried. It's on the edge of the cemetery boundary, in the south-west corner of the site. The 'A' of the plot number along with its location at the very edge of the cemetery suggests that the plot was retrospectively squeezed in as the cemetery was reaching capacity. Jean's brother Jim is in plot 14199, also on the very west edge of the cemetery, though towards its north-west corner. When I asked Jean about visiting once the site had been converted, she recalled 'you just had to follow the wall'.[33] Jean's family were lucky in one way: with both graves being situated almost alongside the boundary wall, they have been easier than most other plots to locate, at least roughly, after the gravestones were removed. Yet perhaps in another way, this is the most unfortunate position: plot 4832A is one of the closest to the Henry Price halls of residence, built as the cemetery was being converted, in 1964. The map suggests the Wiggins' grave is within seven feet of the building: in the archives, I find acknowledgement that relatives may have been concerned by the new halls which

[30] Jean Barker, interview with Laura King, 7 June 2018.

[31] For example, letter XA/32/9, in MS421/6/2/1/32, Leeds General Cemetery Collections, Special Collections, University of Leeds.

[32] The map is available on the University of Leeds Special Collections website: https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections/view/1926 [accessed 18 May 2023].

[33] Jean Barker, interview with Laura King, 7 June 2018.

Figure 2.1 The rough site of the grave of Edith, William, and Mary Wiggins, in 2022, on the University of Leeds campus. Photo taken by author.

jutted out to overhang the cemetery.[34] Visiting again, I can pretty much identify its location (Figure 2.1), using the building, a few remaining gravestones, and the map to make a rough guess. It's not a straightforward process.

In trying to visit the graves of the Wiggins family in this way, I'm in some sense putting myself in the position of families who have relatives there. I can't experience the emotions they might feel, but I can go through the same process of mapping and working out that they would have to go through to find relatives. I can experience the smells, sights, and sounds of the space today: the relative quiet, but also the smell of vomit as I pass through one entrance to St George's Fields. It must have been tricky to navigate for anyone younger than Jean who hadn't regularly visited the graves there whilst it had been a cemetery, and perhaps might recall the position of the plot, by retracing their steps along the boundary wall. Even then, it must have been impossible to feel confident of being in the right place.[35]

[34] Letter to A. E. L Parnis of the University Grants Committee, dated 23 April 1964, in box 2/4, MS421/6/1/2, Leeds General Cemetery Collections, Special Collections, University of Leeds.
[35] Richardson, 'Hiding the Bodies', 463–4.

The Contested Meanings of Graves

Cemeteries became less important in the first decades of the twentieth century, as the home became a more important space for mourning and remembrance.[36] An individual's 'deathscape' of mourning, grief, and remembrance can be complex and situated in many places and spaces.[37] Some people regularly used graveyards and cemeteries, and later crematoria too, with trips there on special occasions or even weekly or more frequent visits used as a way to maintain an emotional connection with the dead.[38] For some groups of people, there was no decrease in the use of graves and cemeteries over time: many Gypsy and Traveller communities have a strong attachment to the gravesite, with graves meticulously looked after.[39] Though there are differences between different Gypsy and Traveller groups, as Gemma Challenger notes in her report of twenty-first-century practices, 'For a traditionally nomadic community the grave is the final or only resting place and the ultimate marker of the deceased.' These are places with family connections that may stretch over hundreds of years.[40] Romany Gypsy Maggie Smith-Bendell recalled spending her work dinner break in her own family cemetery in Paulton, Somerset, spending time with her grandad, aunt, and uncle, all of whom died in the 1940s and 1950s. Explaining Gypsy customs more broadly, she describes how depending on where the person died, 'the funeral may have many miles to travel back to the family cemetery'. She explained that graves are very rarely without flowers all year round, and family and friends regularly visit, concluding that 'Respect for our lost ones is one of our principles.'[41] As Amanda Reed, who is from an English Gypsy background, puts it, when relatives die 'we still see them as being part of our family so we would still go and visit the graveside regularly'.[42]

[36] Sarah Tarlow, 'An Archaeology of Remembering: Death, Bereavement and the First World War', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 7, no. 1 (1997), 116, doi:10.1017/S0959774300001499.

[37] Avril Maddrell and James D. Sidaway, 'Introduction: Bringing a Spatial Lens to Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance', in *Deathscapes: Spaces for Death, Dying, Mourning and Remembrance*, edited by Avril Maddrell and James D. Sidaway (Ashgate, 2010), 1–16.

[38] Julie Rugg, 'Choice and Constraint in the Burial Landscape: Re-Evaluating Twentieth-Century Commemoration in the English Churchyard', *Mortality* 18, no. 3 (2013), 220–1, doi:10.1080/1357627 5.2013.819322; Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning* (Cresset Press, 1965), 48–50; Elizabeth Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way of Death', in *Death, Ritual and Bereavement*, edited by Ralph Houlbrooke (Routledge, 1989), 205–6.

[39] Leeds Gypsy and Traveller Exchange has an archive of many materials relating to Gypsy and Traveller people in the West Yorkshire area, including hundreds of photos of beautifully maintained graves. For more information see http://leedsgateheritage.com/ [accessed 19 April 2019].

[40] Gemma Challenger, 'Cemetery Culture and Traditions' (Friends, Families and Travellers, n.d.), http://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Cemetery-Culture-and-Traditions_v2.pdf.

[41] Maggie Smith-Bendell, *Our Forgotten Years: A Gypsy Woman's Life on the Road* (University of Hertfordshire Press, 2009), 164, 221–2.

[42] Amanda Reed, 'Find Out More' document, *Remembrance* exhibition, Abbey House Museum, 2018–19.

The emotional significance of the gravesite and cemetery could be exposed when it was under threat. Julie-Marie Strange's research into working-class people's use of graves in the Victorian and Edwardian period points to something else significant, that graveyards and cemeteries were deeply important to the families of those buried there, even if they didn't visit and even if they were, in the eyes of officials, 'neglected'.[43] Letters in the Leeds General Cemetery collections made the same point: 'People would say it is a forgotten grave but because it isn't visited doesn't mean it it's forgotten', argued one letter writer.[44] Another described how knowing her grandparents' graves were respected was enough without regular visits, and that reducing a cemetery's value to its number of visitors was inadequate, as a cemetery is 'the last resting place of fellow human beings, whose memorials, when no living person remembers them, it becomes even more necessary to respect'.[45] There may be guilt at work here, of families feeling regret for not visiting or caring for gravesites more. Yet, the kin of those buried in Woodhouse objected to the university's plans to take over the site and repurpose the land because, even if they didn't visit, it was important to know their loved ones were recognized, named, and *could* be visited. A grave, memorial, or site such as where ashes were scattered mattered in the imagination as well as in physical reality.

The absence of a grave altogether, where human remains are buried and where a person's name is recorded, or conversely lack of knowledge of it, can be a source of sadness. Bill Rollinson never knew his sister: she had died before he was born, at just three months old, in 1936. His parents' first child, this little girl was born with spina bifida. Bill explained,

> she never left hospital, three months, never left hospital, my mom used to go every day to see her and I remember her saying that they never explained really…what it was that was wrong with her and…and you know at that time she was going, they knew she was going to die they were just waiting for her to die in hospital it was, it was never, really explained anything about it. I mean now a baby like that wouldn't die there's treatment and operations and things and it's not a, it isn't, a fatal, disability at all but…So within a year of being married they'd had this baby who'd…lived three months and died.[46]

[43] Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 193.

[44] Letter XA30/15, in MS421/6/2/1/30, Leeds General Cemetery Collections, Special Collections, University of Leeds.

[45] Letter dated 5 December 1964, in box 1/4, MS421/6/1/2, Leeds General Cemetery Collections, Special Collections, University of Leeds.

[46] Bill Rollinson, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 8 November 2017.

As for many families who have lost a child, the question of whether that child was spoken of was an important one.[47] Bill said his mother never spoke of her, to him at least: 'it feels to me like it was all supressed and put away, put that back in the box and we don't talk about it which I find odd'. He couldn't understand this impulse and thought about what he'd have done in the same situation: 'if we'd have had a child who died, within months, you'd remember it and you'd talk about the child and events you know it wouldn't, whereas that was just sort of a line was drawn under it'. He wished he could have spoken to his parents: 'I also wish […] there were people I could have talked to more about my sister who died…and why that wasn't spoken about more, that that feels like a very unsatisfactory…episode, you know'. Though some families chose not to speak openly of babies who had died, to their siblings at least, others did so regularly; unlike in Bill's family, both Ted Walker and Jean Pearson in their memoirs of 1930s childhoods recalled regular visits to their siblings' graves.[48]

But Bill hadn't even known his sister's name. When Bill decided to find out more about her, he searched for her birth and death records using the name 'Judith'. He searched on the family history website Ancestry, and tried to find out where she was buried, and came up with nothing, until:

> I was sat down in the library one day and I was thinking about it and it suddenly came to me her name's not Judith it's, it's Eileen, and I don't know where that came from just a bizarre thing with my memory I suppose, and I looked up Eileen and I instantly got it, got the details. That was so bizarre sat at this computer in the library and I was thinking, oh my god what's happening to me.

Once he'd made this discovery, he could find out more: 'but it was really nice that I was actually able to, able to actually find her and yeah she lived for three months…so at some point I'd like, would like to find her, test out where she was buried if you can, but I think it's going to be difficult'.

Bill did know some details about his sister, mostly from his other sister, Val. He remembered being told about the baby being in hospital, how his mother would visit every day, and how what happened hadn't been properly explained to his parents. He knew which church graveyard she'd been buried in, though he'd only found that out much later. But more precise information, such as how long she lived and when exactly she was born and died, had come from research. There were no objects, photos, or any other traces of her as far as Bill knew. Bill was frustrated he couldn't find the exact place she'd been buried, one of the few

[47] On whether families chose to talk about children who had died in this period, see Laura King, 'Remembering Deceased Children in Family Life: The School Case of Poor Harold (1920–31)', *History Workshop Journal* 93, no. 1 (2022), 225–44, doi:10.1093/hwj/dbac006.

[48] Ted Walker, *The High Path* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 5–6; Jean Pearson, *Why Waste It on a Girl?* (Yorkshire Art Circus, 1988), 51–2.

connections he could potentially make with his sister beyond researching her life and death in official records. Bill tried to find her grave:

> I went there, and, with a couple of friends of mine who live down there who I visit… we went searching for the grave I thought it would be really interesting to see the grave, you know and un- unfortunately all the graves from like 1930s time were, you know had been flattened there was no headstones or anything so I contacted the vicar and then I contacted the church warden to ask for records, and they said that all the records had been lost at some point from that church, along with other things, they said.

He thought the records might have been lost in a burglary.[49] He also speculated that perhaps Eileen had been buried in an unmarked grave, and that it might be impossible to work out precisely where she was buried. He pondered that 'I'm not sure why it's important but it is.'[50] Being unable to feel connected to either Eileen's gravesite or her name recorded somewhere was something of a loss for Bill in itself.[51]

Bill couldn't understand why his mother hadn't

> made more of the fact she's got a baby buried in this church, you know, we never went to the church, I didn't even know, that it was there 'til a long long long time after but you'd have thought, you know, it, two or three times a year they'd have gone to the, to the church, wouldn't you? It was a really a… closed chapter.

The church was 'a small church not far from where they would have lived'. For Bill, his mum's apparent lack of use of the church and grave was particularly surprising given 'my mom was quite religious'; she had come from a 'prim and proper' family who were regular churchgoers. She had been 'involved' with her local church in her later years, up until the time she died, around 2000.[52]

Bill didn't talk about his dad so much: mothers were the ones expected to do more of the mourning, grieving, and remembering, even if fathers did feel the loss of their children extremely deeply. Yet we don't know if his parents did visit his sister's grave. Perhaps they went without Bill; perhaps knowing where she was, safe in a grave nearby, provided comfort. Bill imagined how frightening and sad it must have been for his parents, and particularly for his mum as she went through her next pregnancy; thankfully, Bill's sister who came along next was

[49] Bill Rollinson, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 8 November 2017.
[50] Visit to Bill by Laura King, notes, 19 June 2018.
[51] On the importance of both of those things, see Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton University Press, 2015).
[52] Bill Rollinson, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 8 November 2017.

fine. What remembering Eileen in private, or indeed trying to forget, meant for Bill's parents is something we can never know.

Bill concluded that 'it was just always funny, there were always like the three of us but actually there weren't the three, there were the four of us but we literally didn't know about that for ages, and it's just bizarre to me'.[53] His loss of his sister, even though he had never known her, felt important and unresolved; he thought visiting her grave might help him to think and feel his way through his relationship with his sister. But because the burial records had been lost, it was unlikely to happen.

Naming and Remembering Across Generations

Bill's experience, of discovering his sister's name and at least some details of her burial, if not the exact location, point to the importance of the dead being named and their death marked.[54] The lack of name on a grave for pauper burials had long been difficult for poorer people: a decent send off and spending on a funeral might be prioritized over the cost of a private grave and headstone. Some families saved up afterwards for headstones to be placed on graves retrospectively, to solve this immediate competing demand on families' finances at the time of a death.[55] Being named on a headstone was increasingly likely for those from poorer backgrounds in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[56] For those bereaved during both world wars, a name on a memorial had to suffice instead of the grave and body itself; seeing a husband, son, brother, or friend's name inscribed in stone on a memorial could provide comfort. But, conversely, these memorials could remind the bereaved of their loss and the lack of control over and access to the grave itself.[57] For vast numbers of servicemen across the British Empire, in both world wars, and many, many others who lost their lives in civilian service to the war, being named on a memorial, never mind an individual grave, was a privilege not afforded by the British authorities.[58] Whether an individual was named, and where they were named, was dependent on class, nationality, and race.

Age mattered too: babies like Eileen were more likely than older children to be buried in shared, unmarked graves, particularly if parents hadn't taken out burial insurance quickly enough to provide money for the burial. Those stillborn or

[53] Bill Rollinson, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 8 November 2017.

[54] On naming, particularly, see Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*.

[55] Strange, '"Tho' Lost to Sight"'; Julie-Marie Strange, 'Only a Pauper Whom Nobody Owns: Reassessing the Pauper Grave c. 1880–1914', *Past & Present*, no. 178 (2003), 148–75, doi:10.1093/past/178.1.148.

[56] Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 311.

[57] On the meanings of memorials, see Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 78–116.

[58] John Siblon, 'Black & Asian Soldiers and the "White Man's War"', History Workshop Online, 26 April 2021, https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/war-military/commonwealth-war-graves/.

who died in the first hours of their birth, who perhaps remained unnamed, were rarely accorded a grave space of their own. Leeds General Cemetery, where many of the Wiggins family members had been buried, provided space for the burial of babies who had died at nearby Leeds Maternity Hospital. The biggest cause of death in the cemetery is stillbirth, with over 10,000 babies buried there—over ten per cent of burials.[59] These babies were often buried in shared plots with other stillborn babies, sometimes with other adults in a common grave, usually with no gravestone, and were almost all only identified by a surname. The question of how and where to bury a stillborn baby had long been one of confusion and sometimes secrecy.[60] Towards the end of the twentieth century, dealing with the deaths of stillborn and neonatal babies changed radically, as funerals, burials, and cremations and the very naming of babies miscarried or stillborn reflected a changing sense of personhood beginning earlier in pregnancy. Names mattered: knowing a name, seeing a name on a grave, connected to a feeling that that life mattered in some way.

The grave of Bill's sister mattered because Bill had no other ways of feeling a link to her. It mattered *because* he hadn't known her, because their lives had not overlapped. This sense of creating a link to someone personally unknown was particularly important to Bill because it was his sibling, his sister, but family historians frequently use graves for information about their relatives, and to feel connected to ancestors unknown to them. Geoff Hardwick visited graves regularly, particularly those of his mum and his two partners who had died. Geoff told us 'it's an annual thing', at Christmas and on the anniversaries of their deaths. But graves had also been crucial to learning about his family history, something he had previously known little about. He had found gravestones with his surname, Hardwick, in at least two different churchyards near where he'd lived, and was starting to try and work out whether they were relatives or not. Geoff had also found the name of a relative, Eldred Hardwick, on a First World War memorial. Graves, for Geoff, helped to build up a sense of family history, heritage, and belonging that hadn't been available to him previously, partly because he had lost contact with his dad, who left the family when Geoff was eleven.[61]

Maureen Jessop too sought out family graves of those she had only known as a young child, or not at all: her mother's brother Harold had died aged 10, and Maureen had taken her children and grandchildren to visit his grave. Her

[59] For an analysis of the causes of death, see Kelsie Root and Imogen Gerrard, 'Top Ten Ways to Die in Victorian Britain', Living with Dying, 9 August 2017, https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/2017/08/09/top-ten-ways-to-die-in-victorian-britain/. Records of the stillborn infants in the site are here: https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/Leeds%20General%20Cemetery%20Burial%20Registers%20Index?selection=Leeds%20General%20Cemetery%20Burial%20Registers%20Index&browseQuery=Search&archiveDescriptionIndex=stillborn [accessed 18 May 2023].

[60] Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty*, 239–45.

[61] Geoff Hardwick (with Vanessa Manby), interview with Laura King, 18 December 2017.

grandad Tom's grave was also well-known within her family because of its misnaming of him. Maureen described how 'One source of his annoyance came from people who got his name wrong—"my name's Tom not Thomas"'. He now lies in a shared grave, beneath a headstone that marks the life of 'Thomas Cooper'. The consensus about this abomination, Maureen wrote in a blog post, was '"e'll be playing 'ell wherever 'e is!'[62] Maureen visited her dad's grave occasionally, but graves were perhaps more significant to her to build her knowledge of and connection with relatives she hadn't really known or hadn't known at all. She described how she touched old buildings and gravestones to feel a connection to those who had lived and died in that place long ago.[63]

Burial, Cremation, and Places of Memory

The twentieth century can be characterized as one of change in Britain in terms of how bodies were disposed of after death as cremation eclipsed burial by the middle of the century. The twentieth century saw the potential for the uncoupling of the site of human remains and the most significant site of remembrance for that person. The First World War brought in the use of memorials with the names of the dead inscribed on them, local to their homes and often their families as a substitute for (easy) access to a loved one's grave itself, a substitute to stand for bodies which remained in the place they had died. This practice was extended in the Second World War—as was the case for Jean and her family when Alan and Arthur died. The rise of cremation also challenged the link between remains and remembrance.[64] Cremation extended sites that could be used beyond the cemetery: the crematorium itself, and perhaps a stone or book of remembrance with a name in it, but also where ashes were kept or scattered. Cremation had overtaken burial as a preferred option in the UK by 1968 and continued to increase throughout the twentieth century.[65] But burial remained the preferred option for various communities. Choices of what to do with a deceased relative's body varied between religious groups, with Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam favouring burial, whereas cremation had long been the established practice for Hindus and Sikhs. Part of the rise of cremation as a practice has been the growing presence and visibility of Sikh and Hindu migrant communities. In Leeds, there is now a site on the river Aire used by Hindu and Sikh communities to scatter

[62] Maureen Jessop, 'The Sideboard', Living with Dying, 22 January 2018, https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/2018/01/22/the-sideboard/.

[63] Maureen Jessop, interview with Jessica Hammett, 17 January 2018.

[64] For a fuller history of the rise of cremation, see Peter Jupp, *From Dust to Ashes: Cremation and the British Way of Death* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[65] Duncan Light, Julie Rugg, and Craig Young, 'The Disposal of Cremation Ashes in Tourism Settings: Practices, Impacts and Management', *Current Issues in Tourism* 28, no. 8 (2022), 1354–66, doi:10.1080/13683500.2022.2054403.

ashes.[66] The rise in cremation complicated the predominant, historically Christian approach within Britain of a burial and marking of that grave in a site publicly accessible to anyone wishing to continue to mourn and remember that person, and offered a more secular and often cheaper option.[67]

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, increasing numbers of families chose to take away their relative's ashes from the crematorium and either keep them, scatter them elsewhere, or repurpose them—options from turning ashes into jewellery to sending them into space have become available.[68] Part of this move towards cremation, and then a subsequent shift towards green and natural burials, is, as Julie Rugg suggests, a search for rituals around death which reflect the unique and individual nature of the person being buried or cremated. 'Individuation' drives change, as families seek something different and individualized in the wake of a death, and an industry both meets and encourages those wishes.[69] Individuation matters in the choice of how to dispose of a body, the services and rituals around this, how to mark a grave or where to scatter ashes—and it matters too in longer-term remembrance practices, as families seek sites and means beyond the remains as a way to feel a connection to the individuality of the person being remembered, to their life rather than their death. The growth in the scattering of ashes in places of significance, or later, creating something meaningful and personal using those ashes, such as a vinyl record, is about this focus on the individual and their life rather than death.[70]

Carolyn Huston's relatives had long chosen cremation: she told me that 'there was this—this thing about "we don't do burials, we do cremations", in the days when there weren't a lot' of crematoria.[71] Carolyn was born in 1951 in Southern Rhodesia: her parents had moved out there in 1947 when her father, Arthur, got a job for the forestry commission, part of a wave of post-war immigration to British colonies. Born in the wake of the First World War, in 1919, her father had grown up mostly in Scotland, around Glasgow and then Edinburgh, where his father had been head of parks and gardens. He had been named Arthur after his mother's cousin, who had died in the First World War. Carolyn's father had served in Burma in the Second World War, and married Carolyn's mother (born 1918) just after the end of the war, in October 1945, in Scalby, north Scarborough, in North

[66] Satwant Rait, 'Sikh Mourning', Living with Dying, 25 June 2018, https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/2018/06/25/sikh-mourning/. In Leicestershire, a Hindu priest has blessed a part of the river Soar for use for scattering ashes: Scattering Ashes, 'Hindu and Sikh scatter their ashes on the blessed river Soar': https://scattering-ashes.co.uk/places/hindu-and-sikh-scatter-their-ashes-on-the-blessed-river-soar/?share=pocket&nb=1 [accessed 18 May 2023].

[67] Pat Jalland, *Death in War and Peace: A History of Loss and Grief in England, 1914–1970* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 101.

[68] For an overview of the rise of cremation in the UK and the increasing use of tourism sites for scattering, see Light et al., 'The Disposal of Cremation Ashes'.

[69] Rugg, 'Consolation, Individuation and Consumption'.

[70] Light et al., 'The Disposal of Cremation Ashes', 1358.

[71] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 9 January 2018.

Yorkshire. Carolyn's mother had been born and brought up in Leeds and had family throughout the Ryedale area of North Yorkshire, including Scarborough. She had trained in dietetics and worked in clerical roles in Southern Rhodesia.

Carolyn's maternal grandmother, Amy, had organized for her maternal grandfather, Walter, to be cremated when he died aged 72 in 1953: this had involved travelling to Leeds from Scarborough to access a crematorium when there were fewer of them around. Amy and Walter had spent most of their married life in Leeds, where Walter had been born and grown up. After retiring, they moved to Scarborough, where Amy had spent her childhood. Amy had been cremated too, when she died in 1966, aged 84. Both Carolyn's grandparents' ashes were scattered at Lawnswood crematorium, and both had had their names inscribed in the memorial book, something Amy had organized. Carolyn has kept a letter written by Amy to her daughter Hilda and son-in-law Arthur in 1953, describing the arrangements Amy had made for her husband at the crematorium, along with a certificate relating to his cremation and a brochure published by the Leeds Crematorium Board about the services they were offering. Amy wrote:

> There is a "Book of Remembrance" in four quarterly volumes, handmade, covered in natural calf vellum, richly tooled in gold. Lettering executed by hand by modern craftsmen. There is one line below the entry of each name, on which is inscribed a short chosen epitaph. Dad's entry is
>
> Walter Clarkson 1880. Loving Remembrance, 1953.
>
> His ashes are scattered in "The Orchard".
>
> I am leaving similar instructions for disposal of my remains in my will.

She also explained that the book of remembrance was open at the relevant date for anyone visiting on the anniversary of their loved one's death.[72] The accompanying booklet advised potential customers about the dignity of cremation, its neat, clean, safe way of disposing of bodies, and its value for money. It reminded readers of the advantages of cremation as a celebration: 'The whole ceremony breathes the atmosphere of life—not death.' 'There is an ever increasing number of persons who have signified their wish, by written requests, to be cremated after death', it reassured. It offered detailed descriptions of the various options for inscriptions, memorial benches, trees and stones, and places for scattering ashes amongst the 'oasis' of the Gardens of Remembrance, with its 'suitable but distinctive resting-places for the mortal remains of deceased persons', the option Amy took for her husband.[73] Carolyn has kept these documents because of her keen

[72] Personal collections of Carolyn Huston.

[73] Booklet advertising Lawnswood Crematorium, by the Leeds Crematorium Board, 1949–50, in the personal collections of Carolyn Huston.

interest in family history: she never throws anything away, and has Walter's and other relatives' wills too.

Scattering Sites

Both Carolyn's parents, Arthur and Hilda, were also cremated when they died much later. Carolyn and her family chose to scatter their ashes in Scarborough. Both her parents had been living in Oxford when they died, a place they had lived in since returning from Southern Rhodesia in the 1970s. Hilda, like her mother before, had organized and prepaid for her own funeral before her death in 1996. Arthur wanted to scatter Hilda's ashes on her family grave in Scarborough. This grave was where many relatives, other than her parents, had been buried. Carolyn remembered it had been 'a matter of some importance to my mum' to visit the grave relatively regularly. But Carolyn and her dad couldn't work out where the grave was; though he'd visited before, he'd 'promptly forgotten' its location. Carolyn has found it since and has inherited the record of the plot's purchase. But in 1996, they scattered her mum's ashes off the cliffs instead. Scarborough had mattered as her mother's family home, and the place she'd grown up, but also as the place her parents had got married:

> they loved Scarborough, they used to come here and the first thing they'd do is go off to the east coast to Scarborough, and my mum had spent you know, they used to take house there in the, in the summer as a child, and my mother had been brought up there and—and so Scarborough was…very much part of their background. They'd lived for a short while with, with my grandma in Scarborough. So we scattered her ashes on Scalby cliffs, you know, the other side of North Bay, and it was November and—[whispers] and it was freezing! [both laugh] Anyway, so we did that with…my sister came up and—and my dad, and we, we scattered the ashes.[74]

This choice was, presumably, about layering the past and future; a way of connecting to Hilda's past, but also a way of creating a significant place for his daughters to visit, an enjoyable place they would want to come to. When Carolyn's dad died in 2002, she and her sister scattered his ashes in the same location. Scarborough felt special to Carolyn still, and she visited often.

But Carolyn decided to do something else, beyond scattering their ashes: she felt she needed something more to remember her parents. She explained:

[74] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 9 January 2018.

> we went to scatter [my dad's] ashes on the, on the same cliff in Scarborough, to find where we'd scattered the ashes where my mum, was right where there were primroses and violets and things, so it was lovely actually, we were there, you know, in spring, and we scattered the ashes. But we had never had his name put in the memorial, either of their names put in the memorial book, or anything, or had one of those sort of plaques. And I missed that, you know, with my family history thing, so eventually I said to my sister that I, I need something to remember them by, and she I think had felt the same.

Carolyn came up with an idea to buy a plot of woodland. She and her sister 'coughed up lots of money' for an acre in the Scottish Borders, bought from the Woodland Trust. This purchase came with a bench and plaque in their name. Carolyn described visiting:

> you got to walk up through the wood to get there, and they obviously added another acre of trees—I don't know which is his acre, or their acre. But you look down over the Tweed from up there, the Tweed river, and there's an iron age fort behind you it's, it's absolutely lovely. So it actually worked out quite well, and, and even though I don't go there, I know it's there [yeah] and that makes me feel better. Because one of the things I really like are memorial inscriptions on, on graves. So it, like I say that, it was, it was the not…having anything there.

For Carolyn, having a name inscribed somewhere was comforting, as well as being able to visit the location where her parents' ashes were scattered. This site gave a sense of permanence for their memory, and a connection to her dad's Scottish heritage, to match the recognition of her mum's family background in the site of their ashes in Scarborough.[75]

For Carolyn and her family then, cremation meant different possibilities for using places to remember relatives. After her grandparents had died in the 1950s and 1960s, an entry each in the book of remembrance and scattering of their ashes at the crematorium had felt fitting. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Carolyn and her family had separated the location of their cremation, the site where their ashes were scattered, and the place where their names were inscribed. Three different locations were significant, though the crematorium itself seemed to matter relatively little: we didn't discuss it when we spoke about how Carolyn and her sister remembered her parents. The places around Scarborough, the cliffs where their ashes were scattered, and the Scottish woodlands were meaningful. Like those families who wanted to know a grave was *somewhere*, and that it was looked after, Carolyn needed to know her parents were in some way named and

[75] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 9 January 2018.

remembered, even if she had only visited once. Other locations mattered too, and some of these lived in Carolyn's head, rather than places she visited, not least the locations of her childhood. When I asked her if there were places that helped her remember her parents, she described how much of the east Yorkshire coast felt significant, but also 'there's lots of African stuff [yeah] that reminds me, but I don't visit it, but it's in my head.' She described, 'I can still inside my head see the route up to Inyanga, which is this place where the—where my dad started the forest reserve.' Other places mattered for remembering others: at Harewood House, near Leeds, there was a sense of Carolyn's great-grandparents. They had lived there when her great-grandfather worked as a gardener on the estate: 'I get to Harewood and walk to the house that was their house, which is the one, you know, if you walk around the lake just by the walled garden.'[76]

In this way, Carolyn had a 'deathscape' that mattered to her in remembering various relatives. Carolyn and her family had been able to shape and control this deathscape partly because of their relative affluence: they had had the means to pay for the disposal of the dead and their naming to fit their needs. These places were significant in remembering various relatives: her parents, but also her grandparents, some of whom she knew well, some less so. There were other relatives' lives to be remembered in these places too, many of whom Carolyn hadn't known personally. Places that mattered did so because they often symbolized not only individual relatives and their lives, but the interconnections between relatives: Scarborough as the place her maternal family had come from, the place where there were several relatives buried, the place her parents had married, lived their first married days with Hilda's parents, and where their ashes had been scattered. Places symbolized individuals, relationships, and a generalized sense of family history, belonging, and heritage. As well as some families having a family grave or family cemetery, other places could become important as a locus of family memory. In this sense, places of the dead—cemeteries or otherwise—can 'work' after those people have died. The dead work to maintain connections and a sense of family heritage and togetherness.[77]

Conclusion

For our group of family historians, what mattered when disposing of a body after death, of marking that death for the long term, and of remembering through many years after, was choice and control. For Jean Barker, the offer of a book of remembrance was a poor substitute for the family headstone they had wanted in the 1960s. For Carolyn's grandmother, Amy, a book of remembrance at a

[76] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 9 January 2018.
[77] Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*.

crematorium offered the opportunity to create a long-lasting legacy for herself and her husband, in a similar period. Graves, other sites of human remains, and a whole range of places used to remember loved ones could matter to relatives, at different points over time in the many years and decades after a death. The ability to choose and continue to have control over such sites of remembrance mattered.

The place where remains lay—the buried body, the scattered ashes—mattered, but so too did where they were named, where they had lived, and where they had spent their time. Remembering an individual's life as well as death meant the use of other places for remembrance, from scattering ashes at a favourite beauty spot, to decades later going to a church that was visited at least every Sunday. Places allowed a link between remembering individuals, remembering their relationships, and a broader sense of family history and heritage, whether that was local or somewhere much further away.[78] There were deep continuities in practices here, of holding on to a name, or a site of remains, or a sense of a person to keep them alive in memory and in their connection with broader kin and community.

My family has something of a family cemetery. In the Black Country, in the Midlands, there's a cemetery and crematorium on the side of a hill. This is Rowley Regis Cemetery and Crematorium, where my grandparents are buried. Run by Sandwell Council, it's pleasant enough but functional.[79] There are other relatives there, as well as my 'emotional family': Gwen, my childminder-cum-adopted grandma is buried there. My King family reflects the changing cycle of disposal that Rugg outlines: burials in this suburban cemetery, with a move towards cremation, then most recently, some beautiful, secular woodland burials elsewhere. There have been many burials because of the religion of my family's older members: my dad's cousin Maureen was recently buried, aged 96, in 2022. A staunch Roman Catholic, burial it had to be.

At this funeral, I stayed in the car with a sleeping baby, avoiding the driving March rain. I could see my family huddled under umbrellas walking to my grandmother Anne's grave: it's the done thing to at least say hello. Every time we end up at this cemetery, someone laughs at how Anne and Joseph ended up buried in the same plot, united in death even though they had separated in life, twice. There's a fallacy contained in the gravestone inscription: my grandfather, who died in 1962, is claimed as a 'beloved husband and father', an idealization and falsification of their past.

There are other places that matter too: back in Ballymoney, in Antrim, my great-grandmother is buried, and presumably other relatives too: between there

[78] Katie McClymont, '"They Have Different Ways of Doing Things": Cemeteries, Diversity and Local Place Attachment', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 39, no. 3 (2018), 267–85, doi:10.1080/07256868.2018.1459519.

[79] There's some information about the cemetery and crematorium on the Sandwell Council website: https://www.sandwell.gov.uk/info/200168/burials_and_cremations/2097/rowley_regis_crematorium [accessed 18 May 2023].

and Belfast lived Anne, my paternal grandmother and her family. Known as 'Granny', Anne's mother, my great-grandmother Catherine, was born in 1874 and died in 1946. My aunt, Cath, remembers her death, and how she and her many cousins filed past the coffin to kiss her before the funeral. 'I didn't like it', recalled Cath, who was about eight or nine at the time.

Nearly fifty years later, Cath went back, one of many trips she made to Ireland. There are many wild family stories of her and my uncle Brendan touring anywhere in Ireland that would have them, playing and singing in pubs for pints. When I visited Cath, to talk about our family history, I pulled out a photo album from the many she'd got out ready for me to look at. 'Roots Tour of Ireland', it was labelled. Cath told me about a time when her aunt, Jean, Anne's sister, was particularly upset, for no obvious reason. She confided in Cath that she was sad because 'I'll never see my home again'. Cath took Jean and Jean's daughter, Maureen, back to Ballymoney, Belfast, and other places that had been important to them and their family in Ireland. They managed to locate Granny's grave, in the churchyard at Ballymoney. Nearly fifty years after her death, in the mid-1990s, Jean paid for a headstone to be placed on her mother's grave: the family hadn't been able to afford one originally. As well as the dates of her life, it contains the epigraph 'treasured family memories', revealing, I think, that this was a memorial stone that symbolized not just Granny's life but the whole family in Ballymoney and beyond. Cath still has the photo that was sent to them to show the stone had been added to the grave.

My parents, my brother, and I also went to Ireland around this time, visiting various places my dad remembered from his childhood holidays. He was born in 1955, and so hadn't known his granny, but we tried and failed to find her grave: the headstone hadn't yet been added. We found Anne's sister Min's house, a dilapidated former smallholding, the house now inhabited by a goat. This trip was when I was about 7 years old, in 1993 or 1994, around the time of Anne's death, and a way to connect with Anne's homeland in its wake. These places, from the family home in Ballymoney, where Cath had been born in 1937, to Belfast, where many of the family had lived and worked, and where the family had experienced violence as Catholics in the 1920s, were places of Anne, of her mother, Granny, and of the family's heritage. For some of my family these were meaningful places to be revisited, yet for others, these were places that held more difficult memories, and which were to be forgotten. But the grave, a scattering of ashes, the marking of a name somewhere all mattered, and they sat in dialogue with other places labelled 'home' as a way to remember the dead, and to feel connected with the past into the present and future.

Living with the Dead: Memories, Histories, and the Stories Families Tell in Modern Britain. Laura King, Oxford University Press. © Laura King 2025. DOI: 10.1093/9780191915697.003.0002

3
Homes

Two Homes Across the Irish Sea

The foundational story in my family is their migration from Ireland. Anne—Nanny King—was born and baptized in Belfast, but spent much of her childhood in Port Glasgow, Scotland, the family driven there temporarily to escape violence towards Catholics in Ireland, and to find work in the shipyards. Born in 1911, her family moved in 1912, and returned after her father's death in 1921. As young women, she and her sisters worked in various types of domestic service in Belfast. Anne married my grandfather, Joseph, in 1937 when she was around three months pregnant with her first child. It was a mixed marriage, Joseph a Protestant. After coming first to Birmingham, along with many Irish people at that time, they came to settle in the Black Country in the West Midlands, in Blackheath. Like so many Irish families, theirs was a tale of going, and coming and going again.

Anne had her first baby, conceived before marriage, in Ballymoney, where her own parents and other family lived. This baby, Cath, arrived shortly before Anne left for a new home in England, when Cath was a few months old. Her new husband Joseph had already travelled to the Midlands to try to find work and set up home. Another baby, Joe, followed around sixteen months after Cath, born in their first family home in England, in Terrace Street, Blackheath. That year, they moved to Siviters Lane, Blackheath, where Anne would spend most of the rest of her life. They shared the house with another couple for some months, before taking it on as their own. Both of her children spent some of their early childhood back in Ireland, initially to see family and escape from the dangers of the Second World War in the industrial West Midlands, a visit prolonged because of the difficulty of travelling across the Irish Sea during the war. Next came Colette, born in 1941 in Blackheath, and also during the war, Brendan, back in Ballymoney in 1943. Sylvia followed in 1950, and then my dad, Phil, in 1955. It was said that Sylvia was a late surprise, born to Anne just before her thirty-ninth birthday. If Sylvia was a surprise, my dad was a significant shock, born when she was nearly 44, the last of what wasn't even that big a family for a practising Catholic, to a couple not on good terms.

Anne lived most of her 82 years in 23 Siviters Lane, a typical modest, three-bedroom, terraced house, where both Colette and Phil were born (Figure 3.1). She was pleased to move there, my aunty Cath recalled, considering it an 'upmarket' house in the 'posh' part of Blackheath. It housed many, many relatives at

Figure 3.1 Anne (left) with her niece Maureen in her garden in Siviters Lane in the 1970s. From King family collections.

various points, plus lodgers sent to stay there by the priest from Anne's church. The family's story spanned Ireland and the Black Country, with Anne and her children travelling back and forth as she settled in England and as the family grew. These journeys went both ways; many of Anne's relatives lodged at Siviters Lane, as well as coming for shorter stays. It was her sisters who often stayed the longest, with her older sisters Jean and Min eventually settling in the Black Country too, to escape the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Their visits and eventual move were welcomed by Anne, who was homesick for Ireland.

I remember the house at Siviters Lane, if only vaguely. I must have visited many times as a young child, though Nanny King's final years were spent not there, but in care and nursing homes, as she retreated into Alzheimer's. The house, always referred to as 'Siviters Lane', plays a symbolic role in the family. Anne and Joseph had rented the house for nearly twenty years when, in 1958, she managed to buy it for £700. The story of the house is bound up with the story of

their marriage: they were separated when the chance came to buy it from the landlord with whom she had a good relationship. Her daughter Cath remembered him saying Anne was 'one of the best tenants I've ever had'. The story goes that Anne persuaded Joseph, whom she called disparagingly 'old fella', to return so she could get a mortgage. She took out two: a loan from her soon-to-be former landlord, of £70, and the remaining £630 from Rowley Regis Corporation. The house and the two mortgages were in her name only. She paid off the £70 mortgage in 1962, in the wake of Joseph's death. Looking back now, I feel respect for this grandmother I didn't know well; at 47, with four children still dependent on her, and cleaning as her only paid work, she managed to create the right circumstances to buy this house, a home for my family for decades. The mid-twentieth century was a period in which house-buying was this possible.

Anne spent over fifty years at Siviters Lane, the only one who lived there throughout the family's ownership of this house, the constant figure amidst many relatives and friends coming and going for months and years, as well as children leaving as they grew up. As a member of the next generation, I identified Siviters Lane with Nanny King; the two went hand in hand, even if I could barely remember it, or even her. At a gathering to discuss family history in 2014, part of which we recorded, my aunts and uncles conjured a rich and unsurprisingly nostalgic picture of it: the glass cupboard that was always chock full of the jams and marmalades she made (they all continue this tradition), a green linen basket stuffed with bags of sugar (from Joseph's job as a grocer), her favourite chair in the kitchen. They recalled the hours she spent in the garden, in the early days working with my grandfather to grow lettuces, celery, and potatoes. The younger siblings, my dad and aunt Sylvia, remembered her baking endlessly—scones, pastry, potato bread, Christmas cakes—and my eldest cousin Mark, born in 1960, concluded 'I only remember her being in the kitchen'.

The house is just a mile from Rowley Regis Cemetery. When I visited, in 2022, for my dad's cousin Maureen's funeral, we did the usual family funeral rounds, via Gaunt's the undertaker, the English Martyrs Roman Catholic Church, the cemetery, and then to the local social club. The same family members had just a couple of weeks before been at my aunt Sylvia's funeral (a total contrast in style to her cousin Maureen's religious, Catholic service). Death is very much on my family's mind, and these have come in a run of family deaths since 2016, and in the wake of the global pandemic.

As I drove round these streets that many of my family lived in for many years, getting a bit lost in streets not so familiar to me, I realized that by chance I'd driven along Siviters Lane. I knew the house Nanny King lived in was twenty-something but I couldn't in that moment recall the exact number. But I spotted the little row of terraces and knew I'd seen the house she managed to own, the house in which she brought up her children, the house where so many relatives spent so many nights crammed in on beds and mattresses on the floor.

For my family, there's a complicated notion of home, as for many migrant families. The words 'Siviters Lane' are shorthand for an era, for so many memories of a particular time, from the 1940s to the 1990s, and for particular people—and most of all, of Anne herself. When she died, members of the family visited 23 Siviters Lane before her children cleared it out, and my dad suggested my brother (aged 4) and I (aged 6) chose an object to take away to remember her by. When I visited Nanny King as a young child, I loved to play with a tin of buttons. I can't picture the actual tin, but I have a strong visual image of the contents, full of every kind of button imaginable. An iridescent plastic green one sticks in my mind. I remember a sense of being upstairs, of fingering through the tin's contents, of buttons passing between my palms. But this is not the object I took from her collection of tranklements. I wonder now why not. Was the tin not seen as valuable enough? My parents would have let me choose whatever I liked—but did I think the tin wasn't important enough? Did my 6-year-old self want something else on that day? I chose a dark green, mass-produced, ceramic piggy bank, embossed with a floral design. I have no memories of this piggy bank at Siviters Lane, or association of it with Nanny King, in contrast to the button tin, which was so much more evocative of that home and of her. This button tin was both unique to her, the contents unreplicated by anyone else, and at the same time, so common and typical: many houses and grandmothers had such a tin. Not long after she died I lost the piggy bank's little plastic stopper that meant it could be used to hold money, but it stayed in my bedroom for years. It now resides in the smallest room in my house, the bedroom we used for each of my daughters when they were babies. My brother took a pair of brass-effect frogs, designed to sit hanging over a shelf. He still has those too.

Various things from Siviters Lane have spread out through the family since: pots and pans, ornaments of different types, pictures. My dad has kept two other things connected to this house's history: documents relating to the sale of the house and its mortgage in 1958 and the estate agent's brochure from when it was sold in 1993, in the wake of Anne's death, perhaps kept out of pride that she managed to buy that house. 'A spacious freehold intermediate terraced house situated in this most desirable of residential locations', it reads, in characteristically flattering language. It gives a few more details of the house, from its York stone chippings in the front garden and its Minton tiled hallway floor to its log effect gas fire and marble effect kitchen worktops. I can see from an estate agent's listings since that the Minton tiled floor is still there. Otherwise, the house seems to have been transformed from when it housed so many of my relatives.[1]

Siviters Lane, then, as a symbol within the memory of our family, recalled through stories, through objects kept, and through the occasional passing by its

[1] Archived Zoopla listing from 2 January 2020, available (with registration) here: https://www.zoopla.co.uk/property-history/23-siviters-lane/rowley-regis/b65-8ds/53832403/ [accessed 18 May 2023].

door, is bound up in memories of Anne as a mother and grandmother. Yet another way in which home figures within my family's practices of memory is through our Irish heritage. Throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, Anne and her children visited Ireland regularly, and many relatives came to see them in the Black Country. Some of the few items my family has reflect this: photos of holidays at Min's house in the countryside outside Ballymoney, and letters between family members. My dad has a letter he wrote to Aunt Jean: aged about 6, he writes excitedly of the plane they are going to take to come and visit. Likewise, there's a letter from Uncle Joe to Jean, too, telling her all the latest family news from Blackheath.

Joe was the sibling who felt least identification with Ireland. Having spent two or three years there during the Second World War, he came to disassociate from the place, as he'd had a difficult time living there, bullied for being born in England and his English accent. He never returned as an adult. The other five of his brothers and sisters felt more strongly Irish to different degrees. The two siblings born in Ireland, Cath and Brendan, visited regularly, making their way round many different parts of the country by singing, playing guitar, and camping. Music was a strong dynamic in their and our Irishness: Uncle Brendan in particular, a well-known figure on the Midlands folk music scene, would get a guitar out at the slightest hint of a family get together. Someone else would invariably accompany him with a bodhran, and it was pretty much a requirement for anyone present to sing along to 'Dirty Old Town', 'Tell Me Ma', 'Black Velvet Band', and 'Carrickfergus'. These are songs that my cousin Mark has sung at the funerals of my aunts and uncles since. Writing these words makes me realize how very predictable, romantic, and nostalgic such gatherings were: the stereotypical Irish migrant family party. But the reality was often the untuned guitar, some mixed—to put it politely—singing abilities, and often a shouted, heated family argument, over something small or big. Either way, it was a making of identity, a making of home, a making of history.

There were two ways, then, in which 'home' has become part of the way in which Anne is remembered by her family; her children, children-in-law, and grandchildren particularly. This hasn't been about a particular domestic space, though there are traces of her in all our homes, from my little green piggy bank to her Irish griddle iron, still in use by my cousin Maria, to photos of her in the house and most of all in the garden at Siviters Lane on walls and tucked away in albums in her children and grandchildren's own homes. But Siviters Lane, the house she managed to buy, has become a symbol, entangled with a sense of another (lost) home, back in Ireland, both of which have contributed to a sense of intergenerational identity and continuity, of legacy and longevity, from a young woman migrating to a different country to her now dispersed grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren. From the shamrocks sent from Ireland in the post worn on children's collars on St Patrick's Day, through

Anne's deep connection with the Catholic Church, to the Irish music that Anne's great-grandchildren still sing, there remains a connection to Ireland as home and heritage. Homes can have a tenuous hold over younger generations who leave, but nevertheless remain a force in their lives for ever.[2] This use of a much imagined and idealized home is a form of remembering the dead that is entwined with a broader sense of heritage and the family's sense of self. In my case, there remain different levels of identification with Ireland as a form of homeland for these subsequent generations too. This sense of association with Ireland has since been further politicized in the wake of Britain's departure from the EU, a move which further entrenched the border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Our Irish grandparents, Joseph and Anne, have left behind something else: the privilege of access to Irish and EU citizenship for their descendants. The dead and the links they enable to different forms of 'home' remain a deeply political matter.

Home Experienced and Imagined

Home, then, is not just the physical space in which families live, whether on an everyday basis or through an occasional visit to a past home. Home is also symbolic.[3] Childhood homes act as a lasting and significant reminder of both past times and deceased relatives, and specific places associated with a notion of home allow people to make connections to the memories of the dead, beyond the location of the family's house, flat, or other dwelling. As Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey describe, home is the 'nexus of social space and practice that reproduces potent death-related memories'. Spaces are significant in both 'material form and metaphorical potential'.[4] The symbolic, even metaphysical, importance of particular places may be heightened for those who migrate away from home, especially if they were forced to do so. Homes act as a force within families in themselves.[5]

These places don't need to be personally witnessed to be significant. Through the frame of postmemory, and considering the transmission of knowledge through the trauma of the Holocaust, Marianne Hirsch shows how knowledge of places can be passed down. The idea of postmemory encapsulates the efforts made by the descendants of those who experienced it to pay tribute to, remember, and pass on experiences of the Holocaust, how younger generations 'remember'

[2] Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagran: A History of Stories* (University of Washington Press, 2004).

[3] Paul Betts and David Crowley, 'Introduction', *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 2 (2005), 213–36, doi:10.1177/0022009405051551; Claire Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 2 (2005), 341–62, doi:10.1177/0022009405051556.

[4] Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (Berg, 2000), 5.

[5] White, *Remembering Ahanagran*, 12–14.

without the direct memories to do so. As well as practices like memory books, the passing on of memories of particular places is important; Hirsch gives the example of writer Yoram Kaniuk's 'memory' of the streets and places where his family lived in Germany before the Holocaust, extremely vivid to him despite the fact he had never been there: 'Through words and images, this lost world acquired a materiality in his memory that determined his adult discourse and self-definition as an Israeli writer.'[6]

The writings of other migrants and refugees point to similar themes: that 'home' as a place of family origin remains powerful in the imagination.[7] For Elin Toona Gottschalk, a refugee who came to Leeds from Estonia in the Second World War, her childhood home of Haapsalu became bound up with inherited memories of her deceased grandfather, whom she never met, and with her grandmother, a second mother to her, who died in London in the 1970s. This home was a place of lost heritage, lost relatives, an imagined or barely remembered place—though she did visit in later life—which became crucial to her own sense of identity.[8] As the Second World War grows further from living memory, more and more Jewish people, at least in richer countries, are making pilgrimages back 'home' to the places where their ancestors lived.[9] Edith Milton, a Jewish refugee who came to Leeds from her home of Karlsruhe in Germany, via the Kindertransport, felt the powerful pull of home in connection to her relatives who had died, most notably her father. But these were painful memories, of difficult relationships as well as of the trauma of forced migration and the Holocaust itself. Home, for Edith, was a place deeply connected to the memories of her dead relatives and to be, if not forgotten, contained: 'I think, despite the great good will I feel for the town, I will stay away from it. My sister, who of course remembers it much more clearly than I do, has never gone back; and whenever we see each other we seem not to talk about Karlsruhe at all.'[10]

Much of this memory of place is not only about remembering the dead; it is about the loss of home, the experience of dislocation in the face of conflict, trauma, and genocide. Returning to a place of 'home' can be both an act of 'undoing', trying to get back to a past before those experiences of trauma, and an act of

[6] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 242–47; Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012); Marianne Hirsch, 'Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008), 103–28.

[7] Chandan Mahal, 'Family History, Ancestral Place and Diaspora: Material Culture and Community Heritage for People of Punjabi Descent in London' (PhD thesis, Queen Mary University of London, 2022).

[8] Elin Toona Gottschalk, *Into Exile* (Lakeshore Press, 2013).

[9] Ivan Jablonka, *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had*, translated by Jane Kuntz (Stanford University Press, 2016), 2.

[10] Edith Milton, *The Tiger in the Attic: Memories of the Kindertransport and Growing Up English* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 241.

'repair', creating something new in the destruction of a home, and the sense of it.[11] Home as a site can entwine numerous losses, merging the individual and mass trauma, the loss of home itself, and the loss of specific loved ones. Home in the post-Second World War period was such a powerful ideal because so many people did not have one.[12] The loss of home, a past, an identity, and the remembrance of the dead were deeply connected.

Ancestral Homes

For our family historians, a similar sense of 'home' was bound up with memories of specific relatives, with the relationships between relatives, and a sense of the family's history more broadly. For families who, by and large, stayed put in one place, a particular location could become overlayed with numerous family members and meanings. Homes could become 'a seat of stories'.[13] For Sarah Sykes, this place was the 'Farnley triangle', a spot on the west edge of Leeds where her family had lived in many houses, and which connected to so many of the family stories that had been passed down, and relatives she had both known and not known. Sarah had grown up in Bramley in the 1970s and 1980s, a couple of miles from Farnley: this, she thought, was because her dad had 'put his foot down', as he'd wanted them to live slightly further away from the triangle where her mum and all her family had lived. Sarah was an only child but had lived next door to her mum's twin sister, a second mum to Sarah, and her two adopted children, who felt almost like siblings to Sarah. Sarah worked in the library at the University of Leeds, and so met students and researchers regularly, but had in the past felt dismissed by academics, and perhaps that her family history might not be of interest to others. She described herself as a 'frustrated historian' as she'd not been able to go to university to study history as she'd hoped. She researched many of her ancestors through the course of our project, finding out about their work, the places they lived, and building a family tree. She wrote a booklet summarizing her research, 'Journey to Leeds', charting her ancestors' lives, occupations, and homes over more than 200 years. Her framing of their history as a 'journey' to Leeds reflected the work Sarah had done thinking through why and how various branches of her family had ended up in Leeds. Sarah was interested in the broader context of this question too and thinking through the way her family's experiences connected with the social and historical context of the time.[14] As she put it, their experiences 'almost mapped the industrial revolution'.

[11] Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller, 'Introduction', in *Rites of Return: Diaspora Politics and the Politics of Memory*, edited by Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller (Columbia University Press, 2011), 18.

[12] Betts and Crowley, 'Introduction', 216.

[13] White, *Remembering Ahanagran*, 20.

[14] Sarah Sykes, 'Journey to Leeds' (2018), 942.819 LIV, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.

Places like the police station where her grandad had worked had a particular effect on Sarah: 'when I walk past there I get a bit of a shiver', she told us. Sarah's current family house was in Farnley, and its garden backed onto the land that her great uncle had used as a market garden, in the middle of the roads that made up the Farnley triangle. Her aunt had rented it from the council, a big piece of land on which to grow produce, keep canaries, or play in a tree house. Sarah had found out about her ancestors living in other places too, such as Norwell Woodhouse in rural Nottinghamshire and Sherburn in Elmet, a village to the east of Leeds where many of her family had farmed teazels for the cotton industry. Sarah had particularly enjoyed finding out about the family's life in Sherburn in Elmet, 'that feels really good to find [yeah] somewhere somewhere other than, a square inch in Farnley [both laugh]'. Sarah had found that Wrigglesworth, her ancestors' surname, was one of the most common in Sherburn in the mid-nineteenth century. She described how tracking down their move from Sherburn to Farnley was especially interesting: 'I know now, why we've ended up here which I suppose is everyone's question that they have.' Her great-great-grandfather Leonard had worked on the railways and made the move to Leeds in the early twentieth century.

Sarah could tell the recent history of her mum's family by walking round this very small area of Farnley: her grandmother had lived in a house on one corner of the triangle, whilst her grandmother's parents and several of her grandmother's siblings had lived in other houses just up the same street, Butt Lane. Sarah's mum had been born there, in her childhood home which had become Sarah's great uncle Harold's house in time. And Sarah did tell these stories, most notably to her teenage son, who had become increasingly interested in history. Sarah joked 'it's all a bit stifling isn't it but [both laugh] there's nobody left now just me and me mum and dad so, but there's lots of memories, lots of really lovely memories'. Sarah pointed out significant places, and what she'd been told of them, to her son, such as the site of the Fellowship Hall where Harold acted in plays, even though there was little left of it: 'just a pile of rocks now but it was all there so it's nice to show him that'. Her whole family had been embedded in this community: her great-grandfather was Treasurer of Farnley and District Friends Fellowship, and great uncle Harold wrote gardening articles for their magazine. Since moving to Farnley from Sherburn in Elmet in the early twentieth century, this branch of Sarah's family had largely stayed in one place, and she was to this day surrounded by her family history and memories of those who had died. She told us 'I'm sort of stuck in the past to a certain extent.'[15]

John Hague had lived in and around Leeds for years, but still had a sense of home in Sheffield, where he grew up. There were several locations in and around the city which were for John representative of his relatives. He told us 'When we

[15] Sarah Sykes, interview with Jessica Hammett, 30 April 2018.

Figure 3.2 John's dad, Jack, standing next to the handmade blackout shutters at Elizabeth and Arthur's shop in Brightmore Street. Taken from John Hague's personal collections.

go to Sheffield, I go up Brook Hill—and the shop on Brightmore Street is not there anymore—it's still named Brightmore Street and Close, and it's new council housing now—but I always look across and think about my granddad's shop.'[16] John's paternal grandparents, Arthur and Elizabeth, had lived in and run this small grocery shop together, having bought it from Elizabeth's brother in the 1920s. Much of the serving work had fallen to Elizabeth, despite her reserved and private nature, as Arthur also worked making springs for railway carriages in the steelworks of Sheffield. In a booklet he wrote for our project, John described the shutters his uncle, a blacksmith, made specifically for easy closing up of the shop windows during the blackout (see Figure 3.2). For John, this small shop told a bigger story about Sheffield's experience in the Second World War.[17]

[16] John Hague, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 November 2017.
[17] John Hague, 'My Grandparents' (2018), 942.819 LIV, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.

In their later years, Elizabeth and Arthur were allocated a council flat on the outskirts of Sheffield. Although John had been born in 1949, not long before his grandparents moved, he had very visual and visceral memories of spending time in this shop as a child, as well as inherited information and stories about it, from its custom-made blackout shutters to the way his grandfather's trousers 'stood up on their own' in front of the coal fire in their Yorkshire range, full of sweated out salt from his grandad's work in the furnaces of the steelworks. In this way, this shop was far more significant in his and his family's memory than the flat Elizabeth and Arthur had lived in for their final years, which John described as soulless and 'a sad place compared to the shop'.[18] John could visualize the shop's 'candleholders that are like Wee Willie Winkle' at the bottom of the stairs, which epitomized how his grandad was very careful with money: he'd had electricity put in, but only in the lounge. The smells of this place were evocative too:

> My dad used to take me every Saturday and Sunday morning to my grandparents, his parents, yeah [right], because one of my memories is of going down Brightmore Street, where they lived, and my aunt used to bake bread on a Sunday morning and she used to put the bread out on the windowsill. So when I went, I could smell new bread, so when I smell new bread now, that's, memories come by, you know.

John's dad, Jack, had passed on stories about this place too, his childhood home, stories which were repeated many times, in part due to his dad's Alzheimer's: one of these stories was of eating sausages and mash in the cellar of the shop during an air raid. Both of John's grandparents died in his teenage years, in the 1960s.

There were other places that reminded John of his relatives too: his great-grandmother, Eliza, had worked in Hay's Wine Merchant, a drinking lodge in the city centre. This was where his grandparents Elizabeth and Alfred had met: Alfred worked there and got to know both Eliza and her daughter Elizabeth, who had also been employed at Hay's. John has an Advocaat glass from there: 'I'm almost sure, although I can't remember for definite—my dad said that came from Hay's.' It bears the words, 'The delicious Dutch Liqueur / Warnink's Advocaat / The original and best'. He has kept it because it symbolizes a part of his family's history, and specifically as a reminder of his grandmother, who loved her nightly glass of Advocaat (see Figure 3.3). Unlike his grandparents' shop in Brightmore Street, this building still exists: now called the Ruskin building, it houses a recruitment agency also called Hay's. John has visited since and included a photo of the building in his family history booklet entitled 'My Grandparents'.

[18] Hague, 'My Grandparents'.

Figure 3.3 John's grandmother Elizabeth's Advocaat glass, held in John Hague's personal collections.

For John, the village of Bradfield on the outskirts of Sheffield also held layers of memories of his deceased relatives, both those he knew and those he didn't. We asked John about whether there were places that reminded him of his parents, as well as their graves in Sheffield which he visited now and then, usually on the anniversaries of when they died and their birthdays. He explained why Bradfield was special:

> As a kid, we used to go to Bradfield a lot and we used to sit and watch them play cricket there. So, I didn't know, and my dad couldn't have known, that's where we came from. There's generations and generations, and they're all buried in the churchyard. So and you'd think, oh, I like it here [mm], so I don't know whether that's just—I don't know. Said to someone it's strange, isn't it, that I just felt at home there? [yeah] I couldn't have known what it meant.

Through his research, John had realized that many relatives had lived in Bradfield in the past. They had moved away from the village: John's great-grandfather, Dennis (born 1827), had left Bradfield for work in Sheffield, whilst Dennis's father, Benjamin (born 1786), had combined farming and knife making to try and make ends meet. But John's grandfather, Arthur, hadn't known this himself: his mother had died when he was 3 years old and his father had left. Arthur was

brought up by his older sister in Sheffield, and their knowledge of their family's background had been largely lost. John's research into these relatives, who had lived decades before he was born, unearthed this connection with Bradfield, where his parents had loved to visit, and where he in time felt 'strangely' at home.[19] As John explained, the connections to his family were not hard to find in the church and its graveyard: 'They joke, don't they, and say about, in Wales, there's Jones, the milkman Jones, the coalman Jones. Well, in Bradfield it's Hague this and Hague that and Hague the other.' He told us that he enjoyed 'going and—it's a bit boring but—sitting by people's graves and thinking they're related to me, they've gone on before me'.[20] John had also found a family connection to one of the victims of the 1864 flood in Bradfield, in which at least 250 people died when Dale Dyke reservoir's dam burst.[21] He'd researched this disaster, and bought items relating to the flood online, such as a small memorial card for the victims. As such, though this was a place that reminded John of his parents, who had died in the twenty-first century, it also symbolized connections to John's dad's family over decades and generations, and both inherited and more recently acquired knowledge of his family's past. John's experiences of the place, inherited knowledge, and research had built up an emotional connection with Bradfield. Here was a sense of an ancestral place, even if Bradfield wasn't somewhere John had lived himself, or had grown up knowing his connection to. Home could take many forms, and was always imagined as much as real.

Uncanny Places

For our family historians, these places could feel full of spiritual meaning, meaning that was felt in both physical and emotional ways. From Sarah feeling the 'shivers' at the sight of her grandad's police station, to John's uncanny sense of home in Bradfield, places could feel almost spooky in the ways they conjured a sense of connection to the dead. Sue Child was particularly reflective about this kind of experience. Born in 1945, Sue had grown up in Leeds, and talked about how various places associated with her family had a powerful effect on her:

> When I walk into Leeds market, I become that little girl that went in with my mum and my grandma. And I—although Leeds market's changed a lot, when I go in—and my husband's the same—we know that we are proper Leeds fabric through and through. And it's a slice of my beating heart is Leeds because I went

[19] John Hague, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 November 2017.
[20] Family historians' group discussion on the impact of the project, 7 June 2018.
[21] Shane Ewen, 'Socio-Technological Disasters and Engineering Expertise in Victorian Britain: The Holmfirth and Sheffield Floods of 1852 and 1864', *Journal of Historical Geography* 46 (2014), 13–25, doi:10.1016/j.jhg.2014.05.021.

> to school in the centre and I know so much about it. I remember particularly the women folk of the family going through there.[22]

Places could have something of a transformative effect on how someone felt: Leeds market transformed Sue into a little girl.[23] This sense of longing was often very localized, about particular sites. This experience was intertwined with Sue's memories of her grandmother, Maud, her dad's stepmother. Sue remembered many visits to the market with Maud, spending time visiting Maud's brothers who worked in the market and buying fish from the stalls, or 'going fishing' as Maud called it.

Maud's house remained particularly powerful in Sue's imagination and memory, perhaps even more so than the house she had grown up in, on the same street: 'when I'm stressed or anything like that, when I dream, I go to my grandma's house, not my own. It's strange isn't it that?' Her grandma had been a particularly significant figure in Sue's life: 'I was very much and to this day I'm very much influenced by this lady, Grandma Maud', Sue told us. Maud's family had come from Mayo, Ireland, and Sue described how 'she came from an ordinary little terraced house and she was a tailoress at Burton's which was a big firm in Leeds. But she was a lot more than that, she was really intelligent.' Maud had taught her about history, religion, art, literature, culture, and Sue summarized 'I had a wonderful…rich life with my grandma, although she came from an ordinary family.'[24] For Sue, remembering her grandmother and her 'ordinary' background helped reiterate Maud's importance, as someone whose life had not been recognized as important by others.

Like Sarah, Sue had a strong family association with a particular part of Leeds: for Sue, this was Pontefract Lane, where she had grown up, and where Maud and other relatives had lived. Sue framed her family history round this place in her booklet for our project, entitled 'Pontefract Lane: Five Generations'.[25] For Sue, the deaths of both parents and her grandparents in the 1980s led her to find out more about the two houses on that street where her family had lived, across many generations. These streets have been knocked down since, but to Sue they still loom large in her memories of her family members and her past, along with connections to places in Leeds that still exist today. Because of the pace of change within cities since the 1970s, these imagined places are particularly powerful:

[22] Sue Child, interview with Jessica Hammett, 8 December 2017.

[23] Numerous autobiographers use this device to squash time in their writing, describing a sense of being transported into the past through being in a particular location: William Woodruff, *The Road to Nab End: An Extraordinary Northern Childhood* (Abacus, 2002 [1993]), 3–6; Evelyn Cowan, *Spring Remembered: A Scottish Jewish Childhood* (Corgi Books, 1990 [1974]), 9–17; Ralph L. Finn, *Spring in Aldgate* (Robert Hale, 1968), 207–8; Winifred Foley, *Shiny Pennies and Grubby Pinafores: How We Overcame Hardship to Raise a Happy Family in the 1950s* (Abacus, 2010), 153–9.

[24] Sue Child, interview with Jessica Hammett, 8 December 2017.

[25] Sue Child, 'Pontefract Lane: Five Generations' (2018), 942.819 LIV, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.

their power in part lies in the fact that buildings in particular and places in more general terms have been lost, along with the people associated with them.[26]

For Sue, this sense of connection between those who had died, family history, and place extended into the future too. She told us about how she and her husband had made plans for their own funerals. She explained that 'talking about remembering people, we have bought a small plot over here in this cemetery, and we'll be cremated. And it's because our grandchildren—we don't expect people to visit, but our grandchildren will think of us as Rothwell.'[27] For Sue, her interest in her family history was as much about her children and grandchildren: passing on her own memories and histories was a key reason she did research and wrote it down. Both buildings and places could matter, then, and provide a strong sense of connection to the dead and the past even as those places changed. Houses and places could be frustratingly temporary, as they were knocked down and replaced, but places could remain significant. As both John and Sarah found, the site of previous homes and places relating to ancestors and relatives, whether they were now occupied by new housing or piles of rubble, could remain meaningful.

Loss and the Home

As well as home as a neighbourhood or town, and home as a symbol within individual and collective memory, homes can be much more straightforwardly a place of remembrance: a place to keep, curate, and display items of the dead.[28] Home, and nostalgia for it, could be the antithesis to and cure for loss and death in the twentieth century—both on an individual level, in an age of high mortality rates, and on a mass scale, in both world wars. As Judy Giles writes, 'yearning for what has been lost may drive the desire to build new forms of "home" that provide security and plenitude for future generations.'[29] As Joanne Begiato defines it, nostalgia is 'a medium for fighting the passage of time and loss of loved ones.'[30]

[26] Melanie Tebbutt, 'Imagined Families and Vanished Communities: Memories of a Working-Class Life in Northampton', *History Workshop Journal* 73, no. 1 (2012), 164–5, doi:10.1093/hwj/dbr025.

[27] Sue Child, interview with Jessica Hammett, 8 December 2017.

[28] Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 213; Hallam and Hockey, *Death, Memory*; Fiona Parrott, 'Death, Memory and Collecting: Creating the Conditions for Ancestralisation in South London Households', in *Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum*, edited by Sarah Byrne, Anne Clarke, Rodney Harrison, and Robin Torrence (Springer, 2011), 289–305.

[29] Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Berg, 2004), 55.

[30] Joanne Begiato, 'Moving Objects: Emotional Transformation, Tangibility and Time Travel', in *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History*, edited by Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles (Oxford University Press, 2018), 240. Also see Susan M. Stabile, *Memory's Daughters: The Material Culture of Remembrance in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cornell University Press, 2004).

Home—the nexus of dwelling, garden, and neighbourhood around[31]—signifies remembrance of the dead, and the dead figure significantly within the everyday domestic lives of those remembering.

Homes of all shapes and sizes can enable an atmosphere in which the dead remain present, alongside the living. A 'moulding' of one's physical world is one particular response to a death.[32] Homes are accessible and familiar as places to remember, whether they are owned or rented.[33] The first decades of the twentieth century saw an increased turn to the home as a place of remembrance, as well as and over the use of cemeteries. This was accelerated by the First World War, in which many bereaved families did not have access to a grave, and found domestic spaces more useful and usable places for remembrance than war memorials.[34] The use of home as a space of remembrance was particularly important for women.[35] This reflects the stronger emotional ties that women felt to the home, and relative time spent within them.[36] Homes could act as women's own 'archive', in ways formalized archives did not.[37] But for both men and women, homes could be places of security and belonging, in which past, present, and future could be brought together.[38] Homes were 'places where history is made'.[39]

This was part of the value of the home as a space for remembrance: families could create spaces in which the memory of relatives who had died was comfortably ever-present, a gentle, daily, and unobtrusive reminder of loved ones, with little effort on the part of those remembering.[40] From the late nineteenth century in Britain, the home became increasingly understood as an expression of personality, amongst certain sections of the middle classes at least.[41] Victorians,

[31] Joanne Begiato, 'Selfhood and "Nostalgia": Sensory and Material Memories of the Childhood Home in Late Georgian Britain', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 2 (2019), 232, doi:10.1111/1754-0208.12617.

[32] Daniel Miller and Fiona Parrott, 'Loss and Material Culture in South London', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 3 (2009), 503, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01570.x.503.

[33] Julie-Marie Strange, '"Tho' Lost to Sight, to Memory Dear": Pragmatism, Sentimentality and Working-Class Attitudes towards the Grave, c.1875–1914', *Mortality* 8, no. 2 (2003), 155, doi:10.1080/1357627031000087398.

[34] Sarah Tarlow, 'An Archaeology of Remembering: Death, Bereavement and the First World War', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 7, no. 1 (1997), 116–17, doi:10.1017/S0959774300001499.

[35] Jane Hamlett, *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle-Class Families in England, 1850–1910* (Manchester University Press, 2010), 200.

[36] On the ways in which women invested emotionally in their homes, and the importance to them in memories, see Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Home'.

[37] For discussion of this in an Indian context, see Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

[38] Giles, *The Parlour*, 52–5.

[39] Alison Light, *Inside History: From Popular Fiction to Life-Writing* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 159.

[40] As Stabile writes of eighteenth-century America, the house was 'a vehicle for remembrance, an "ancient memory palace"'. Stabile, *Memory's Daughters*, 6.

[41] Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (Yale University Press, 2006); Hamlett, *Material Relations*; Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Polity, 2008). On the design

especially women, often regarded the home as a space to express oneself and one's memories. This tendency intensified in the twentieth century, with the growth of home ownership particularly amongst upper-working- and middle-class families and in the affluent south of England.[42] Families like my own, particularly in the post-war period, could manage to buy a house of their own, though renting remained the norm for the majority. The ownership of a house could increase investment in and identification with it on a personal level.

Shaping the Domestic

Whether or not someone had died at home, or their body had been laid there to rest before their funeral, there was the sorting out of possessions, and working out what presence the dead person should continue to have in the home. Some families had the ability to take this to an extreme. Molly Hughes built a house in the early 1920s in Hertfordshire, and later wrote about her efforts to 'breathe the spirit' of her husband, who had died in 1918, and his own natal home into that new house. Rooms were designed to accommodate his furniture and pieces they had collected together. The garden was planted with rose bushes he had grown. Moreover, the new house's name, 'Fronwen', reflected his Welsh heritage, and also created a link to their daughter, Bronwen, who had died in 1899, shortly after her first birthday.[43] On a smaller scale, affluent families were able to dedicate a room or specific space to a dead family member.[44] The Layton family marked their son's life by putting together a box of his things and keeping it in the exact place where he died of meningitis in 1890, aged 21 months, in the library, 'the room

of homes in the interwar period, see Deborah Sugg Ryan, *Ideal Homes, 1918–39: Domestic Design and Suburban Modernism* (Manchester University Press, 2018). On the relationship between home and self, also see Clare Cooper Marcus, *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of Home* (Nicolas-Hays, 2006); Emily Cuming, *Housing, Class and Gender in Modern British Writing, 1880–2012* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[42] Giles, *The Parlour*; Jon Lawrence, 'Class, "Affluence" and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain, c. 1930–64', *Cultural and Social History* 10, no. 2 (2013), 273–99, doi:10.2752/147800413X13591373275411; Joe Moran, 'Houses, Habit and Memory', in *Our House: The Representation of Domestic Space in Modern Culture*, edited by Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft (Rodopi, 2006), 27–42.

[43] Molly describes building the house and its meaning in *A London Family*, but the connection to her daughter is to be found in *A London Home*, which explains that 'Fronwen' meant 'the shining hill', and Bronwen, its female equivalent, 'the shining breast'. Molly Hughes, *A London Family Between the Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1979 [1940]), 48; Molly Hughes, *A London Home in the 1890s* (Oxford University Press, 1978 [1946]), 166.

[44] Hamlett, *Material Relations*, 200; Jason Tebbe, 'Landscapes of Remembrance: Home and Memory in the Nineteenth-Century Bürgertum', *Journal of Family History* 22, no. 2 (2008), 195–215, doi:10.1177/0363199007313672.

which he loved so'.[45] Such practices were common to families who lost sons in the First World War.[46]

Such a home was still beyond the means of many, though; even by the affluent post-war years, owning or at least living in a house that could be moulded in this way, and living in it long enough to do so, was not a choice available to everyone. The interwar period saw the growth of the celebration of the domestic and an idealization of private, cosy family life, centred around parents and their children.[47] But the reality for many throughout the twentieth century was sharing with multiple generations, by necessity, over-crowding, and a lack of privacy. The conception of home as connected to personality was a bourgeois ideal. Rented, temporary, or precarious, homes might not be safe places in which to manage grief and positively remember those who had gone.[48] Houses, as bell hooks describes, could refuse to be imprinted with memories; whilst some might be 'crowded' with the past, others resisted this process.[49] 'Home' might be just a room or two.[50] Some did not have homes at all.[51] In this case, houses could offer only limited options for remembrance of the dead. The lack of availability for homes as places to remember was multiplied over generations; houses for the working classes frequently did not last long, cleared or demolished to make way for the new.[52] Yet home was more than a physical space, and for many people, as we have seen, the particular place of home—a childhood neighbourhood, a hometown, or country—was also deeply connected to the dead.

But in numerous working-class homes, of all shapes and sizes, could also be found physical reminders of the dead, often within a wider display of the past, a creation of space to act as a homage to what had now gone.[53] The remembrance of the dead sat within broader ways of maintaining links with past events, experiences, and identities. Such displays of a particular history could be found in the

[45] Michèle Barrett and Peter Stallybrass, 'Printing, Writing and a Family Archive: Recording the First World War', *History Workshop Journal* 75, no. 1 (2013), 14–17, doi:10.1093/hwj/dbs044.

[46] Ann-Marie Foster, 'The Ephemera of Remembrance in the Wake of War and Disaster, 1899–1939' (PhD thesis, Northumbria University, 2019), 53–4, https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/41204/.

[47] Langhamer, 'The Meanings of Home'. Although as Cook notes, queer families found ways to create family and homes which worked for them too. Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[48] Cuming, *Housing, Class*, 5–12.

[49] bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (Routledge, 2000), 10–23.

[50] Ben Jones, *The Working Class in Mid-Twentieth Century England: Community, Identity and Social Memory* (Manchester University Press, 2012), 157–9.

[51] In 2023, a report was published documenting the numbers of people dying whilst homeless, with a poem and webpage used to remember them. Museum of Homelessness, '1313 people experiencing homelessness died in 2022, we honour each person', https://museumofhomelessness.org/news/museum-of-homelessness-honours-the-1313-people-experiencing-homelessness-who-died-in-2022 [accessed 3 May 2023].

[52] Light, *Inside History*, 219.

[53] For example, see Cohen, *Household Gods*; Hamlett, *Material Relations*; Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty*.

homes of the miners Keith Gildart studied, who displayed their work history through items relating to mining history and their own careers.[54] This tendency frequently found its form in the front room, an often formal space reserved for special occasions.[55] This wasn't true of every family, however, and the front room could also be a space for items treasured because they were new or little used—the 'best' china, for example. But the 'special' front room acted for many families are a space of tribute and memory.

The use of a special front room continued throughout the twentieth century; amongst many families of West Indian heritage, the special front room remained a formal and only intermittently used space.[56] Raphael Samuel argued one of the most significant examples of the use of history in the present was the creation of 'a kind of miniature historical shrine' in many homes.[57] In this display of the family and its past within the home was a purposeful creation of familial identity, and the ability to exclude or include family members and parts of that family's past. The dead could sit with the living in a cacophony of memories, periods, and histories, a purposefully displayed presence in a family's life.

Homes were a mix of 'curated' items with the messy ephemera of everyday life.[58] But in this messiness and mix of things was meaning. In the medley of things in each family's home, sparse or full, curated or less so, the dead remained present. Homes offered the opportunity for people to mix temporalities and make sense of different memories and identities, to bring past, present, and future, the living and the dead together.[59] Many families held on to things to remember their loved ones by; yet it is also clear that the particular space of the home, as distinct from the home as a collection of things, was important in remembrance of the dead.[60] The home could offer a way in which to mould the remembered dead within everyday habits and patterns, a seamless and permanent presence, and likewise, to remember the deceased person's everyday life and the mundane and routine time spent with them. Houses offered a sense of long-term remembrance, as spaces which would outlive those who occupied them.[61]

Families also felt they could take the memory of their deceased relative with them to a new home, even if that was one the deceased hadn't lived in. For Molly

[54] Keith Gildart, 'Mining Memories: Reading Coalfield Autobiographies', *Labor History* 50, no. 2 (2009), 140, doi:10.1080/00236560902826063.

[55] Jones, *The Working Class*, 158–60.

[56] Michael McMillan, 'The West Indian Front Room: Reflections on a Diasporic Phenomenon', *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 13, no. 1 (2009), 135–56, doi:10.1215/07990537-2008-011.

[57] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (Verso, 2012), 45.

[58] Sugg Ryan, *Ideal Homes*, 50.

[59] Rachel Hurdley, *Home, Materiality, Memory and Belonging: Keeping Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas (Beacon Press, 1994), 6–7.

[60] Begiato, 'Selfhood and "Nostalgia"'.

[61] Moran, 'Houses, Habit'.

Hughes, 'breathing the spirit' of her husband into her new home, in a village he had never lived in, was possible in part because of her relative affluence. But working-class families, too, found ways to bring the dead with them to new homes. The Cooper family sought to keep alive their little boy's memory in the very atmosphere of their house. This was a powerful story of a little boy's legacy being passed on over many generations, and on to Maureen Jessop, a member of our group. For Maureen's grandmother, Mary Cooper, her son's memory lived on not only in their keeping of his things and telling his story over generations, but also in the family's apparent occasional sighting of him after his death. Mary mixed her Christian faith ('the religion was there but they weren't churchgoers', as Maureen put it) with belief in an ability to connect with the dead in the here and now.[62] Harold had died aged 10 in 1931. This working-class family moved a year later, relocated through a slum clearance programme. They moved from Cavalier Street in the Bank, an industrial, working-class part of inner Leeds, to a brand new 'corporation house' a couple of miles to the east of the city centre. The family's sensing of him as a ghostly spirit was positive for them; his mother wanted him to 'visit' and sought to keep alive his memory in this way, even if spiritual sightings could not be easily instigated by them. The sense that Harold's spirit remained with the family was a comfort wherever they lived. Spiritualism was popular in the interwar period, having seen renewed interest in the wake of the First World War, as many people sought to reconnect with loved ones they had lost so suddenly in the conflict.[63] As the authority of and engagement with the Christian church came into question in the interwar period, belief in the afterlife continued steadily amongst around half of adults.[64] If members of a family believed their relative might still live on in some form, the home was an obvious place for remembering, particularly as many people found comfort in alternative spirituality rather than the Christian doctrines of a heaven elsewhere.

Families, then, had to negotiate the pain and grief that the home and belongings of the deceased might prompt with the use of those same things as a positive way to remember. The home shifted in meaning in the wake of a death, as a space and container of the belongings of the deceased, whether they were few or many. The use of domestic space for remembrance was flexible and malleable: the space of the home could be useful if it had been shared with the dead, but the dead could also 'move' with a family to be remembered in a new home. Whilst their

[62] Laura King, 'Remembering Deceased Children in Family Life: The School Case of Poor Harold (1920–31)', *History Workshop Journal* 93, no. 1 (2022), 225–44, doi:10.1093/hwj/dbac006.

[63] Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 54–77; Jennifer Hazelgrove, 'Spiritualism after the Great War', *Twentieth Century British History* 10, no. 4 (1999), 404–30, doi:10.1093/tcbh/10.4.404; James Lachlan Macleod, '"Greater Love Hath No Man Than This": Scotland's Conflicting Religious Responses to Death in the Great War', *Scottish Historical Review* 81, no. 1 (2002), 70–96, doi:10.3366/shr.2002.81.1.70.

[64] Callum G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Longman, 2014), 116–76.

memory might be too painful, especially in the immediate aftermath of a death, both the space of a home and its materiality could provide a way of maintaining a relationship with the dead. These were homes in which both the living and the dead resided.

A Display of the Past

In the years after the Second World War, there was an increased prizing of the new, alongside a focus on the home as a physical and symbolic answer to the upheaval of the war. Across east and west Europe, housing was modernized and modernist in design.[65] With new housing being built, exhibitions of home design, and the increasing availability of goods as Britain emerged from rationing, the 1950s and 1960s saw many families wanting new things and being able to afford them. It would be easy to assume that the post-war focus on all things new meant that families no longer crammed their front rooms full of mementoes from relatives alive and dead, from past parts of their lives. Homes did start to look different. Yet houses still held the things and memories of the dead, and from the 1970s onwards there was a turn back to the 'traditional' aesthetic.[66]

We can find evidence of this in people's homes today. In Anna Green and Kayleigh Luscombe's study of intergenerational memory, they found little displaying of deceased relatives in the homes of those they interviewed in the 2000s, and participants struggled to find examples of inherited family objects. In contrast to Samuel's findings of the 1990s they suggest there was little evidence of the American trend of creating 'mini-mausoleums', a trend which could be found in the front rooms of British families earlier in the twentieth century.[67] Green and Luscombe's participants had been randomly selected to join their study. In contrast, the families here naturally had some interest in their own history. These individuals did point to the presence of the past in their homes in different ways, and the presence of the dead specifically, though many insisted at first that they did not have many things or ways of remembering the past within their homes. Working together over the longer term, we started to build a more detailed picture of the ways the past shaped people's homes, even if displaying the past and remembering the dead this way hadn't been an active choice. Active remembrance of the dead happened in many homes, and a more accidental and incidental presence of the dead could be found in many more.

[65] Betts and Crowley, 'Introduction'; Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 64–70.
[66] Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 70–7.
[67] Anna Green and Kayleigh Luscombe, 'Family Memory, "Things" and Counterfactual Thinking', *Memory Studies* 12, no. 6 (2017), 646–59, doi:10.1177/1750698017714837.

In the passing down of household objects, we can start to see something of the agency of the dead and the incidental remembering that takes place within and between different generations. Carolyn Huston's home was full of objects inherited from relatives. When I visited, she took me on a tour, pointing out all the things on display which had belonged to previous family members, including paintings, furniture, and even plants in her garden. She also had a spare room full of boxes of documents and objects, from sewing samplers to medals, wedding menus to visiting cards.

Her garden was particularly special to Carolyn: various male relatives on her father's side had been professional gardeners. Carolyn's father, a forestry officer and keen gardener, had been named after his mother's cousin, Arthur Barnes, who had died in the First World War. Arthur's father, Nicholas, had bred apples as part of his role as a professional gardener, and had named varieties after his deceased son and his daughter Millicent. Nicholas had another son, but apparently no apple variety was named after him: Carolyn wondered 'why the middle boy didn't have one, I'm not sure, I suspect he did but it didn't succeed'. Carolyn had a species of the Arthur Barnes apple in her garden, a present from her son. Carolyn remembered that 'I always knew the story of the apple tree'.[68] Carolyn wrote a blog post describing the meaning of this space, entitled 'My Garden of Memories'. As well as the garden and its plants, Carolyn had records relating to her ancestors' careers as gardeners, and had visited the gardens in Princes Street, Edinburgh, where there is a 'floral clock' flowerbed of her grandfather's planting and design when he was head of parks and gardens in the first half of the twentieth century.

Her male relatives had dominated this history, as career gardeners, but there were traces of her female ancestors too. Carolyn's garden contained plants that reminded her of her great-grandmother, Agnes (see Figure 3.4). Agnes had been married to James Jeffrey, an established gardener who had headed up various noted gardens around Britain. Carolyn explained:

> in my garden I have a special salvia that came from cuttings, taken originally in her garden in Kirkcudbright and passed down through the family via my father's cousin, Violet James, one of Agnes's grandchildren. All my cousins and my sister also have cuttings, so Agnes lives on in our memories through 'Agnes's red salvia'.

Carolyn's garden was a reminder of living relatives too; many plants were gifts from friends and relatives. Her son's gift of the apple tree meant this plant reminded her of both the ancestors connected to the naming of the apple, and also her son himself. Carolyn had grown poppies from seeds given as favours at

[68] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 9 January 2018.

Figure 3.4 Carolyn's salvia plant, taken from cuttings of her great-grandmother Agnes's plant. Photo taken by Carolyn Huston.

her son's wedding in California. The pigeons that visited reminded Carolyn of her granddaughter chasing them when she was little, and there were various hiding places and hidden features in the garden that her grandchildren had loved discovering. This was a garden full of meaning: 'the plants do talk to me of far-flung places and friends and relatives'. The garden brought together those from different places round the globe as well as from different points in the past and present.[69]

Carolyn had lived in Leeds for decades but grew up in what was then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in the 1950s and 1960s. Her parents had moved there in the late 1940s for her father's job in forestry. This garden in suburban Leeds, and Carolyn's house, merged memories of her childhood and her parents' lives,

[69] Carolyn Huston, 'My Garden of Memories', Living with Dying, 3 September 2017, https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/2018/09/03/garden-of-memories/.

too. When writing about the meanings of her garden, Carolyn started with memories of her childhood garden in Africa. This was where Carolyn had first learnt the skills of gardening and become interested in plants. For Carolyn's family, plants were an effective means to remember the dead, a living presence that related to a person now deceased. But the interest in gardening itself and gardening skills and knowledge were also part of this intergenerational inheritance, and gardens combined memories of both living and dead relatives.

This was true of Carolyn's house, too, which held memories of Carolyn's own life, childhood in Southern Rhodesia, and her husband's history and experiences. Like other of our family historians, there were links to broader national and global histories, and the history of Carolyn's parents' lives and her childhood were entangled with the history of the late British Empire and the declaration of independence in this country, which would eventually become Zimbabwe. Traces of her family's past were particularly present in Carolyn's home, because of her interest in her ancestors, and because numerous members of her family had held on to things and passed them down. Many of her ancestors had been relatively affluent, so had things they could pass on as treasured or valuable objects. Carolyn's house was particularly full of traces of her relatives and ancestors, but her home was by no means unique.

Incidental Traces

Cherril's approach to her family history was very different, and shows the wide range of ways in which individuals chose to engage with their family history, or chose not to. Either option could have good reasons behind it. Cherril had grown up in Leeds in the 1950s and 1960s. In contrast to Carolyn, who had lived in her house for over thirty years, Cherril moved to a new house during the time we worked with her, and for various reasons never had the time, or inclination, to do as much family history research as she'd planned. Like Green and Luscombe's interviewees, she had little related to her family history: 'I can't think that I've anything', she said, and 'I have very little, very little', beyond a couple of photos of her parents and grandparents.[70] Cherril was particularly aware of what she owned, as she was packing it up and then unpacking it all. Her youngest brother, by contrast, lived in the house the family had owned since Cherril was about 14, and in which her mother had lived until she died in 2000.

Cherril and Carolyn both used their homes as a visual reminder of their families. For Cherril, this was mostly about her living family members, rather than those who had died, especially long ago. Cherril's upbringing had been a difficult one: she was the eldest of four siblings, and had been 'hypervigilant' as a child,

[70] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 September 2017.

unable to enjoy her childhood because of the lack of care from her parents. She enjoyed celebrating her own children and their much happier memories together rather than her childhood. Navigating histories of abuse, addiction, and severe mental health problems in Cherril's family was part of thinking through her family history, and perhaps part of the reason why Cherril hadn't wanted to do much research. Cherril was apologetic about her lack of research several times, and we tried to reassure her that she could do as little or as much as she wanted. Forgetting could be a positive choice, as much as it could be from a lack of interest in the past.

When we spoke to Cherril, in interviews and in our regular meetings, she was not only aware of the impact that the difficult aspects of her own past had had on her family, but that telling those stories might also be difficult for us as interviewers and for other group members. She wasn't sure whether we'd want to hear about the most difficult and violent parts of her childhood. At the end of our first interview, she said 'I hope your next interview is somebody who had a delightful childhood, I think you deserve it.' I'm not sure I always got our conversations right: the way my research project was set up meant I sought out how families had passed stories, objects, and traces of relatives down through generations and over time. My focus was on choosing to remember relatives, and perhaps not enough on families for whom forgetting was the best choice. Cherril repeatedly told us she had little: this reflected her relatively poor upbringing, in which her family really hadn't had much 'stuff'; she described the house she'd grown up in, and where her mum lived for the rest of her life, as 'very sparse'. But this lack of stuff, and lack of wanting stuff that reminded her of her past, was about Cherril's choice to focus on her children and grandchildren over her relatives who had died, to prioritize the happy memories of her later life over the often very difficult times in her childhood.

When we asked about whether Cherril had much that reminded her of her parents, or other relatives who had died, she mentioned the absence of things, too. When Cherril and her siblings cleared out her mother's home when she died, sparse as it was, Cherril was surprised there weren't any vinyl records. This was one thing that Cherril said she had inherited from them: 'the other thing my mother and father loved and I have inherited this is the love of music'. When we visited her house, once Cherril looked, she did identify several pieces of furniture owned by her parents, and particularly her dad; perhaps there was a little more than she had initially realized. Inherited items included a hostess trolley and some tables, as well as more personal items related to her dad, such as his glasses. The roses in the garden also reminded her of his love of gardening. As she packed up her home to move, Cherril decided to get rid of some side tables she'd inherited from her father.[71]

[71] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 September 2017.

For Cherril, traces of past relatives in her home were often not linked to a desire to remember the dead specifically. She'd almost forgotten the links some of her objects had to her parents, because that connection was not something she sought to preserve. What mattered were photos and other bits and pieces relating to her children and grandchildren, and the successful, happy family life and career Cherril had built for herself despite her very difficult childhood. She told us how she had chosen to bring up her children in a totally different way to how she had been brought up, and talked about how those with difficult childhoods could easily repeat those patterns in their parenting, something she had been careful to avoid. Likewise, Carolyn's choice to furnish her home and decorate her walls with things of her now deceased relatives was more about her interest as a historian, and her desire to research her family history, than a definitive seeking to remember the dead. But in the possession of such items by families today, we can see the way the dead continue to 'act' on the present, and the way their memory and legacy can live on in domestic spaces even without their descendants actively seeking this connection.

Conclusion

For those who want to remember the dead, and the past more broadly, homes can provide a particularly powerful way to remember. Choosing to display family and the past within the home is not for everyone. But for those who take the option to actively or passively remember their dead relatives and ancestors, or fill their home with reminders of living family who reside elsewhere, the home offers a lot of options. Defined either as a neighbourhood or town connected to the past to be visited or imagined, or as a domestic space to be (as far as was possible) moulded, homes have a particular power in conjuring memories of the dead. And the flexibility of the concept means that individuals can mould their own sense of home as a way of remembering, depending on their needs.

Places matter hugely, then, in remembrance practice and in connecting with the dead. Graves, memorials, and sites to scatter ashes are part of this, and places outside home, in its literal or symbolic sense, are important ways to remember the dead, from holiday destinations to workplaces. Yet the home remains a special place for remembrance. It sits neatly in contrast to the national, community level and very public forms of remembrance, such as in the commemoration of the war dead. Home as a constructed domestic space, in its messy mix of intentionally curated objects with the jumble of everyday life, and home as a symbolic ideal, tied to childhood and the past, can act as a key mechanism for remembering relatives who have died. Homes are powerful symbols in memory practice, a place which individuals can recognize, make sense of, and connect to their own and

their ancestors' pasts. The home in both its senses, a place to live and a place of identity, offers a way of connecting with the past in all its forms, as well a space for specific remembrance of dead relatives. Such practices are long-established. And even as homes as spaces have changed dramatically, their use in the remembrance of the dead has continued.

Living with the Dead: Memories, Histories, and the Stories Families Tell in Modern Britain. Laura King, Oxford University Press. © Laura King 2025. DOI: 10.1093/9780191915697.003.0003

4
Things

A Schoolboy's Case

In a box in her spare room, Maureen Jessop has a small, battered school case. It is a brown, box case with a small handle and contains some books and other items. Her family all know about this case; it used to belong to Maureen's mother and her parents before her. Maureen has shown it to her daughter, and her grandchildren are familiar with the story it represents. Until a few years ago, that's where the case stayed. Then, in 2017, Maureen joined our family historians' group. Through our work together, Maureen told us about this case and the story behind it. The case had once belonged to Harold, a little boy who died when he was just 10 years old, in 1931. Harold's mother and family had a sense of his continued presence after he had died, and one way to continue telling his story and remembering him was through this small collection of objects (Figure 4.1).

This case played a crucial part in remembering Harold's life for many generations, allowing his life to be memorialized by those he had never met as well as his closer relatives. Harold was born in 1920 and died in 1931, just before his eleventh birthday. He contracted appendicitis, which turned to peritonitis. He died in Leeds General Infirmary. His mother, Mary, a sewing machinist, and father, Tom, a railway porter, and their children lived in a terraced house in the Bank, a working-class, industrial part of Leeds. Mary Cooper died in 1988, and her daughter, also called Mary, kept hold of her brother's school case. Mary was just 5 years old when her brother Harold died and is now in her nineties. Maureen, Mary (junior)'s daughter, was told all about Harold as she grew up in the post-war years. Her grandmother and mother would tell stories about the little boy who died young, throughout Maureen's life. Harold's school case 'was always there'. Passed on from mother to daughter to granddaughter, the case now resides with Maureen.[1]

Many families own objects relating to their deceased relatives; things provide an obvious and powerful way to remember someone.[2] The Cooper family chose

[1] Maureen Jessop, interview with Jessica Hammett, 30 August 2018.

[2] Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (Berg, 2000); Margaret Gibson, 'Death and the Transformation of Objects and Their Value', *Thesis Eleven* 103, no. 1 (2010), 54–64, doi:10.1177/0725513610388988; Margaret Gibson, 'Melancholy Objects', *Mortality* 9, no. 4 (2004), 285–99, doi:10.1080/13576270412331329812; Anna Green and Kayleigh Luscombe, 'Family Memory, "Things" and Counterfactual Thinking', *Memory Studies* 12, no. 6 (2017), 646–59,

Figure 4.1 Harold's case, featuring his exercise book, textbook, pencil box, and a photo of him. Held in Maureen Jessop's personal collections.

to put together a small collection of objects: inside this battered school case are two school textbooks, an exercise book filled with Harold's work, a wooden pencil box, and a photo of Harold. The textbooks, pencil box, and case itself had been used by other children before Harold. In the inner cover of the textbooks are the names of such children. The textbooks and exercise books show the kinds of subjects Harold was studying at the time: the history of the British Empire, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the different bones of the leg. The exercise book is particularly evocative, containing Harold's words: there are exercises in handwriting and grammar, but also short stories and other pieces of creative writing. Some essays describe the house in which the Cooper family lived and the days out they enjoyed. These descriptions, as well as the small photo of Harold tucked inside the case, mean Maureen and her family can build a picture of Harold and his family's life when he died. These are everyday objects that Harold would have

doi:10.1177/1750698017714837; Serena Dyer, 'State of the Field: Material Culture', *History* 106, no. 370 (2021), 282–92, doi:10.1111/1468-229X.13104. On the distinction between 'objects' and 'things' as conceptual terms, see Green and Luscombe and Dyer in particular.

handled and used, and their tactility—the smooth worn edges of the pencil box, for example—also help Maureen and her relatives feel connected to a family member they never met.

When we set up our group for family historians, objects provided the easiest way to explain my research interest in remembrance practices. Keeping objects after someone has died is a common practice, an established language for understanding the relationship we continue to have with the dead. Several members mention the programme *The Repair Shop* in our discussions, a British television series in which members of the public bring beloved and often damaged or worn items to be restored by experts. The objects on this show don't always symbolize the memory of the dead, but it's one of the most dominant themes. Experts 'bring back to life' the things featured through their mending, and in doing so help their owners continue to feel connected to the relatives who are symbolized by them: a pair of tap-dancing shoes that reflect a mother-in-law's profession, a grandfather's leather bowls bag which will be passed on to future generations, a stepfather's beloved teddy bear.[3]

We discussed the kinds of items the family historians have over a series of meetings, and the chance and luck that is involved in what they may own themselves and what might reside in their relatives' homes or have been lost altogether. Some families don't have a lot; as Alison Light puts it in her account of her family's history, 'Our hand-me-downs were not heirlooms to look forward to, but cast-offs.'[4] What our family historians do have mostly depends on their age, position in their family, and to some extent their gender. Geoff Hardwick owns one or two items that belonged to his deceased relatives but tells us his sister has most of what might be called their family's 'archive'. For many of the older group members, they have by default become the 'curator' of their families' collections, small or large, as a member of the oldest generation, and an individual that has an interest in history. The keeping—and throwing away—of family items has become their job. Carolyn Huston tells us that she hoards as many items as she possibly can, and delights in seizing things from her cousin before he can throw them out. She inherited a sewing sampler this way, made by her grandmother to show her skills to prospective employers. The younger members of the group don't have so many old family items in their own homes, but Katie tells us about a strange goat or camel hair (she thinks—she doesn't know what it's made of) bag that belonged to her grandfather, and she believes it came home with him from Egypt when he served there in the Second World War. This bag lives in her mum's house and acts as a container for anything related to their family history. Katie brought the bag to

[3] *The Repair Shop*, series 7, episode 39, BBC, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0011w0d; *The Repair Shop*, series 7, episode 14, BBC, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000tr07; *The Repair Shop*, series 4, episode 11, BBC, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00048x2.

[4] Alison Light, *Common People: The History of an English Family* (Penguin, 2015), xxiii.

share with us, along with a postcard, but not the rest of the bag's contents, which her mother wasn't comfortable sharing beyond the family. This was understandable—Katie's mum didn't know us, and many family historians constantly negotiated this line between which objects and information should remain private for family members and what could be made more public. But it illustrates a hierarchy in who makes decisions about things relating to the dead: it was usually older members of the family and those who had the closest relationship with the deceased who made decisions about these objects.[5]

We discussed the kinds of things that they have: a cigarette case, a writing case, a clothes peg, an oversized cup and saucer won as a fishing prize, paintings, furniture, greetings cards, jewellery. Some of these were kept for their specific value in conjuring up a particular person, such as John's candlesticks, which came from his grandmother's dressing table (his brother got a matching tray and glass dish). Some, like Katie, have an old item which acts as a container for other things relating to the family's history. Many things have been held on to for their historical and emotional value even though they are not interesting or beautiful. Geoff told us he doesn't have many things but came along one week with a pair of his grandfather's medical scissors; his grandfather was a nurse. Some of the group have held on to items simply because they're useful or attractive, such as Eric's glass vase that used to belong to his mother and 'elephant seat' from his gran's sister, and various bits of Cherril's furniture, which had belonged to her parents before her.[6] Others have items which they don't much like but can't bring themselves to throw away because of their connections to family members. It was only over the course of weeks and months of meetings and discussion, interviews, as well as visits to the homes of these family historians that we built a picture of these things and their meanings.

Some of these objects were displayed in our exhibition, *Remembrance*, at Abbey House Museum in Leeds. This exhibition, only small in size and scale, proved particularly popular: this sense of connecting with the dead through objects felt tangibly meaningful to visitors. It brought together items in the museum's collections with loaned objects from our family historians and other collaborators. Hundreds of people brought their own examples of such remembrance practice to postcards that were added to the exhibition. The exhibition shows the way objects can become overlayed with connections to the dead. Amanda Reed loaned a handmade wooden model of a Gypsy cart (Figure 4.2). She described how when her dad died in 2014, she

[5] The exhibition featured and built on work by Leeds-based artist Ellie Harrison's Grief Series, which have been very popular and found ways to help people explore how people 'keep alive' memories of the dead. See her website: https://www.griefseries.co.uk/.

[6] As Holmes notes, the usefulness of objects was a crucial dynamic in the keeping of family items. Helen Holmes, 'Material Affinities: "Doing" Family through the Practices of Passing On', *Sociology* 53, no. 1 (2019), 174–91, doi:10.1177/0038038518777696.

Figure 4.2 Amanda's model Gypsy cart, made by Percy Waite. Photo taken by Amanda Reed, cart held in her personal collections.

> wanted him to have a proper, old-fashioned, Gypsy funeral, and he wanted one as well. So he came home the night before, and we had him in the crib, and he had his own special room. On one wall we had photographs of all his ancestors, on another wall we had pictures of my mum and our generation, on the other wall we had the grandkids, and then on the last wall we had photos of the great grandkids and a collage of the all the friends he'd had through his lifetime.

Amanda drove the horse and cart carrying his coffin to Harehills Cemetery in Leeds. When we asked if she'd like to lend us an item for our exhibition she chose this model of the Gypsy cart because it had layers of memory attached to it; as well as reminding her of her dad and his funeral, and the broader Gypsy heritage they both valued, the cart also held the memory of the man who made it, Percy Waite. He too had since died and this object symbolized the memory of both of them. Percy's family came to visit the exhibition, Amanda tells me, and were delighted this item he had made could be shared with a bigger group of people.[7]

An Afterlife Through an Object

Maureen, similarly, tells us the family were 'thrilled' to share Harold's story via this exhibition. His things and the words of his exercise book were on show to thousands of visitors. Sharing the memory of those who have died seems to add another layer of meaning; it feels satisfying and significant to not just keep these objects, but to share them with others beyond the family. Thousands of people had the chance to learn about the life of a little boy who never grew up. Always 'poor Harold', the moniker affirms his place in the family's emotional story. Over the course of ninety years, the family have kept these things of Harold's to

[7] Amanda Reed, unpublished memoir, shared with me by email.

remember him, to keep alive his memory despite—in fact, because—he died so young. Harold, born in 1920, might have gone on to fight and die in the Second World War. But the odds are that, having reached the age of 10, he would have lived to old age.[8] His sister is still alive; he might even still be living if he hadn't succumbed to peritonitis in 1931, a victim of poverty and a lack of effective surgical intervention. But whilst the wide range of things these family historians still own show us that objects act as a lasting, easily created, and emotionally powerful way of remembering the dead, it is Harold's lost future, the life he didn't live, that has made his things particularly powerful. A boy who never got to grow up, these things of Harold's have been treasured by three generations of his family to remember his life in the lifetime he should have had.

The essay that I find most powerful in Harold's exercise book is on the subject of 'The house that I should like to live in', written in March 1931. He dreams of the life he wants to have when he is an adult. He's aspirational but not totally unrealistic: he dreams of a small but pretty house in Blackpool, a place which he loved to visit on holiday. He describes the different rooms—a sitting room, 'a room for meals', two bedrooms and a bathroom, and the garden outside, filled with tulips, daffodils, and 'some grass at one corner'. He hoped for 'beautiful pictures' and decided that he 'would try to get a woman for a maid to work in the kitchen'. He imagined whitewashing the ceiling and papering the walls, putting linoleum on the floor, and acquiring some linen curtains for the windows. He thought about how he would fund his purchases: 'I would buy a suite of furniture for the house. I would get a check off the man. I would tell the Corporation to put electrice lights in the house.' He also hoped for a gramophone and records and a motor car. These would have always been dreams, but the poignancy of him writing of the adulthood he would never reach is particularly powerful.[9] The privilege of reading these words, as someone unconnected to the family, sits heavily as I leaf through the book, as probably the first person to read them beyond his teacher and his family members. Being able to access this story, this object, and feel a connection to Harold himself shows the way in which such experiences are often confined to the intimate spaces of the family. It also shows how this collaborative methodology opens up new ways of getting inside families and their pasts.

When we interviewed her, Maureen mentioned how she likes to read Harold's words; when she's cleaning the house, she might stop and pull the case out, and sit on her spare room floor and read. In an interview, the piece of writing Maureen particularly mentioned as significant is Harold's essay on Orpheus and Eurydice. This stands out to Maureen because she too studied this classical tale at school, around thirty or forty years after Harold had done. In reading this, Maureen can

[8] Laura King, 'Remembering Deceased Children in Family Life: The School Case of Poor Harold (1920–31)', *History Workshop Journal* 93, no. 1 (2022), 232–3, doi:10.1093/hwj/dbac006.

[9] Personal collections of Maureen Jessop.

find a very personal link to this schoolboy, situating her own remembered childhood self of around fifty years ago alongside this uncle she never knew. Because he died at 10, Harold's identity has been fixed as a schoolboy. In being able to hold the items that Harold used, and read his handwriting, Maureen's connection to Harold through this object is more personal and equal than to other deceased relatives, of one schoolchild to another. Time, through these objects, has become flexible and orientated around the life cycle, rather than linear.[10]

Maureen is an experienced family history researcher, who was deeply interested in and knew a lot about her family's history. She was not the oldest member of her family, but because her mother was becoming frailer, Maureen had started to sort out some of her belongings with her, and had taken some of them to her home, including Harold's case. Maureen told us of her mother's extensive belongings: 'my mother's got loads of stuff, she goes, I don't know what you're going to do with all this stuff when I go I thought yeah I do! [both laugh]'.[11] Though her mother still had a lot of things, Maureen had now effectively become the 'curator' or 'archivist' to her family's historical collections, choosing what should be kept and what discarded; the documents and objects which were seen as particularly special in preserving and passing on the family's history, and in holding the memory of Maureen's relatives. Harold's case was the most powerful example of this: this object more than any other had been carefully put together and its story passed on with it through the generations of this family. But Maureen had other items too. Like most families, she has a collection of documents and photos which help her learn about deceased family members. More poignant and personal things in Maureen's collection included handwritten greetings cards and the patent relating to a cabinet her father designed.

In our various visits to look at Maureen's collections, meetings as a group, and more formal interviews with Maureen, we learned more of the history of this case, and what it meant to Maureen's grandmother and mother. The case had in the wake of Harold's death been kept out of sight in the house, tucked away in the family's sideboard, where all treasured and important objects and documents were kept, such as Tom's war medals and other things related to his service. It had, according to Maureen, simply always 'been there', but Harold's parents and siblings would take it out occasionally. The family, particularly Harold's mother, told stories of him regularly, remembering him as a kind, popular boy who 'was good in school plays'. Some parts of this story are lost to us; it's unclear whether Mary Cooper put together her son's things into this case immediately after his

[10] Barrett and Stallybrass found something similar in the wake of a son's death in the First World War: the time that mattered were the dates that came up each calendar year as significant milestones and anniversaries passed—birthdays, deathdays. Michèle Barrett and Peter Stallybrass, 'Printing, Writing and a Family Archive: Recording the First World War', *History Workshop Journal* 75, no. 1 (2013), 1–32, doi:10.1093/hwj/dbs044.

[11] Maureen Jessop, interview with Jessica Hammett, 30 August 2018.

death, or over the course of months or years. The school textbooks are inked with the city council's official stamp of ownership. Perhaps a teacher suggested they keep them; perhaps Tom or Mary decided that these borrowed books should now belong to them because of Harold's death. In its mix of mass-produced items and Harold's own handwritten words as well as his photo, in the combination of items that were on loan or might be passed between children at different ages, Harold's family found a way to capture his memory in a small shrine. Maureen wrote a piece for our project website, noting that 'He may have had a short life but the memory of "Poor Harold" lives on.' Her daughter responded in the comments below the blog post: 'Great Nanna Mary & Great Grandad Tom would be so happy and proud that Poor Harold's story has lived on through our generations and even more proud that their granddaughter has put pen to paper to make his story known beyond the family.'[12]

A Container for Emotions

Harold's case was a particularly emotional object for Maureen, perhaps more significant than other objects she owned. There were clear patterns in what objects had been kept and which family members especially remembered amongst our group; those who had died too young, through war or in childhood, were strongly represented. For most families, the holding on to and passing down of things to remember the dead and construct a family history was a haphazard process, subject to the vagaries and interests of different family members at different times. The example of Harold's case exposes processes at work within many families but represented a particularly active version of remembering the dead, even by members of the family who had never met him. But the holding on to things to remember the dead can be found in almost any period of history, and across many cultures.[13]

Joanne Begiato describes this keeping of objects in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as when one woman wore a whistle that had belonged to her grandfather in memory of him, an object and its sound bringing him strongly to mind over sixty years after his death.[14] As Julie-Marie Strange notes, in the nineteenth century families used 'mementoes which were interwoven with domestic

[12] Maureen Jessop, 'Poor Harold', Living with Dying, 9 October 2017, https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/2017/10/09/poor-harold/.

[13] Joanne Begiato, 'Selfhood and "Nostalgia": Sensory and Material Memories of the Childhood Home in Late Georgian Britain', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 2 (2019), 235–6, doi:10.1111/1754-0208.12617; Jane Hamlett, *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle-Class Families in England, 1850–1910* (Manchester University Press, 2010), 180–207; Jason Tebbe, 'Landscapes of Remembrance: Home and Memory in the Nineteenth-Century Bürgertum', *Journal of Family History* 22, no. 2 (2008), 195–215, doi:10.1177/0363199007313672.

[14] Begiato, 'Selfhood and "Nostalgia"', 236.

space and infused with intimate meaning', many of which were, for those who could afford it, created specifically as mourning items.[15] Jane Hamlett documents the 'freighting' of items with emotional meaning because of a death, and the particular meaning this had for women in the nineteenth century, when they might be marginalized from more public mourning rituals.[16] Objects could be made with history in mind; the long-established practice of quilt-making, for example, was one of women documenting the lives of women, and passing that knowledge on.[17] Indeed, quilts could specifically be about remembering the dead, from those nineteenth-century quilters who stitched the direct command 'Remember Me' within their pieces, to the AIDS quilts from the 1980s documenting the lives of those individuals lost to the epidemic.[18]

Objects might be produced in response to a death or become significant in its aftermath; as Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey put it, objects may be either 'dedicated' or 'emergent'.[19] Objects that have belonged to the dead or been given by the deceased to those remembering can be meaningful. Things might be kept because they have become a symbolic representation of a person, whilst other items survive through families more out of obligation or family pressure.[20] Objects have a particularly powerful capacity to transmit emotions between generations.[21] Objects can squash time, acting as time travellers to connect different generations of a family together, lasting beyond the lifetime of individuals.[22] This was what Maureen experienced in feeling close to Harold and understanding his memory through his writing, feeling a shared experience of school captured in his little case and the things within it.

Things, then, figured strongly in these families' remembrance of the dead, from the early weeks and months following a death to their ability to create a link between the living and dead even if the person remembering had never met the person who was being remembered, like in the case of Maureen. Things, in their materiality, could hold the memories of multiple family members, and traces of

[15] Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 213.

[16] Hamlett, *Material Relations*, 180–1.

[17] Tanya Evans, 'The Use of Memory and Material Culture in the History of the Family in Colonial Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2012), 207–28, doi:10.1080/14443058.2012.678584. On the history of quilts in Britain, see Sue Pritchard, *Quilts 1700–2010: Hidden Histories, Untold Stories* (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2012).

[18] Deborah McGuire, '"Remember Me": Domestic Textiles in Britain: Memory, Identity and Emotion' (MA thesis, Oxford Brookes, 2022), doi:10.24384/fjy7-9c32; Christopher Capozzola, 'A Very American Epidemic: Memory Politics and Identity Politics in the AIDS Memorial Quilt, 1985–1993', *Radical History Review* 82, no. 1 (2002), 91–109, doi:10.1215/01636545-2002-82-91.

[19] Hallam and Hockey, *Death, Memory*, 50.

[20] Holmes, 'Material Affinities'.

[21] Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles, 'Introduction', in *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History*, edited by Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles (Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–7.

[22] Joanne Begiato, 'Moving Objects: Emotional Transformation, Tangibility and Time Travel', in *Feeling Things*, edited by Downes et al., 229–42; Hallam and Hockey, *Death, Memory*, 48.

the relationships between people as well as individuals themselves. They could trigger a range of emotions and provide a sense of a tangible and lasting legacy of the person who had died, perhaps in positive ways. Things triggered memories, and supported rituals and practices, the *doing* of emotion.[23] The availability of objects depended a lot on the wealth of the family, and a range of events might easily interrupt the keeping of objects, from forced migration to family feuds. Our family historians didn't much discuss those conflicts that may have led to the loss of items, or access to them. But objects might be rejected or discarded because they triggered overly negative emotions, or objects made meaningful because they were available, where others were not. Objects might be too freighted with emotion, and things rejected because they were too painful a reminder of the loss of someone loved.

Yet things, because of their universality, and because any object could matter irrespective of its intended use or financial value, were available as a means of remembrance and history-making to everyone, even if individuals had to make pragmatic choices about which objects to invest in emotionally. Other practical issues had to be taken account of too; whilst furniture was likely to last because it was useful, the things that lasted through most families were often relatively small and able to be kept or stored easily within the home. The material and sensory nature of objects, to be touched as well as looked at, and perhaps smelled or listened to, was part of things' attraction and power as a means of remembering.[24] Clothing could be particularly important in this sense; worn close to the body, clothes and textiles could be particularly powerful in conjuring up the 'spirit' of a loved one. The shape, feel, and smell of textiles could bring a person's memory closer and make it more tangible. Jack Lawson, a miner from County Durham, who later became a Labour MP in 1919, remembered his mother as unable to speak of his brother who died in the First World War. But she found a way to remember him, and to share that memory with others: Jack wrote, 'In a shy way she would bring from a drawer some article of clothing which had been his, and talk about it, and him. Always he was with her.'[25] Elin Toona Gottschalk, an Estonian refugee who came to Leeds after the Second World War, recalled her grandmother treasuring her grandfather's prayer shawl for her whole life, one of the few objects which survived after his death in Estonia before Elin was born, through their forced migration and through decades of moving, up until she died in the early 1970s.[26]

[23] Monique Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuian Approach to Understanding Emotion', *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012), 193–220, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2303.2012.00621.x.

[24] Begiato, 'Moving Objects'.

[25] Jack Lawson, *A Man's Life* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1949 [1932]), 151.

[26] Elin Toona Gottschalk, *Into Exile* (Lakeshore Press, 2013).

Keeping and passing on things was not just about remembering the dead. Objects might be passed between family members and friends for all sorts of reasons. Some might be formally 'collected', whilst others unthinkingly kept. Objects might symbolize a part of a family's past they were proud of or an established tradition within a family and provide a way of documenting the positive aspects of a family's history. Keeping objects was frequently a gendered practice, with objects often commemorating men's work, achievements, and interests.[27] Some families valued objects which told of difficult moments within a family's history, and spoke to the counterfactual, the 'what if' of family life, highlighting the ruptures rather than smooth continuities between different generations.[28] Remembering the dead could fall within these impulses: objects to conjure memories of the dead could be about proudly remembering a past relative and their achievements or good qualities, about idealizing that person and relationship, but it was often punctuated with sadness too, for someone now gone. This was particularly true of those who had died young or through circumstances such as war or accidents, in which their death was seen as needless or unexpected. The counterfactual was powerful here: remembering those who had died young meant grappling with the life they might have lived had they reached old age. Things might initially help maintain a connection to the dead and help manage grief. Over time and generations, objects could then become family heirlooms to symbolize not only the dead but a wider sense of a family's past, and broader connections to community, local, national, and global histories.[29]

Symbols of the Dead

When we visited John Hague, he got out numerous objects, documents, and photos relating to his ancestors. From the Advocaat glass that reminded him of his grandmother (see Figure 3.3, p. 54) to medals and jewellery, he had objects which were common amongst many of our family historians, and objects that were a bit more unusual. Some items were mass-produced, like that Advocaat glass, showing how it was the emotions invested in those items rather than the nature of the object itself that mattered. Anyone could own an identical little glass, but the emotions it held and its connection to John's grandmother made that specific glass meaningful. John had added to his inherited collections, most of which he

[27] Evans, 'The Use of Memory'; Fiona Parrott, 'Death, Memory and Collecting: Creating the Conditions for Ancestralisation in South London Households', in *Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum*, edited by Sarah Byrne, Anne Clarke, Rodney Harrison, and Robin Torrence (Springer, 2011), 289–305.

[28] Green and Luscombe, 'Family Memory'.

[29] Daniel Miller and Fiona Parrott, 'Loss and Material Culture in South London', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 3 (2009), 502–19, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01570.x.

had taken home when he and his brother had cleared their parents' house, with items bought online relating to different parts of his family's past. Some items were boxed away, and others were displayed in his home.

John highlighted his granddad's fishing prize as particularly significant. He'd come to own it when his own father had died, in 2012. It is an odd item, this oversized cup and saucer, won when his grandfather, Alfred, was about 13 years old in around 1900. John remembered seeing it in his grandparents' house in Sheffield when he was a young boy, in the 1950s, sitting proudly on their mantelpiece along with their beer jug. His grandfather had died in 1964, and this object had survived in the family since, for now over 120 years and across three generations. John treasures such items today and included photographs of the fishing prize and other objects, such as his grandmother's Advocaat glass, in his family history booklet for our project, which focused on both sets of his grandparents. John kept these objects on a shelf in his home, a trigger for both his own memories of his grandparents—the prize displayed in their home, the Advocaat glass drunk from each evening—and their lives when Alfred and Elizabeth were young.[30] These objects reveal a lot in their survival over two generations, when most other things had been discarded, and in the histories they came to represent. These items distilled the characters of his grandparents for John and said something about their lives before John was born.

This idealization of the deceased alongside a wish to remember their most important talents and achievements meant that medals and prizes were a common category of remembrance object. This was an especially common way to celebrate male relatives, not least because they were historically much more likely to win medals and prizes. In the Jamaica Society Leeds project and exhibition *Eulogy*, descendants of the first generation of Jamaican community in Leeds were photographed with items relating to their older relatives; the daughters, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter of Errol Edward James chose his MBE medal, awarded for his campaigning work for racial equality, whilst the descendants of Hubert Glendore English were photographed with his Royal Air Force pay book.[31] Others chose objects relating to their parents' and grandparents' work, such as hairdressing and plastering tools and nursing badges.[32] For those who fought in the world wars, or served in the military at other times, medals were frequently kept and passed on. This was the case whether that person had died in the war or much later; either way, medals were treasured. Such processes highlighted parts of an individual's life over others, with military service in particular dominating the way some men were remembered.[33] These kinds of items allowed

[30] John Hague, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 November 2017.
[31] Susan Pitter (ed.), *Eulogy* (Jamaica Society Leeds, 2019), 59, 71.
[32] Pitter, *Eulogy*, 77, 81, 87.
[33] Martin Bashforth, 'Absent Fathers, Present Histories', in *People and Their Pasts: Public History Today*, edited by Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 209–10. On the way the

Figure 4.3 The cross (a) and ring (b) given to Nellie by her fiancé Frank, held in John Hague's personal collections.

the preservation and celebration of a link between an object, an individual, and a wider community, national or global history too, from military service to being part of a wave of post-Second World War migration, and the contributions these individuals made to the British economy and society.

John had fewer items relating to his mother's family. Part of the processes of chance and individual preference which govern what is kept, his mother had been much less interested in 'stuff' than his father, and so material traces of her relatives were fewer. Yet, his mother and in turn John had preserved two particularly poignant items relating to John's maternal grandmother, Nellie. Nellie died in 1965, and John had come to own these two things via his mother, who died in 2005. These items, described by John as 'love tokens', are a small gold cross and an engagement ring that belonged to Nellie, given to her by her fiancé, Frank, who died in 1918 whilst serving as a machine gunner in the First World War, before the pair could marry, apparently a 'thing' in wartime Sheffield (see Figure 4.3a and 4.3b). Nellie and Frank had a son together in 1916, Arthur. John described how having a baby 'out of wedlock [was] in those days a big stigma for families', but Nellie was supported by her family. After the war, Nellie married Alfred Dunlop, John's grandfather, who told her 'he would take Arthur as his own son'.

These items are special to John, telling a story of his grandmother's life before she married his grandfather, and captured the memory of Frank, someone unknown and unrelated to John, his grandmother, and the relationship between

First World War objects and stories have passed through families, see Mike Roper, *Afterlives of War: A Descendants' History* (Manchester University Press, 2023).

Frank and Nellie. When John described them, he mentioned a third item, which never existed, a cameo brooch that, according to tradition at the time, Frank would have given Nellie when he returned safely from the war.[34] The cameo brooch that John doesn't own is significant: that there are three, not two, items summarizes that this is a tragic story, about a young woman who, like many, lost her fiancé in the First World War. 'Of course, she never got the cameo brooch', said John in our interview. These items were special because they connected John's family to wider national and global events, because they pointed at a 'what if' question, and the painful emotions that went with it. Had Frank survived, their family history would have taken a very different path. For John, remembering this counterfactual part of the family's history was important, and Frank had become someone John felt particularly connected to, despite the fact they were biologically unrelated and Frank had died decades before John's birth. As well as keeping these items, John had bought a small memorial statuette of a First World War soldier, in Frank's memory.

Keeping mementoes of spouses or partners who had died young was a particularly poignant and often difficult form of remembrance, especially in the case of remarriage. Nellie seemed to be able to be open about remembering her lost fiancé, and her new husband was understanding of the situation. This was perhaps because of the national cultural memory of the First World War which glorified those losses: remembering someone who died in that conflict was not only taken for granted but expected.[35]

To Preserve or Discard

In the wake of a death, the objects of the deceased are sorted, kept, and dispersed. This process depends a great deal on who had died. A child might have just a few things that were specifically their own: Harold Cooper's case probably amounted to a large proportion of his belongings, and even then, the textbooks and exercise booked would, officially, have belonged to his school. Any toys would have likely stayed with his siblings. Children's items might also be distributed to friends. Conversely, when an older person dies, there might be a house to empty and perhaps sell, with many different types of things to sort, discard, or preserve. This can be a difficult and emotional process.[36] There might be a will to follow, or not, and the person themselves might have expressed wishes about what should happen to their objects. Wills and less formal requests to pass on objects act to shape

[34] John Hague, 'My Grandparents' (2018), 942.819 LIV, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.
[35] Roper, *Afterlives of War*.
[36] Parrott, 'Death, Memory', 292.

family life after death.[37] For some, a desire to pass things on is an assertion of the wish to be remembered, even if those left behind don't want to do so.

The process of sorting through the things of the dead, whether they are few or many, can be part of the grieving process. Yet in the usually emotionally fraught days and weeks following a death, the personal items of the deceased can be too powerful to deal with. A process of divestment, as well as deeper engagement with objects, forms one response to a death.[38] Objects might be discarded because they are associated too much with the deceased, and carry too strong emotions, of sadness, guilt, shame, anger, even hatred perhaps. Many of our family historians group felt like John, who pondered what would happen when he died: 'I think, I've got all this stuff and who am I going to pass it on to? Probably my son.' He hoped his son's interest in his family history would grow as he got older, and that objects like those John used to remember his grandparents might last after his own death.[39]

Amidst this circulation of a wide range of types of items were two key dynamics in remembering the dead. Firstly, many people chose to remember their relatives (and friends) purposefully and actively by holding on to a single or small set of items which summarized or distilled their character and the relationship between the person being remembered and the person doing the remembering. Remembrance of the dead was the primary aim here in holding on to specific things. Families and individuals did find ways to navigate and push against this tendency to reduce the dead to a one-dimensional figure; remembering their individual achievements or skills, whether their contribution in a war or artistic talent, could feel like a productive way to keep alive what was unique about that person. Yet creating a simple narrative around a person could also be a way of creating a story that would last over generations. Remembering as a practice was a constant balance between preserving individuality and reducing someone to their positive characteristics, and between the positive aspects of the deceased and their relationship with the person remembering and the more troubling 'what ifs', the emotions around what might have been had events turned out differently.

Objects might also be kept for other reasons—because a piece of furniture was useful or an item of jewellery was attractive to its new owner. In this case, remembering the dead was a more tacit and secondary aspect to owning that object. It might not have been an important part of the decision to hold on to a particular item, but in its association with both the deceased's life and death, there was held within that object a relationship with the person who had died. The financial context of the family involved was clearly important here. For poorer families, holding on to objects for sentimental reasons might be unrealistic when they

[37] Hamlett, *Material Relations*, 181.
[38] Miller and Parrott, 'Loss and Material Culture'.
[39] John Hague, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 November 2017.

could be sold or pawned. Many of our family historians reflected that they did not have many inherited items from their families because they had little money and were working-class. But likewise, for those with little, holding on to and taking good care of useful items such as the clothes and furniture of the deceased was necessary to economic survival. Throughout much of the twentieth century (and before), at least until the boom in consumerism, the decreasing cost of goods like furniture, and increase in disposal income, objects lasted through generations because they had to. Objects, then, faced a constant process of sorting and valuing, and were ever subject to the decision about whether they were significant or valuable enough to be kept. Objects were transformed in their meaning in the wake of death, and through grieving; they might become more or less significant as time passed. The key to the continued power of objects was the stories and emotions that went with them; a good story, easy to tell and pass on, might help ensure an object remained powerful and stayed within a family.

A Solidarity with the Dead

Any kind of item might be useful to remember with. Janet Coles told us about what she'd kept after her mother's death in 1995: 'I've got some jewellery…it's more things that she gave me that, as presents and things that I've kept rather than things that were hers.' Janet thought her family hadn't been particularly focused on keeping things: 'it was never sort of…oh this is, you must keep this because so-and-so it was just you might like this sort of thing'. Janet had kept hold of several greetings cards and postcards; these seemed to be things Janet felt compelled to keep. She had held on to a first birthday card, from 1949, from her grandmother, Evelyn. Evelyn had died when Janet was just eighteen months old, so Janet had no memories of her, but had kept this card, signed 'Granny', 'which must have been her'.

Janet had kept a card her mother had sent her ahead of Janet running a day school in her job as an adult education researcher: 'my mum had sent me a card saying you know good luck it will be fine and all this and it, and that was one of the last things she gave me so things like that I've still got'. This item had become meaningful and something Janet had chosen to preserve after her mother's death, because it happened to be the last thing her mother had given her, although Janet, perhaps contrasting it to the idea of keeping and passing on grander family heirlooms, dismissed the card as 'a silly thing' before telling me about it. Yet this was a powerful emotional object; Janet said it could 'still make me feel sad really'. Janet kept it with a range of items documenting her parents' lives together: 'I've got a box with various things in and it's got things like newspaper cuttings when they got married and things like that.' The sense of triviality in such objects demonstrates how any object could matter, but there was still a sense of perceived

Figure 4.4 Janet's inherited watch and match case, held in her personal collections.

hierarchy in keeping things, and that others might interpret emotional objects as meaningless.

Janet added that what had survived through generations were 'the sort of incidental things', such as a Vesta match case and watch of her grandmother's (Figure 4.4).[40] In contrast to the good luck card from her mother, which had become immediately meaningful in the wake of her mum's death, the match case and watch had grown in importance over many years. Janet first remembered seeing these objects on her grandmother's mantelpiece, along with a clock that only worked when facing down and a glass grapefruit dish. Janet explained that the watch and match case were least interesting to her as a child, and added, in a piece of writing about inheriting these objects:

> It seemed likely that they had belonged to my great grandmother, Rachel Glibbery and been passed down to my grandmother Emily and from her to my mother Freda. Over the years of researching my ancestors I had returned to these objects. It now seemed the right time to look more closely at them.[41]

This process of returning to these objects and their meaning was part of our research together: for her booklet about her family history, Janet decided to focus on the lives of the three great-grandmothers she knew about, and chose a photo

[40] Janet Coles, interview with Laura King, 8 December 2018.

[41] Janet Coles, 'A Mantelpiece of Memories', in *Inheriting the Family: Objects, Identities and Emotions*, edited by Katie Barclay, Ashley Barnwell, Joanne Begiato, Tanya Evans, and Laura King (Bloomsbury, 2025).

of the match case as her cover image for this booklet.[42] These items, as Janet had got older, started family history research, and become part of our group had a new symbolic significance for her, representing not just her great-grandmother, but her grandmother and mother too. Janet wrote, 'I am proud to be the fourth generation to own the Vesta case and watch as reminders of three strong, resourceful and determined women.'[43]

Remembering is as much about the person seeking to remember as the remembered. What they choose to keep and use points as much to the relationship between those individuals as the wider life of the dead. In Janet's case, remembering her great-grandmothers was about a sense of female solidarity with women who had lived difficult lives: this was about Janet's politics today as well as the past. Janet was tapping into long traditions of women's memory practices, of mothers, aunts, and grandmothers passing down items to their younger female relatives, and those women keeping, curating, and passing on those histories in turn. Janet's sense that these items were not always important—a card was a 'silly thing'—also reflects how women's memorial and history-making practices have frequently been seen as inferior and of less importance than those of men. Yet, Janet's own background as an adult education researcher at a university, and decades of experience and expertise in historical research as a family historian meant she was particularly attuned to the connections between her own family and broader historical changes. In her booklet, she concluded by reflecting that Rachel was the only one of her great-grandmothers who lived long enough to gain the vote. Janet's final thought in this piece was of the 'great courage, strength and determination' women like her great-grandmothers had to find in the difficult circumstances they faced as women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and concluded 'it is a heritage to be proud of'.[44]

Connecting Beyond the Family

The way that objects represented broader histories beyond the individual family was perhaps most obvious in their links to both world wars. John's particular emotional connection to his grandmother's fiancé, Frank, who had died in the First World War, was felt by several family historians: those who died in war held a particular place in family histories. Medals from both wars, and other forms of military service, frequently created a special link between grandfathers and their grandsons after death, reflecting the bonds and intergenerational passing on of histories between male relatives. For Bill Rollinson, inheriting such an item came

[42] Janet Coles, 'Three Remarkable Women: The Lives of My Great Grandmothers' (2018), 942.819 LIV, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.
[43] Coles, 'A Mantelpiece of Memories'. [44] Coles, 'Three Remarkable Women'.

Figure 4.5 The medallion Bill inherited from his grandfather, James, from his personal collections.

with a sense of mystery. Bill explained 'it was always said this was [my paternal grandfather's], and he wanted me to have it…a medallion gold medallion on the back it says "Auchinleck, welcome home for war service 1914–19"' (Figure 4.5).[45] Bill couldn't work out this item. His grandfather, James Rolinson (born 1874), had been a miner in the Black Country, and Bill hadn't found out anything more about him serving in the war, through either family memories or his own research, beyond a sense of a story that his grandfather had lived in Scotland at some point. Bill had managed to track down the changing spelling of his surname; whilst his grandfather had been Rolinson (with just one 'l', whilst generations before had been Robinson), his father had become Rollinson. Bill thought he had probably continued his work as a miner during the war, either in the Black Country or potentially in Scotland: there were mines around the village of Auchinleck, in East Ayrshire. The medallion would have been one of many created by villages and towns specifically for their residents, rather than an official war medal.[46] Further research into both this specific item and into any war records relating to his grandfather had so far drawn a blank. The connection to Auchinleck, a small town in Scotland, remains unknown. This object has remained both special and mysterious to Bill, a remnant of his grandfather, his work history, and his contribution to the war, even though this was something Bill knew nothing about. Yet despite this lack of clarity about Bill's grandad's

[45] Bill Rollinson, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 8 November 2017.
[46] Many thanks to historian Taff Gillingham for help understanding this item.

experiences, the family had understood that it must be passed on to Bill after his death in 1965, reflecting a tradition of patrilineal inheritance of military objects.

Bill told us he had 'very very few' objects relating to his older relatives or ancestors.[47] This sense of a lack of stuff was common amongst several members of our group, and reflected a frustration of not having more, though they could all point to a few inherited objects, photos, and documents. Few of them had financially valuable heirlooms, as they imagined might be the case in wealthier families. Class and affluence mattered here. In Richard Hoggart's memoir, he reflected on his perceived lack of sense of history within his working-class family, connecting this with objects. He contrasted himself with families who had magnificent and valuable pieces of furniture to pass down through multiple generations: 'you feel time shift horizontally back in a way you have never known yourself. For working-class people three generations or at the most four, alive and on the ground, an occasional conjuring up of a face (that lovely aunt who died young), a few small objects, an anecdote or two: that is usually all.'[48] Within our group, as family historians keen to learn about their past, there was a shared sense of wishing less had been discarded in the past by relatives, that more things and stories had been passed down. As Bill put it, 'there would have been lots of stuff, mind you, you see I grew up in the in the '60s and early '70s and that was a time people got rid of everything'. He pointed to items that had been lost too, like his dad's Air Raid Precautions (ARP) warden's hat: 'I remember he had his hat once, God I wish I'd kept that.' Perhaps their relative lack of stuff was partly why Bill's family had kept this medallion, despite the lack of knowledge about its context. One other particularly special item was a ribbon of the Ancient Order of Foresters, complete with its original case, which had also belonged to James, and had been passed down to Bill via his dad. The Ancient Order of Foresters was a Friendly Society of which James had presumably been a member. This was a somewhat unusual item to have inherited, so Bill found it particularly interesting, along with the medallion, to feel some continued connection to his grandfather, who had died when Bill was a young adult.

The other item which had remained particularly poignant to Bill was a silver cigarette case belonging to his father, who died in 1976 (Figure 4.6). When we interviewed him, Bill pointed to two things that made this object meaningful: that it conjured up his childhood in the 1940s and 1950s, a moment in the post-war period in which such items were very common: 'I do quite like that, because…there's something about it that was like from that time, you always had a cigarette case you know and you opened it and flashed it round and people took the fags from it.' He hadn't been particularly close to his father. His dad had had a

[47] Bill Rollinson, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 8 November 2017.

[48] Richard Hoggart, *A Local Habitation, Life & Times, Volume 1, 1918–1940* (Oxford University Press, 1989 [1988]), 11.

Figure 4.6 Bill's dad's cigarette case, held in his personal collections.

quite 'separate life' when he was a child, and as Bill had grown up, they had clashed over politics.[49] Yet Bill looked back and wished he'd had more time to talk to his father and learn more about him and his background. The second aspect of the case that Bill pointed to as significant was its shape, 'curved to fit a man's breast' as he described. This case had sat in his father's pocket, against his chest, and when describing this, Bill pointed to his own chest. Bill had considered cleaning it up but had so far decided not to. This item connected the two of them in an embodied way, reminding Bill of his father's physical presence, even if he hadn't been a particularly 'present' kind of father. For Bill, this item symbolized not only his dad's memory, but also his wish that they might have got to know each other better.[50]

Parents were, unsurprisingly, particularly well represented in the objects the family historians had kept. Marie had kept a few items relating to her family's past, such as items from her grandfather's shop, which sold flowers and seeds. Marie told us about the many things she had given away too, such as a brooch of her aunt's. This brooch was the only thing Marie had that belonged to her aunt, but she decided to donate it to a charity who sold jewellery to raise funds for heart research: 'I thought well I will never wear it and I gave it to them to sell for money, and hoped that she would agree with that…because I had only kept it because it, it had belonged to her.'[51] For Marie, just keeping it as a reminder of her aunt wasn't enough if she didn't also use it. She had, however, kept a few other items relating to her parents and grandparents, and one of the most poignant things she had was a writing case of her mother's. Her mum had died in 1967,

[49] Bill Rollinson, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 8 November 2017.
[50] Visit to Bill by Laura King, notes, 19 June 2018.
[51] Marie, interview with Jessica Hammett, 26 January 2018.

aged 48, when Marie was just 17. Marie lent this case to us to display in our exhibition about remembrance practices. As well as the case itself, Marie had some original pieces of her mother's writing, within a notebook, such as a recipes for fruitcake and Christmas puddings. The recipe and writing case were objects which not only provided a tactile link to Marie's mum, but were used and useful, a way to connect through practices that these objects enabled.

Conclusion

Things were perhaps the most visible and obvious everyday practice of remembrance for these family historians and their family members over multiple generations. Things had been passed down and treasured, along with the stories that accompanied them. But there were mysteries too, and some things remained meaningful even where their context had disappeared. Objects were also significant when imagined: they might have been lost or were owned by other relatives, and yet still their imaginary power provided an important space through which to remember those who had died.[52] Objects' 'everydayness' could be significant; a thing could be important because it helped the person remembering to think about the life of the deceased on a day-to-day basis.

The intergenerational sharing and inheriting of objects was an instance when the remembrance of others and remembrance of oneself could become interlinked; in passing down family history objects to sons and daughters or other younger relatives, that person asserted their own right to be remembered.[53] Objects might start to accumulate the memories of multiple members of a family and symbolize key aspects of that family's history as well as particular members within it. In this sense, certain key objects became heirlooms. Some objects—not all—connected out to wider community, national and global events, as families' histories and broader histories shaped each other.[54] In some cases, passing on important family items to museums provided the best way to preserve that family history, an impulse often to be found when there were strong connections to major national events.[55]

Objects, like other forms of remembrance, also show how remembrance was a way of 'doing' family.[56] The keeping, use, and passing on objects provided a way

[52] On the power of objects as imagined, see Carolyn Steedman, 'What a Rag Rug Means', *Journal of Material Culture* 3, no. 3 (1998), 259–81, doi:10.1177/135918359800300301.

[53] Parrott, 'Death, Memory', 301.

[54] Katie Barclay and Nina Javette Koefoed, 'Family, Memory, and Identity: An Introduction', *Journal of Family History* 46, no. 1 (2021), 3–12, doi:10.1177/0363199020967297.

[55] On the links between families, domestic objects, and museums, see Kate Hill, 'Collecting Authenticity', *Museum History Journal* 4, no. 2 (2011), 203–22, doi:10.1179/mhj.2011.4.2.203; Parrott, 'Death, Memory'.

[56] Holmes, 'Material Affinities'.

of drawing the lines of who mattered and belonged within a family, and which relationships were significant. And though the passing of objects mattered a lot between parents and children, especially in the immediate wake of a death, their use to signify many types of relationships were important too; between uncles and aunts and their nieces and nephews and between relationships not so easily described within a family, such as John Hague's grandmother's fiancé who died in the First World War.

Our family historians were particularly interested in the past, and as well as owning items relating to their family's history and particular relatives who had died, many of the group displayed and used the things they had on a regular basis. Most of the group were mindful of the processes of curation, discarding, and passing things between relatives and had thought through what this might look like in the future as well as the past. But there was a dual sense for many of the group, of the enormous amount of 'stuff' they might have to deal with in the wake of a relative's death, or perhaps others might have to sort out in the wake of their own, twinned with a sense of a lack. Most of our group felt they didn't have much; as Bill put it, 'very very few' objects had survived through generations. Such a lack could be a sign of deprivation, or mobility, or both.[57] This sense could bubble up even if those family historians could name several things they did have. Such a sense of deficit, of what hadn't been passed on, either specific items lost or a more generalized sense of lack in comparison to richer families, pointed to the reality of not having much, but also to an emotional and classed sense of lack and loss, of poverty and not always having the control and choice over what to hold on to and pass on, and what to discard.

In my own family, there has been interest in keeping hold of things; that green piggy bank that used to belong to my Nanny King, Anne, still lives in my house. In 1993 when she died, my dad thought through the idea of us as young children taking and holding on to something. I own more from my maternal grandmother, partly because my mother was her only child; her jewellery that I inherited when she died, the scrapbooks she made my brother and me as children. There are other bits and pieces that survive of Anne, many mundane. One of the more extraordinary, given her income and background, was a textile hanging by artist Tibor Reich called 'The Age of Kings', made in 1964 for an RSC production, and which she later bought at a furniture shop, where the salesman complimented her taste: 'Madam is a modern woman', the story goes. The piece was passed down to her daughter Colette, who loved it, and since Colette's death, in 2020, her daughter Maria, who realized its artistic significance.[58]

[57] Light, *Common People*, xxiii–xxiv.

[58] Age of Kings, Tibor Reich, V&A, accession number T.62–2010, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1191291/age-of-kings-hanging-reich-tibor/.

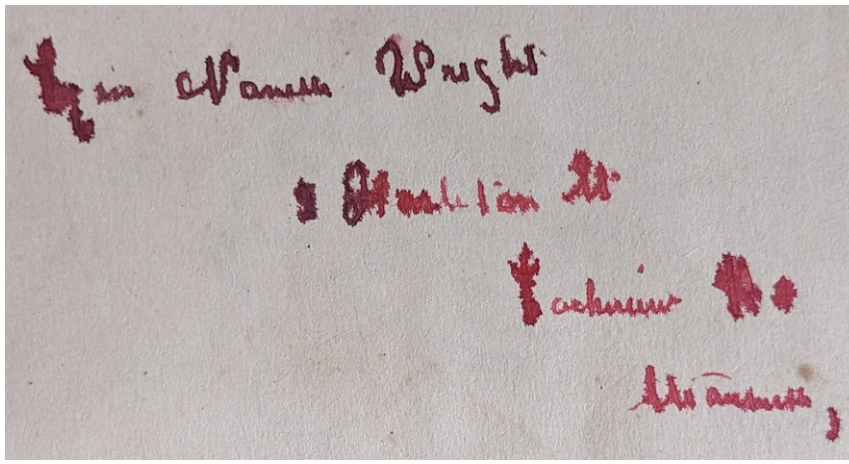

Figure 4.7 The annotation on the front page of Anne's cookbook, from King family personal collections.

And there's her cookbook too, a battered recipe book she presumably acquired when studying cookery in Belfast, a night school she was sent to whilst working in service. It was published by an American baking powder company. Within it are the recipes she used for her scones, remembered as the most delicious scones my dad ever tasted. He tells me that looking back at the book brings back the smells of his mum's baking. And there's a much-used recipe for 'Mrs Moody's Wonder Cake' too, one he remembers regularly eating as a child, a sponge cake covered in frosting. Like in Marie's family, recipes provided a way to connect generations over time, something that could be used as well as passed down. The cookery book, now in my dad's possession, also reveals something about Anne's character. In the inside cover, she wrote her name—but not 'Anne' or 'Annie', as she was sometimes known. Instead: 'Miss Nanette Wright' (see Figure 4.7). Most of her sisters were known by names other than how they'd been baptized—Jean was actually Jane, Peg Margaret, Min Mary. Nanette was the somewhat glamorous name she'd given herself, an alter ego she wanted to become. In such a book is the distilled sense of my grandmother as a great cook, baker, a mother, and grandmother who looked after others. But there was also a hint of her inner self and her dreams, another life, her beyond and before her family.

There are many things spread across the family that remind us of other relatives who have gone: my uncle Brendan's furniture has found new homes amongst his nieces and nephews, partly as a reminder of him, partly because we share his taste in mid-century homeware. Some of us, his nieces and nephews, have bodhrans from his large collection of instruments. He didn't have children himself, so the owning of these things by his nieces and nephews feels satisfying. But my family is also like many, in that this process is chaotic and haphazard. As far as I know,

there are no objects that create any links back to generations before my grandparents. Beyond a couple of photos, I don't think anyone has things that relate to my grandfather Joseph, who died in 1962. Here is choice in remembering: in contrast to Anne, the mother who worked hard to bring her children up, to help them get an education, and to give them the tools to do that bit better in life, Joseph was not a good dad. With some of his children, he was generous and loving, with some he was angry and violent, and others he paid little attention to. I'm told he was a hard worker, but often prioritized friends and the pub over his family. Whilst we have many things of Anne, a much-loved mother and grandmother, his children didn't have so much reason to choose to remember Joseph.

Living with the Dead: Memories, Histories, and the Stories Families Tell in Modern Britain. Laura King, Oxford University Press. © Laura King 2025. DOI: 10.1093/9780191915697.003.0004

5
Photos

The Mundane and the Momentous

Photos were perhaps the most common trace of the dead that our family historians had. Many had birth, marriage, and death certificates, most had at least one or two objects that acted as a purposeful or accidental reminder of the dead. But all had at least some photos, whether they acted as the 'family archivist' in their family or not. Geoff Hardwick hadn't much related to his relatives who had died. When we asked him about what he knew about his mum's history, and what, if anything, he had that reminded him of her, he said, he had 'only photographs … yeah, them little ones, I've forgotten where they are.'[1] She had died in 1990, aged 64. Photos are important, ordinary, commonplace, unique, ever-present, and often forgotten—all at the same time. Since the late nineteenth century, photos have provided a 'new community of memory' for all types of families.[2]

That photos were now familiar and everyday items for our family historians, though, didn't mean they weren't treasured. It was quite the opposite: photos were kept and everyone had them because they were special. They stuck around in families and were hard to get rid of. Photos from around the 1950s and earlier took on a particular significance, because they were from an age before personal photography was cheap and easy, and because the images showed those generations that were older or now dead. Some group members had photos going well back into the nineteenth century, others just one or two from the mid-twentieth century or a little earlier. That they showed the faces, the bodies, the visual expressions, and the doings of dead relatives made photos special. They could reveal physical resemblances with living biological relatives and give hints of the characters and emotions of those now dead. Photos were common—and increasingly common, as changing technologies made photos increasingly accessible for everyone. But photos were also unique—every snap taken was a unique capture of a moment, a person, a relationship, or family group.

[1] Geoff Hardwick (with Vanessa Manby), interview with Laura King, 18 December 2017.

[2] Nicole Hudgins, 'A Historical Approach to Family Photography: Class and Individuality in Manchester and Lille, 1850–1914', *Journal of Social History* 43, no. 3 (2010), 582, doi:10.1353/jsh.0.0298.

I started to think about the photos I've seen in my family. Videos feature too. Born in the mid-1980s, my childhood was one of the giant, heavy camcorder, with its loud whirring zoom, capturing grainy and wobbly footage of the blowing out of birthday candles, school fancy dress parades, wading through cold Shropshire streams in wellies on weekends away. My dad splashed out on a JVC video camera in about 1990, mostly, I think, to capture my brother and me as young children, but in doing so, he also captured footage of so many of my relatives who have since died—grandparents and a great-grandmother, aunts, uncles, and great-aunts. These are mostly incredibly boring: the filming of the everyday as well as the more significant moments. Even as we watch it—my parents and others—the footage is both intensely poignant and intensely tedious at the same time, as those no longer alive act up for camera, amidst lengthy footage of family parties at which you can hear what no one is saying.

My parents got all these videos transferred to DVD in the 2000s, hoping to preserve precious recordings on a dying format. But this meant losses and absences too: footage of a much-remembered Christmas morning declaration that 'he's been!', and my dad's mum, Anne, Nanny King, peeling sprouts for Christmas dinner has been lost. No footage of Anne survived, from my dad's filming at least. It must have been Christmas 1991, now gone. I have copies of the DVDs, of the content that was preserved; they'll need a format change again, to last. But these are for the future too; they have captured, I realize, my parents being parents of young children, like I am now—testing us with sums for the camera, asking us who the Prime Minister is. 'John Major!' my brother replies. These videos, along with the photos we own, are the future of remembrance in my family as well as a capturing of the past.

Questions of legacy and format came up in discussions at our family history group when we touched on photos. Like documents, photos were fragile and could be easily damaged, or fade, or get lost. Photos had a fragility, whether they were physical copies or digital records, and our family historians had questions and concerns about the best way to preserve and share digital photos. Their archives of photos, like my family's, are messy. I started to track down the many photos my family has, alongside the videos my dad and others made. They are spread across relatives, some in albums, some loose, some digitized, some battered, some hidden away, some on display. There's a tattered album labelled 'family groups', mostly from the 1950s, created by Anne. There are lots of loose photos from the 1950s and 1960s, of trips to Brighton, Bangor, and to see family in Ireland, as well as many of Anne and her children in the garden at their house in Siviters Lane in the Black Country.

When I look through the collections of my dad and his siblings, I find one photo that crops up a lot: a portrait of 'Granny', my great-grandmother Catherine, Anne's mother, who died in 1946 (Figure 5.1). The same photo is reproduced across lots of family members' collections, and I never find the original. My eldest

Figure 5.1 A photo portrait of 'Granny', Catherine Wright, née Morgan, held across various King family members' collections.

aunt, Cath, tells me she took it to a photo developing shop years ago and made everyone a copy. She is now the only one alive who met Granny. In Cath's house, this photo is framed and sits on her dresser, one of a few choice family photos spanning many decades and five generations. There's a spare copy in the back of the frame. In my aunt Sylvia's collection, shared between her daughters after her death, is also a framed copy. My dad has a loose copy of the photo. It's a typical interwar shot, of Granny, sitting posed and looking directly at the camera, in her finery. This posed portrait of Granny is the one chosen to act as a carrier of her memory, copied and passed around to ensure she wasn't forgotten, for another generation at least. There are a few other photos of Granny too, amongst a small handful from around the 1930s, such as Granny and her daughter Jean on holiday in the Irish seaside town of Portrush.

These few images of the 1930s also show my grandmother, Anne, as a young woman. There's a daring one of her in short shorts, patterned socks, high-heeled shoes, a jaunty cap, and a look of, perhaps, determined challenge on her face, looking straight at the camera, as she holds on to a bicycle (see Figure 5.2). I don't think the bike can have been hers; it looks big and has a crossbar, and is probably a man's bike. A caption on the back reads 'Mum at about 18/19 Harleson[?] St Belfast'. This is bold: a young woman in 1930s Ireland, displaying herself in such

Figure 5.2 A photo of Anne posed with a bicycle in about 1930. A caption on the back reads 'Mum at about 18/19, Harleson[?] Street Belfast', held in King family collections.

a way—well, shocking. My aunt Sylvia wrote captions on this and other photos much later, leaving traces of herself and her mother. These tell us about both of them. Another reads 'Mum, Jean outside Methodist Hall around 1931 (on the look of for fellas [sic])'. Here are photos that contain traces of the life Anne had before her children were born, and here are traces of my aunt's sense of humour and playfulness, enjoying the idea of her mum as a strong young woman determined to find fun, and hoping she did. My dad can't remember seeing these photos of his mum and aunts as young women. But my other aunt, Cath, had seen this one of her mum posing with the bike before. These photos were—whether by design or accident—passed on more between the women of the family.

What's notable are the absences too. Of those who died before the 1940s—of my great-grandfather George Wright there's no trace. There are lots of photos of Anne and some of her sisters, as well as the handful of Granny. My grandfather, Joseph, who died in 1962, is less visible, partly because he was estranged from his

Figure 5.3 A photo of Joseph and Anne King, in the 1940s or 1950s, held in various King family members' collections.

family for marrying a Catholic, presumably, or perhaps he didn't take any photos of his childhood with him when he left. His absence amongst our family photos has been exacerbated by, I think, a lack of strong desire to remember him and remember times spent with him, in contrast to my grandmother. When I search, there is one photo of him in his children's collections, a photo of my grandparents together, in perhaps the 1940s or 1950s (Figure 5.3). This photo is another I find copied across collections, an image of some sort of harmony between Anne and Joseph, even though the family's memories of the two of them as a couple is mostly of rows, resentment, and violence. It was a marriage of some sort of convenience. This image is the couple they should have been. My dad has a copy too, tucked away in a folder of his 'family history' bits and pieces. What unsettles me is that I assumed it was the photo my dad had displayed on a wall in their house, in a collection of photos spanning four generations, from their childhoods to that of my children. But—no. That's not the photo that's there, when I look. The photo that is there is one of Anne, my dad, and his nearest sister in age, Sylvia, in the late

1950s, when my dad is aged 4 or 5. This photo my dad describes as 'happy at Siviters Lane with my mum and Sylv'. My assumptions turned me to that family ideal, to the displaying of two parents together, even when I knew that my grandfather wasn't present in my dad's childhood, even though I knew Joseph and Anne had split. My parents did, they tell me, display this photo of Anne and Joseph, and one of my maternal grandparents too, for a short time in the house I grew up in. Both couples had been unhappy, both had separated. Both of my sets of grandparents were 'ill-suited couples' as my mum puts it, but she'd been touched by an image of both couples looking happy and comfortable together, at least for a moment, amidst what were years of difficulties.

My mum's feeling of being touched by these photos and my false memory of the photo of Anne and Joseph being still displayed today show the power of these images, and that they are not evidence of the past in any straightforward way. Photos show the stark meeting of the families we live with and the families we live by, as in John Gillis's framing.[3] Despite Joseph's deficiencies as a husband and father, despite his absences in his relatives' lives, despite the wish to not remember, such photos and their power persist.

The Otherwise of Photos

And then there are the 'what ifs'. When looking through some of my aunt Sylvia's collections of things the day after her death, in January 2022, we come across two photos of a 'Jack Brians'. These aren't a big surprise—my aunt knew about this man, as did several other members of my family. This Jack was a boyfriend of Anne's, my Nanny King. There are two formal shots of him, in an unbuttoned army-style shirt, similar but seemingly taken at different times (see Figure 5.4). Both photos have a hint of a smile. One is marked with a note from him: 'Yours ever, Jack'. On the back are notes from Sylvia: 'Jack Brians, old boyfriend', the first reads, and the other with more detail: 'Jack Brians, from Talbot Street Dublin. An old flame of Mum's. "I should have married him."' Cath also remembers these photos: she recalls finding them amongst her mum's things when she was a teenager, probably in the 1950s. She asked who this man was and was also told he was the man Anne 'should have' married, though he was 'too' handsome, when Cath remarked on his looks. Cath told me he was the love of Anne's life. The two images are tucked into a photo envelope, kept for what must be nearly one hundred years.

The photo brings to mind the story that was told to someone—we don't quite know who—that when they broke up, she threw a ring he'd given her, perhaps an

[3] John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

Figure 5.4 The two photos of Jack Brians, kept inside the small photo envelope, held in King family collections.

engagement ring, perhaps diamond, in the river Bann near Ballymoney, in a gesture showing their relationship was most definitely over. The story goes that he left to serve in India, part of the Inniskilling Fusiliers. He's not the only past love known about either—the name 'Johnny English' is also mentioned, and recollections that Anne and her sisters had lots of boyfriends. Here's a reminder of not only my grandmother and her life as a young woman, but of a life she might have had, and of a man my family has no other knowledge of or connection to. Here is the man she might have had a loving relationship with—that she didn't have with my grandfather. These photos are a way to remember the past, to remember people, to remember relationships, and to recognize the counterfactual. They are a way to remember my grandmother not just as a mother or a grandmother, but as a young woman with a turbulent love life. Anne kept those photos all her life in memory of a past relationship, a man who was to her gone, and her daughter kept these two in memory of the different parts of Anne's life.

The collections themselves are difficult to navigate. My dad, as the youngest sibling, has a small collection of images, some original older photos, but mostly copies of originals. The original photos seem to have been passed down to his older siblings, and perhaps more to his sisters than brothers. Cath, the eldest, has

some of the oldest photos, partly inherited from her cousin, Maureen. In her eighties and in relatively poor health, she struggles now to keep track of where they all are. Amongst these various scattered collections are many photos of Anne as her family grew, and her children and grandchildren. The middle sister, Colette, had many too, which have been passed down to her daughter, after Col died in 2020. A few months after Sylvia died, I properly sort through her photos with her daughter. It's a wonderful mess, a mix of very new and quite old, photos from her professional life as a community arts organizer, photos from her life as a political activist, photos from our family. She, it's thought, had a large proportion of the photos inherited from her parents. There are beautiful shots of her pregnant body, experimental images taken by her photographer ex-partner. I try to amass the 'historical' photos, make a little more sense of her collection, and piece together the photos that relate to the family's history from her childhood and before—of grandparents and great-grandparents. But I feel an ambivalence about doing this too. Is this a way to preserve our family's history, to share photos that others will enjoy too, to create a bit of chronology and sense? Or does it betray something of the pleasingly chaotic collection that my aunt had put together, mostly haphazardly, over many years? Any kind of organization starts to exclude too, as I might choose to select the images of those I remember or know about.

Idealizing

Choosing what photo to take, collecting, selecting which images to keep and which to discard is a process of idealization. There's an idealization of the dead, and an idealization of the family. Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, Marianne Hirsch describes how the process of photography can be 'inherently familial and material, akin to the very processes of life and death', but also combat death in the sense of the timelessness inherent in photos. She writes,

> As photography immobilizes the flow of family life into a series of snapshots, it perpetuates familial myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history. At the end of the twentieth century, the family photograph, widely available as a medium of familial self-presentation in many cultures and subcultures, can reduce the strains of family life by sustaining imaginary cohesion, even as it exacerbates them by creating images that real families could not uphold.

She adds that 'photographs locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life', showing 'what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently, it is

not'.[4] Such a sustaining of 'imaginary cohesion' takes place through all processes of family history, as well as within the use of photos. As Annette Kuhn describes, family photos and family memories are interlinked: 'they are stories of a past, shared (both stories and past) by a group of people that in the moment of sharing produces itself as a family'.[5] The visual medium of the photo makes this process particularly poignant, this double idealization of the dead and of the family as an institution, in its picturing of what a family should look like. My grandparents, stood together, the loving couple—and not. The grouping of family members into multi-generational assemblages of parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, aunts and uncles and their nieces and nephews are an iteration of what a family should be: patri- or at least matrilineal. I remember this process repeated across the years, the call for 'all the cousins!' to gather round to be photographed. In my relatives' collections is one such example: babies on their mums' knees, three generations together, smiling faces. It's from perhaps the late 1960s, maybe a family party or celebration of some sort, an occasion to document the happy family getting together. The golliwog toy in the background now betrays its usefulness as an idealized image of our family's past.

But the catching of everyday moments too could be part of this process of idealization: the capturing of children playing, Anne proudly in her garden. The family photo, and photo album, constantly reiterated the ideal family as white, heterosexual, and patriarchal.[6] As Thy Phu and Elspeth Brown note of the contemporary Canadian context, this very sense of the mundane can be harmful: 'ordinary images normalize violence through their projection of a predominantly aspirational mood'. Yet, as they also suggest, what we aspire to through family photography and family photos is complex, contradictory, and ever-changing, even within one family, or one individual. Family photographs are 'technologies of the otherwise'. They can offer a space to refuse white heteronormativity, amongst other narrow models of what families should look like.[7] Photos are a place of complex interplay between past, present, and future: a place to find the past we want, a present of resistance and refusal as well as conformity, a future to be created. Paying attention to that context, the process of idealization and how photos are used allows us to see beyond the image itself and the black and white.

[4] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 5–8. Also see Patricia Holland, 'Introduction: History, Memory and the Family Album', in *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, edited by Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (Virago, 1991), 1–14.

[5] Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, 2nd edition (Verso, 2002), 22.

[6] Deborah Chambers, 'Family as Place: Family Photograph Albums and the Domestication of Public and Private Space', in *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination*, edited by Joan Schwartz and James Ryan (Routledge, 2003), 96–114. Also see Shawn Michelle Smith, 'Feeling Family Photography: A Cautionary Note', *Photography & Culture* 10, no. 2 (2017), 165–7, doi:10.1080/17514517.2017.1327177.

[7] Thy Phu and Elspeth H. Brown, 'The Cultural Politics of Aspiration: Family Photography's Mixed Feelings', *Journal of Visual Culture* 17, no. 2 (2018), 155–7, doi:10.1177/1470412918782352.

We find what we want in photos. For me, the discovery of my Nanny King flouting the rules, dressed to shock, being radical as a young woman—in my interpretation—is the photo I home in on because of my politics, my research, my perspective on life. It's a photograph that pricks, of *punctum* in Barthes's words.[8] I want to have a grandmother like this, I want her to have been rebellious and to have felt free in the context of being a young Catholic woman in Belfast in the 1920s and 1930s. This is the version of my grandmother that I can feel most strongly related to—perhaps particularly as I don't have that many direct memories of her, as she died when I was aged 6. I want to go beyond the staged photos, the family groups, the conventional. I know so little about this photo, really—who took it, whether she dressed up in that way for the photo itself or for some other reason. This feels like the 'essence' of her to me, but why?[9] Is this the true Anne, or is it that gardening, baking, jam-making grandmother of her later life? Or—as is no doubt the case—both? It's idealization of our relatives and ancestors either way, even though the process of photography and photos themselves are what often feel like the most 'accurate' or 'true' capturing of the past. It's putting images to use, our use—as my aunts have done, and as I do now as I look at this image in my family's collections. Remembering the dead through photos—and videos—offers the possibility of a sense of intimacy in remembering, in seeing someone and feeling seen back as that person, now dead, gazes at the camera, at us looking. Remembering through photos also offers the possibility of curation, of selection, of idealization—to create both the past and the family I, you, we want.

Beyond the Family

Photos, within written accounts of a family, could also form one way of creating those connections between individual, family, place, community, and nation. Family photos were bound up with place, and reflect the relationship with place that those families had.[10] Photographs from personal collections, of course, weren't all about family. Remembering the dead through photos of them meant also seeing them with friends, at work, in other, public spaces. These were the photos that existed because the occasions, or the subjects of the photo, had been important enough to photograph in an age before the smartphone. Photos could relate to a range of senses of belonging, for those families long settled in a location, or those who had migrated.[11] Photos, in depicting both locations and people,

[8] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard, new edition (Vintage, 1993).
[9] Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 1.
[10] Chambers, 'Family as Place', 99–100.
[11] Hudgins, 'A Historical Approach', 564.

were a way to connect. Marie had family connections to Wisbech in Cambridgeshire and had seen a call by the local photographer: 'they were appealing for people who particularly could recognize photographs to help them'. She had put a lot of work into labelling the photos she submitted—names, places, and 'anything else I could think about that would be relevant to the photographs'. She had been frustrated that this work had gone without thanks, her labour unacknowledged by the photographers.[12] In the end, it had been a useful exercise in helping her to label and document her family photos, creating a 'memory bank', but though the idea of connecting her photos and her family to their locality had been appealing, it hadn't born the results Marie wanted.

Such projects are very common; across the country, local history groups based on photos have sprung up on websites and social media over the last couple of decades, offering a possibility to connect individuals and families with localities and communities. In Leeds, the Leodis website run by Leeds Libraries offers such a possibility, bringing together online archival photos of Leeds and the surrounding area, with an option for members of the public to add their own comments and memories.[13] Photos offer an easy sense of collective and community memory, a sense of shared heritage through its visual record of people and places in the past. Online photo sharing spaces allow an intertwining of family histories and histories of places.[14]

One of the most successful examples of such a community is the online Gypsyville project, run by Amanda Reed, who was born in Leeds and has English Gypsy heritage. As Amanda describes of her own family history, 'photographs bring our stories and our history to life' and 'photographs are a good way of telling our story'.[15] Amanda described how important photos had been to her and her family: her aunt Violet (born in 1936) treasured photos and had owned a camera so had managed to take many. As Amanda put it, 'we can see her telling her stories in the photographs on display, and she has left us our stories in the photographs to tell'. This culture of treasuring photos in Amanda's family was common to other families too, as shown through the Gypsyville online community. Gypsyville is a closed Facebook group, open to those of Gypsy and Traveller heritage and a select few others by invitation, named after the nickname given to an area in which lots of Gypsy families used to live, if they moved into bricks and mortar housing. The group now has around 4,000 members. Reflecting a strong interest in family history and heritage amongst Gypsy and Traveller communities, the site offers an alternative to museums, archives, and other sites which have

[12] Marie, interview with Jessica Hammett, 26 January 2018.
[13] Leodis, https://www.leodis.net/.
[14] Lianne Brigham, Richard Brigham, Peter Brown, and Helen Graham, 'Living with History in York: Increasing Participation from Where You Are', in *Heritage, Conservation and Communities*, edited by Gill Chitty (Routledge, 2016), 143–62.
[15] Amanda Reed, unpublished memoir, shared with me by email.

failed to include Gypsy and Traveller groups as part of the histories they tell. Gypsyville offers a 'virtual campfire', in Amanda's words, for people to share stories and histories through photos. In an article for *Travellers Times*, Amanda described how 'I can put a picture on and we don't know what it is or where it is, or who it is […] within an hour you will have 20 comments'. Photos offer a space for reconnecting family members and friends, to share memories, to remember those who have died and past experiences.[16] A closed site based around photos, the Facebook group has offered the chance for a positive space for remembering and for creating Gypsy and Traveller identity in a society which is often hostile to Gypsies and Travellers.

Social media offers new possibilities for a wide variety of types of photo-based memory communities. Some are deeply nostalgic, harking back to an overly idealized and everyday past of 'proper binmen'.[17] Others, like Gypsyville, allow connection between communities. Another such example is Linden Archives, an Instagram account of the photographer Stuart Linden Rhodes, which shares photos of the '90s gay northern scene'.[18] The sharing of these photos is a way of celebrating the joy of 1990s queer culture, also idealized through such shared spaces. Many photos have become particularly poignant in their showing of those who have since died, not least from the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s.[19] The community that has built up around this Instagram account, through thousands of followers and the comments from those pictured in these photos, has led Linden Rhodes to publish a limited-edition photo book since.[20]

The Digital and the Physical

Eric was very organized about his photo collection. He had digitized, filed, and labelled all his older photos from his parents' families, from his childhood in the 1940s and 1950s, and from his married family life too. He and his wife Marie had sorted her family's collections too. When I visited their house, they showed me their collections on their computer, and shared photos with me online, so I could see not only the many images they had, but also how they had stored and

[16] Mike Doherty, '"I Started Tatting When I Were a Baby in a Pram" Amanda Reed', *Travellers Times*, 16/2/2018, https://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/features/i-started-tatting-when-i-were-baby-pram-amanda-reed.

[17] Dan Hancox, '"Who Remembers Proper Binmen?" The Nostalgia Memes That Help Explain Britain Today', *The Guardian*, 15 November 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/nov/15/who-remembers-proper-binmen-facebook-nostalgia-memes-help-explain-britain-today.

[18] Out & About with Linden/@linden_archives, Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/linden_archives/ [accessed 19 May 2023].

[19] Patrick Sproull, 'A Queer Archive of Northern England in the '90s', *Huck*, 7 December 2021, https://www.huckmag.com/article/a-queer-archive-of-northern-england-in-the-90s.

[20] Stuart Linden Rhodes, *Out and About with Linden: A Queer Archive of the North* (Pariah Press, 2022).

organized them. Eric and Marie had a rigorous system, so any photo could be conjured up in minutes. They had spent many years hosting international students from the university, and enjoyed sharing photos old and new with not only family and friends, but the students who stayed with them:

> as historical family photos, you know, I don't mean I sit and go through the whole lot [sixty thousand!] but we'll be talking and I have my computer rigged up so I can show the pictures through the telly, it's hardwired under the floor, so I can just press the right button and it shows what's on the computer, which—I mean we regularly do the, around Yorkshire, and this is the type of things you can see.

This helped Eric and Marie introduce the students to their family and themselves, but also show them what life was like in Britain, sharing Christmas rituals and information about the local area.

This process of digitization had meant that Eric and Marie had thrown away all physical copies of their photos, except for a small few. They had amassed over 60,000 digital images. Eric explained:

> I mean we've, we've been through and digitized all our photographs, and got rid of the photographs [oh], rightly or wrongly, but it's released shelf loads of stuff [yeah] and if the house burns down, I pay for cloud storage, I can still get everything back. If it was photographs in the house [they're gone] they're gone.

The only physical, hard copy photos Eric and Marie had kept were wedding photographs, both their own wedding and their parents' weddings, and other 'historic' ones, such as those Eric had inherited from his mum, of his childhood: 'this is baby on the couch type of thing, you know, professionally done, as, as you did in those days, I've got those'. Some of these photos, from Eric's childhood, had been labelled by his mother, and these had marked them out as worth keeping—because they had additional information on them, as well as a trace of his mum's handwritten record-keeping. He explained 'when mum had died, if there was nothing on them, there was no use keeping them'. Even for Eric, keen to focus on the digital and make space in his home, some photos were impossible to throw away.

Eric enjoyed showing the photos and having them carefully ordered and filed away for the future—every individual digitally copied photo was labelled with a short caption of what it pictured. And the images themselves were also meaningful. They helped Eric remember his younger days, and to know something more of his relatives. Photos could help go beyond individual memory: when I asked about his dad, Eric told me about how he used to play on the beach with him on holidays: 'I can't remember dad playing with me on the beach at Filey, I know he

Figure 5.5 Eric and his family at Filey, in 1950/51, from Eric's family collections.

did because I've seen photographs, but it, it won't come.' The photos helped him remember the yearly holidays the family took on the north Yorkshire coast, using the passes his father gained from working on a railway (Figure 5.5). They stayed in a bed and breakfast, hiring a canvas beach hut for the daytimes, and so spent a lot of time on the beach. The photos helped Eric to remember his parents, and other relatives, before they got old: 'I was surprised looking through some of them, as I was doing not too long ago, at how young mum looked at times and yes, you tend to forget that side of things. I can't remember mum looking young, except through seeing pictures of her.'[21]

Paul Cave, one of the younger members of our group, was particularly reflective about the value of photos. One photo of his family had triggered a long-standing interest in researching his family history, from an urge to be able to put context, information, and names to those pictured in the image. He realized he didn't recognize several of the group, and it pushed him to find out more (see Figure 5.6). He reflected how the loss of knowledge around photos could quickly render them meaningless, making the subjects into any 'random family'. Through online family history research, and the site Genes Reunited, Paul had some years ago made contact with a distant, older relative, who had identified a number of people in Paul and his dad's photos: 'that was really cool because it was, it wasn't just, you know, like looking at photos, it was like actually speaking to someone who had been with these people'.

Photos could mean a lot to Paul. He told us of locating a photo of his great-grandad in the University of Leeds Liddle Collections, of the First World War: 'it

[21] Eric, interview with Laura King, 26 January 2018.

Figure 5.6 The family photo which triggered Paul's research. Paul's grandmother, Mary, is on the left, with glasses and a striped top. Photo taken from Paul Cave's family collections.

is interesting to, to look on that man who, you know [my dad's] dad knew even if only briefly, and, you know, kind of, I think it's quite a…it's quite a poignant experience looking at these photos of people who are no longer here.' Because of his great-grandfather's involvement in the First World War, Paul reflected he had as many photos of him as his grandfather—the vagaries and events of history dictating the extent of the visual records, as well as the technologies available when those people lived.[22] Paul recalled a photo of his paternal grandad, Leslie Cave, sitting proudly next to his van, with 'Cave and Son' written on it. Yet, when Paul sought out that photo, for inclusion in this book, he realized he had conflated two different photos, one of his maternal grandfather, standing next to a van with lettering of the company he worked for (Figure 5.7) and another of an unmarked van outside his paternal grandfather's house, a photo he had found on Leodis, the Leeds Libraries photo archive (Figure 5.8). The image of a 'Cave and Son' van was one Paul realized he'd invented, the projection of a sense of family pride in his paternal grandad through an imagined photo.

Like Eric, Paul had done a lot of work digitizing his family's photo collections, in part to upload them to online family history websites like Ancestry. This process, he felt, had devalued the physical photographs themselves. Paul did still have a 'musty' box of original photos and thought about how they had been

[22] Paul Cave, interview with Jessica Hammett, 30 April 2018.

Figure 5.7 A photo of Paul's maternal grandfather, Phillip Stone, with his works van. From Paul Cave's personal collections.

touched by his relatives and ancestors when he handled them. Photos are tactile, even as smooth, flat renderings of sensory and three-dimensional worlds.[23] But overall, Paul thought that 'what matters to me is what those, the information that those objects are able to impart, not necessarily the objects themselves'. One of his grandfathers, a grandfather by marriage, but as close to Paul as his biological grandfathers, had served in the Second World War. Paul described an album he had about these experiences:

> when my granddad Bill was in Sri Lanka, or near Sri Lanka, and he went to India on leave and he went to, I think he went to Delhi and, you know, it's like these photos, and it's like, wow, he was there and he decided to take these pictures, and he decided these pictures should go in this album and blah, blah, blah. But not necessarily the, the album itself, you know, I do think, I do want to care for it and I do want to keep it and you know, this, that and the other but, I don't sort of, sort of sit lovingly flicking through the pages, and you know that kind of thing, as a way into remembering my granddad. I just think about my granddad, you know [yeah] if that makes sense?[24]

[23] Carol Mavor, 'Collecting Loss', *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 1 (1997), 111–37, doi:10.1080/09502389700490071.

[24] Paul Cave, interview with Jessica Hammett, 30 April 2018.

Figure 5.8 A photo Paul found on the Leodis website of his paternal grandfather's house and van. Reproduced by kind permission of Leeds Libraries, www.leodis.net.

Photos, though, could be difficult to discard—destroying them could feel too violent, throwing them away too final, even for Paul who found the images and the information they held more compelling than the physical photos themselves.

For Katie, photos were particularly valuable. When we interviewed her, with her grandmother Dorothy, she described a collection of family things—mostly documents and photos—kept in the camel or goat hair case: 'the photos are good, especially I think. Can't remember who was in there actually, in the photos, but it's always nice to see pictures of people that you [Yeah], that you're…talking about.' There was a sense of bringing to life relatives she had never known, those that her grandmother told her about but she, in her late twenties when we worked with her, had never met. Dorothy told us, 'Oh I like photographs!' Photos were a way to conjure happy memories without a sense of reliving the grief Dorothy felt or dwelling on the more difficult parts of the past. She said,

> they bring back a lot of mostly happy memories. 'Cause I actually remember the nice things about people, rather than…And I think sometimes if people have been unkind, it's usually they're not well, or they're in pain, or…they can't, you know, there's something wrong with them, and that's what makes them unkind, so I tend not to think about unkind things, but just remember happy things.

One photo, of Katie's grandfather, Alf, had a particular significance. When she started to talk about her husband's family, Dorothy brought up this photo: 'It was in the early 30s. Hm. He was…he was born in…He was about 8…or 9. I've got a picture of them, haven't I [Mm, yeah] of the mum with the five little boys. You can go get it.' At this point in the interview, Katie fetched the photo, and Dorothy explained the circumstances in which the photo was taken: 'Somebody said she should have a photograph with them while they were all together because there was talk of, of, my husband, who was the right age, going off to the…army school.' The photo of the family group, a mother with five sons, including Alf, had a particular poignancy because it was taken just after his father had died in army service. This couple had also lost their first daughter: Alf's sister had died at age 3 or 4, in around 1920. This photo, taken around 1930, captured the family group that was left, with two of its members notably absent. Dorothy didn't know who might have paid for such a photo: the family, living on a soldier's pension, hadn't much.

In the end, Alf didn't go—it was felt the family had been through enough, with his father dying and the loss of another daughter, and so he stayed with his mother and brothers, until the disruptions of the Second World War. Dorothy felt she had never really known her mother-in-law, despite the fact she had lived with Dorothy and Alf for some time. She didn't tell her family much about her background, and 'threw everything away, she didn't keep anything much at all.' Dorothy added 'she never wanted to talk about the past…The boys used to ask her…she, she used to just, sort of just shrug her shoulders and say "Oh I don't know, it's gone".' Coping with extreme poverty and losing her daughter and husband, Dorothy felt, had meant she was unwilling or unable to revisit the past and tell stories of it. But despite that, some photos and other items had survived, and some of the stories with them.

For both Katie and Dorothy, part of the appeal of photos was the opportunity to trace family resemblances across generations:

KATIE: And I think you can…I, I just think that his mum looks like…my mum.
INTERVIEWER: Yeah.
KATIE: You can really see a…a resemblance.
DOROTHY: [talking at the same time] And you—and your granddad looks like his mum.
KATIE: Yeah. Yeah. Oh definitely, yeah.[25]

The visual quality of photos helped cement a sense of continuity and bondedness across multiple generations, even for those relatives who had never met each other.

[25] Katie and Dorothy, interview with Jessica Hammett, 26 June 2018.

Archives of Care

The ability to see the faces of relatives and ancestors after their death was something families gained in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Occasionally, painted portraits of ancestors were kept and used. A couple of the family historians we worked with had sketches of an ancestor. Families, from working-class as well as middle-class backgrounds, paid for professional photograph portraits even in the nineteenth century when to do so was still very expensive. In the following century, increasing numbers of families from all social backgrounds could take their own photos of the doings of daily life as well as posed shots. Photographs became more common and were used by families to remember.

Photography and mourning were deeply connected in the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Photos could become almost 'religious icons' in the home as a shrine to the dead and a marker of their absence.[26] Post-mortem photography, a somewhat niche but important practice in the nineteenth century, became less prevalent in the twentieth. This was partly due to the growth of the availability of photos, so families would have a greater number of photos of that person alive, and partly due to the decline in infant and child mortality; children were the most frequent subjects of post-mortem photographs. There was also an increased emphasis on remembering the life rather than the death of an individual, with the decline in post-mortem photography echoed by a move away from mourning items created specifically in the wake of death. But it is difficult to assess the popularity of this practice, and there's also evidence of its increased prevalence into the twenty-first century, particularly as smartphones make taking post-mortem photos very easy.[27]

As photography became cheaper and readily used, remembrance practices changed too: in Britain, photographs of the dead in the home became the predominant form of memorializing the dead, favoured over using the cemetery, and placing photos at a cemetery, as in other European countries.[28] The scale of death during the First World War made these photos even more important, in their visual content and their tactility as objects too, traces of the absent.[29] The early twentieth century also saw the rise of assembling photos, perhaps with other documents and ephemera, into books, albums, and the like, part of a 'culture of

[26] Hudgins, 'A Historical Approach', 572–5.

[27] On post-mortem photos, see Audrey Linkman, 'Taken from Life: Post-Mortem Portraiture in Britain 1860–1910', *History of Photography* 30, no. 4 (2006), 309–47, doi:10.1080/03087298.2006.10443484.

[28] Sarah Tarlow, 'An Archaeology of Remembering: Death, Bereavement and the First World War', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 7, no. 1 (1997), 116–17, doi:10.1017/S0959774300001499.

[29] Jay Winter, *War beyond Words: Languages of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 207.

making' within families, particularly amongst the upper and middle classes.[30] Women often played a more significant role in the curation of family photos, as well as other items documenting their histories such as scrapbooks and quilts, even if photography as a creative and artistic practice might be associated with men.[31] These practices were an archival practice of care, of love. These connections have persisted through changing photographic technologies and dramatic shifts in family life: photographs offer the chance to remember, preserve, and pass on the family itself as well as individual members within it.[32]

Photos themselves provided an easy and ready-made chronology of a family. As Hirsch puts it, photography in the twentieth century became, for some families, a 'primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation—the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, by which the family's story would henceforth be told'.[33] Photos are testaments to an individual life, an autobiography, and have at least a veneer of 'truth' about them, giving a sense of 'the life as it is lived', to use Jay Prosser's words.[34]

Photos could get lost, become damaged, or get thrown away, but the steady proliferation of them over the course of the twentieth century meant that for families not to have any photos, physical or digital, or film content too, they had to be rejected entirely. Whether they were organized or loose, labelled or not, they contained a lot of information. Photos, posed or more informal, could trigger a whole range of positive and negative emotions. But as time went on, knowledge of the context and content of photos could get lost. Albums were frequently simply collections of photos, with no additional context, intended to be used by those who could give some kind of commentary and contextualization. Many family historians we worked with were careful to label photos and put them in albums or scrapbooks if possible, piecing together what they knew about older photos to preserve them for the future, as well as labelling their own photos. But this was a time-consuming process, and inevitably many also ended up with loose

[30] Jane Hamlett, 'Mothering in the Archives: Care and the Creation of Family Papers and Photographs in Twentieth-Century Southern England', *Past & Present* 246, Supplement 15 (2020), 186–214, doi:10.1093/pastj/gtaa036. On the creative uses of photos, also see Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).

[31] See Patrizia di Bello, *Women's Albums and Photography in Victorian England: Ladies, Mothers and Flirts* (Routledge, 2007); Chambers, 'Family as Place'; Liz Gloyn, Vicky Crewe, Laura King, and Anna Woodham, 'The Ties That Bind: Materiality, Identity, and the Life Course in the "Things" Families Keep', *Journal of Family History* 43, no. 2 (2018), 157–76, doi:10.1177/0363199017746451; Hamlett, 'Mothering'; Deborah McGuire, '"Remember Me". Domestic Textiles in Britain: Memory, Identity and Emotion' (MA thesis, Oxford Brookes, 2022), doi:10.24384/fjy7-9c32. Also see Rachel Maloney, The Matriarchive, https://www.rachel-maloney.com/copy-of-installations [accessed 31 May 2023].

[32] Anne Blue Wills, 'Mourning Becomes Hers: Women, Tradition, and Memory Albums', *Religion and American Culture* 20, no. 1 (2010), 93–121, doi:10.1525/rac.2010.20.1.93.

[33] Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 6–7.

[34] Jay Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 9.

photos which weren't well organized—like many in my own family collections. The choice to label and catalogue took photos into a new realm, of preserving for posterity, for history, with the future in mind.

As part of her interest in family history, Jean Barker had assembled historical photos of her ancestors into albums, adding typewritten captions and dates to photos even from over a hundred years ago, of which she had no personal memory. This was the sort of care, love, and emotional work through archiving that Jane Hamlett describes, from a mother, sister, and daughter. One album had a label on it: 'This album is dedicated to the memory of Arthur, Alan and Jack Wiggins. These young men served their country from 1940/1946. The words on the cenotaph read "Lest we forget". I for one shall never forget them. These boys were my brothers.' This album brought her three beloved brothers together in their military service, Alan and Arthur who had died in the war with Jack who had died much later, in 1987.[35] Photos could become meaningful in their connections and the physical placing of images together, assembled and overlaid with multiple relatives and meanings. Carolyn Huston, our family historian with a spare room full of objects and documents relating to her family's past, had many albums too, from both sides of her family. The photos inside had been carefully labelled by her relatives, who had had the time and resources to assemble these albums. Some parts of Carolyn's family had been 'well-to-do' as she put it, so left a particularly rich visual record.

As a child, Carolyn had known exactly where this organized set of albums was and had looked through them relatively regularly: 'we always had access to the photographs of their lives and, and the people they knew.' But there were mysteries too: the photo in one album of her mum with an 'attractive young man': 'It wasn't labelled and again, I didn't know who it was', Carolyn told us. The lack of label for this photo was notable: the albums and scrapbooks from both her parents and their families were in general very well organized, with text captions explaining each photo's context. Carolyn later pieced stories together and worked out this was a previous boyfriend of her mum's who had died during the evacuations from Dunkirk in the Second World War—another 'what if'. The photo left a trace, though, a record of that relationship, the man who died, and her mother's earlier life. There were other clues; though her mother 'never mentioned a word', Carolyn and her family found a cigarette case amongst her mother's belongings which they assumed had come from her boyfriend. Her mum had also bought her the book *Snow Goose* by Paul Gallico, set during the Dunkirk evacuations, at which Carolyn remembered her mother would 'cry buckets'. Here, a photo provided a record, a trace of a man who had died when text, words, histories did not.

[35] Personal collections of Jean Barker.

With the photo and a tiny bit of information, Carolyn had managed to work out who this man was, finding records of his death at Dunkirk through her research.[36]

Carolyn also told us about a locket. This was one of the few things her sister possessed; Carolyn by and large had collected most things of any historical significance in her family. The locket was one of the few things that had survived from her maternal grandmother's belongings. She explained:

> her locket was there, which my sister has which is a silver locket, it's about that size it's quite big and in it she has a picture of Arthur on one side and Herbert on the other, and when my mum got it she put my sister on one side and me on the other and my sister's got it now and she's got her two girls, so there there's sort of three layers of photos [wow] on this locket which is rather nice.[37]

Such a locket preserved together the love of mothers over three generations, squashing time to align the care and attachment three women had for their children. The way photos were collected, labelled, and where they were kept was where the meaning of photos came from, along with the images contained within the photos themselves. The living and the dead resided together in albums, lockets, or loose in folders.

For John Hague, it was those scrawled notes on the back of photos which were particularly satisfying. Like Paul, he felt frustrated when photos had no context; the people within them became meaningless. John had quite a few photos, old and new, and displayed lots of older photos in his house as well as keeping them in folders with other documents and materials relating to his family's history. Some of his relatives had done him a favour and kept notes, he told us: 'One of the good things is that, on most of the photographs, is written on the back, or someone's written on the back, the date and time and who it is [mm]. Otherwise, you just don't know who they are.' This contextual information allowed John a greater sense of knowledge about his family history, and to build up connections with relatives he had never known. John had added to this visual record of his family's past by visiting sites of significance—old houses, graves—and taken photos of those too, adding them to folders with the photos that he had inherited.

Displaying the Dead

But for John, displaying photos was perhaps most important as a way to remain connected to relatives who had died. As we sat in John's house, we asked about whether he had photos of his parents and grandparents on display:

[36] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 9 January 2018.
[37] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 29 January 2018.

> I do. We've recently had this done, so up above here is a bedroom and then there's a corridor that goes there, and in the corridor I've got two shelves. So I've got their pictures stood on the shelves and then, at the end of the corridor, I've got two shelves across and I've got those on, on there. So it's not part of the bedroom, if you see what I mean, because [my wife] thinks it'd be weird [laughs].

We asked a bit more about what felt 'weird', and John talked about the sometimes uncanny feeling photos could provoke, a too intimate sense of the presence of the dead. John described his wife's reaction to a photo of his maternal grandparents on their wedding day, 'she says, "They're looking at you as though to say, 'I'm keeping my beady eye on you'" [all laugh].'[38]

John and his wife's slightly different views on how welcome photos of the dead were, particularly within the setting of the home, reflected the mix of emotions that photos could instigate, both welcome and not. Photos of the dead can symbolize a simultaneous absence and presence. Photos displayed in homes might ensure the dead remained present in the everyday lives of the living, a constant reminder on the wall or framed on the mantelpiece of those who the living wanted to remember.[39] Photos could provoke a range of emotions—the eeriness that John's wife alluded to, as well as pain. Photos of those who had died in all sorts of circumstances were displayed, though often those who died in the world wars were marked out as different, such as in the use of poppies in their display, or a photo of that individual in uniform, for some years at least.[40]

For Sarah Sykes, photos of the dead in her home were too much. She reflected on what photos she chose to display and what was notable in its absence. She reflected that 'I've got the photographs fairly well arranged so I know where they are if I want to find something', but 'I haven't got any photographs of anyone who's died on display, I'd feel a bit odd about doing that [mm] so, I know some people do, they have photographs of people that have passed away but I think I might find it…a bit upsetting'. Sarah told us a lot about her aunt who had died in the mid-2000s. Her aunt, her mother's twin sister, had been like a second mum to Sarah, and had lived next door to her parents when she was growing up. Instead of displaying her aunt's photo in her house, Sarah had something else to remind her: 'I've got a cat that she bought me and I have that on a windowsill, little pottery cat, I like to have that and I do think of her when I see it, but I find that easier than having a photograph of her.' It was difficult for Sarah to get used to looking at photos of her aunt, because they provoked such painful emotions. She told us

[38] John Hague, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 November 2017.

[39] Rachel Hurdley, *Home, Materiality, Memory and Belonging: Keeping Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 143–4.

[40] Ann-Marie Foster, 'The Ephemera of Remembrance in the Wake of War and Disaster, 1899–1939' (PhD thesis, Northumbria University, 2019), 73–7, https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/41204/.

that now, about thirteen years after her aunt had died, she did 'quite often look at photographs, it took me a long time to look at a photograph of her'. Part of the appeal of those photos now was the opportunity to share them with her son, who didn't remember Sarah's aunt, as he'd been so young when she died.[41] Sarah reflected that she had come to appreciate her photos more, especially the more recent ones, highlighting that 'they don't have to be ancient to be history'.[42]

Janet Coles, similarly, felt the power of photos and an urge to keep some of them private. When we interviewed her, Janet brought along some family photos, including one of her parents on their wedding day. I asked to see them, and Janet reflected 'I haven't brought any of, now this is odd isn't it because I've got some of my mum when she was younger, but I haven't I didn't bring those, but…I didn't know what to bring.' She repeated this sense of not feeling quite right about sharing photos of her mum: 'as I say I didn't, I don't know why I didn't bring one of my mum it just didn't seem to be the thing to do'.[43] For Janet, such family photos had a deep sense of privacy, and perhaps were too intimate to share in the context of our project, even if it was about family history. Perhaps her mum hadn't become distant enough in the past, a part of a sense of history. Family photos contained within them a tension: they were taken to be preserved, shared, a moment or person captured for the future. But they were deeply emotional things too, an object and an image that could trigger very personal and deeply felt emotions in a way that felt inappropriate for public consumption.

When writing up booklets on their families, some of our group included lots of photos of individuals, and some a choice few. Janet used two photos to set up her story. On the front cover, Janet chose a photo of a Vesta case, to keep matches in, that had been passed down through her family (see Figure 4.4, p. 86). On the first main page of the booklet, she included the photo of her parents' wedding day from 1943 (Figure 5.9). It's a simple photo of the two of them, standing outside the church, linking arms and both smiling. In the background are guests peering round the side of the church, and terraces and a greenhouse in the distance. They look happy, in their wedding clothes—a suit for him, a knee-length dress for her, with gloves, a tiny bag, and a hairpiece. Both have flowers pinned to their outfits. Here is the happy wartime wedded couple. This was the photo Janet wanted to show, the photo that was designed and taken for public consumption. Spread through the rest of the booklet are three formal portraits, photographs of Janet's grandmother and two great-grandmothers.[44]

Like other written family history accounts, the choice of photos is revealing in these booklets. There is a sense of showing the formal shots, the photos that

[41] Sarah Sykes, interview with Jessica Hammett, 30 April 2018.
[42] Family historians' group discussion on the impact of the project, 7 June 2018.
[43] Janet Coles, interview with Laura King, 8 December 2018.
[44] Janet Coles, 'Three Remarkable Women: The Lives of My Great Grandmothers' (2018), 942.819 LIV, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.

Figure 5.9 A photo of Janet's parents, Freda and Ted, on their wedding day, taken from Janet Coles's personal collections.

would have been expensive and carefully posed. The photos are often taken on momentous occasions—notable birthdays and anniversaries or other forms of celebration of the individual, such as a retirement party or the presentation of an award or prize. This is the public face of family photography, remembering the dead as they posed themselves, or remembering them when they were celebrated. Some of our family historians, and some writers of family histories, memoirs, and autobiographies chose to include shots of everyday life, and perhaps more intimate and candid images. Holiday shots were certainly common. Photos of objects, homes, and places were also common. Marie included a few more informal shots, of family nights out and relatives laughing together, in a final section of her booklet simply titled 'Some more family photos'.[45] She chose not to deposit her booklet with the local library, unlike many of the other family historians,

[45] Marie's booklet (2018), held privately.

which perhaps invited a slightly more intimate view into family life, designed more for her relatives rather than others outside the family.

Conclusion

Photos allow for a powerful form of visual remembrance and are an important mechanism for remembrance on an everyday basis. In taking photos, keeping them, labelling them (or not), and putting them into albums or on display, families find ways to mark both the presence and absence of their dead and a recognition of their histories. Photos help to enable an ongoing sense of presence of the dead, but also emphasize the difference between past and present.[46] The visual nature of photos makes them particularly special, offering an intimate way of connecting with the dead. Seeing their faces, moments in their lives, and being able to project a sense of their emotions and thoughts from the images themselves mean that photos can be powerful, providing, in Hirsch's words an 'intimate material and affective connection' with the subjects in those photos.[47] This isn't always welcome; seeing the dead can be too much. Photos are simultaneously intimate, deeply personal, and also for public consumption, displayed for others to see.

Photos seem to neatly capture a memory, an experience, but they are mediated. A photo is about an idealized past as much as what happened; the choice of which photos to take, which photos to keep, which photos to display are processes of aspiration and idealization, a creation of the history a family or individual want. Photos are about the future, too, a reminder of mortality and our own deaths to come, as well as those that have already happened.[48] The act of taking photos, collecting them, putting them in albums is about the future as much as the past, 'remembering to remember in the future.'[49]

What do photos offer up of the dead that other ways of remembering do not? I think it is this sense of intimacy, the ability to look into the eyes of someone no longer here. I look again at the photo of my Nanny King, Anne. That one with her determined expression, as I see it. When writing this chapter, I couldn't stop going back to it. I carried it round in my bag over some weeks, sharing it when I thought someone might be interested. The intimacy of seeing her bare legs, the tight shorts round her hips and bottom, the look of defiance and challenge in her expression, but the bike too, the net curtains in the background—it all sticks with me. It's a posed photo but its sense of playfulness and refusal to conform to the

[46] Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 20.
[47] Marianne Hirsch, 'Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008), 116.
[48] Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room*, 2.
[49] Adam Drazin and David Frohlich, 'Good Intentions: Remembering through Framing Photographs in English Homes', *Ethnos* 72, no. 1 (2007), 73, doi:10.1080/00141840701219536.

expectations of being photographed as a young, working-class woman in 1920s/30s Belfast is what makes it, to me, powerful. But that's the thing—it's powerful to me, where others in my family might chuckle at it, and move on, looking for something else. Those who never knew or weren't related to Anne might see nothing of significance in it. We find what we want of the dead in our photos.

Living with the Dead: Memories, Histories, and the Stories Families Tell in Modern Britain. Laura King, Oxford University Press. © Laura King 2025. DOI: 10.1093/9780191915697.003.0005

6
Writing

A Writing Case and a Recipe Book

Marie had inherited a few things from her mum, who had died when Marie was just 17. One was her writing case. When we asked our group of family historians whether they wanted to write about their relatives through a blog post, Marie wrote a piece about her mum and her writing case, an object we also showcased in our exhibition on *Remembrance* at Abbey House Museum. Marie understood it had been given to her mum in the 1930s as a Christmas present. This object reminded Marie of her mum because,

> When I was growing up in the 1950s families kept in touch by writing letters to each other about day to day events. My memory is of Mum having 'done her jobs' for the day often sitting down in the middle of the afternoon with a cup of tea, to get the writing case out and write letters.

Marie was also pleased that she had a handwritten 'copy of a recipe she wrote in what I refer to as the family recipe book', an image of which she included with her blog post.[1] It was a plain notebook, with 'Memo Book' on the cover and Marie's mum's annotation: 'with apologies to Mrs Beaton'.[2] It was used foremost as a recipe book, but it contained other pieces of writing, such as a poem, which encouraged the reader to give praise and compliments to anyone due them in life, 'for he cannot read his tombstone when he is dead'.

Marie told us more of the recipes:

> This is one of the few examples of my Mum's writing I have. It must date from when she was first married as it refers to some of the ingredients which can be used 'when available'. This must refer to wartime food rationing and post-war food/ingredient shortages. The fruit cake was always made and taken on holiday with us to eat with our picnic lunches or as a special treat at bedtime.[3]

[1] Marie, 'My Mother's Writing Case', Living with Dying, 15 January 2018, https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/2018/01/15/my-mothers-writing-case/.
[2] Personal collections of Marie.
[3] Marie, 'My Mother's Writing Case', Living with Dying, 15 January 2018, https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/2018/01/15/my-mothers-writing-case/.

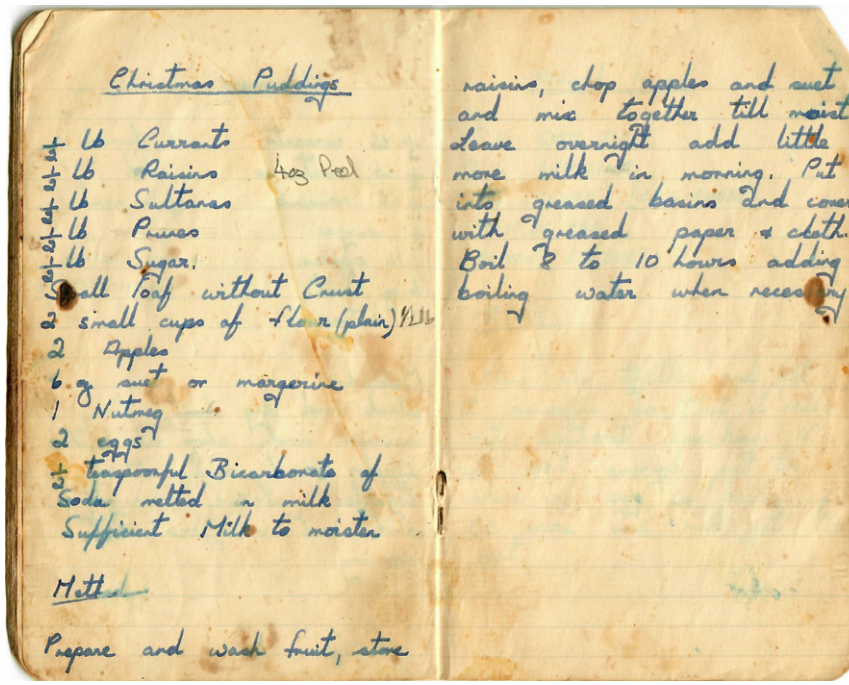

Figure 6.1 Marie's family Christmas pudding recipe, held in Marie's personal collections.

For Marie, these pieces of handwriting, and particularly this fruit cake recipe and another for Christmas pudding, practical in their purpose, helped her to remember her mum. Handwriting offered an intimate link with the dead, from the captions scribbled on the back of photos to the beautifully written out recipes. Her making of this fruit cake and her Christmas pudding, as her mum had done previously, allowed a connection between Marie and three generations of her ancestors. The recipes, and using them, connected her and her mum with Marie's grandmother and great-grandmother, who had originally passed on the recipe for Christmas pudding to Marie's mum. Her aunt, Marie's godmother, had also written in this book, and Marie wondered if her mum and aunt had worked on it together, ahead of her parents' marriage in 1944. Marie had added notes in the margins of the recipe, such as a conversion of a measurement in cups to ounces. Marie had also added her own recipes, creating a real sense of a collective family book. Marie's recipes and her use of them reflect a long history in which recipes and recipe books were a core form of intergenerational communication and knowledge.[4]

[4] Elaine Leong, 'Collecting Knowledge for the Family: Recipes, Gender and Practical Knowledge in the Early Modern English Household', *Centaurus* 55, no. 2 (2013), 81–103, doi:10.1111/1600-0498.12019.

Marie explained that the Christmas pudding recipe (Figure 6.1), which stretched back four generations, 'I still make, it makes enough puddings for two years, so it doesn't get made every year'. This practice, of following her mother's written instructions through her recipes, transported Marie back to her childhood, and memories of helping her mum prepare the substantial quantities of dried fruit and make the cakes. It reflects a strong link between the memory of others and food, and moreover, the senses. She pondered 'Whether that's why I still make them, it's, it's a link to the past that it's something that…I can always remember us doing together is making mincemeat and making Christmas puddings and Christmas cake.'[5] Marie had been born shortly before Christmas and, she explained, her mum had been desperate to get home after giving birth: 'Family stories tell of her discharging herself so she could spend Christmas at home with her family.'[6] Marie had kept up her mum's tradition of getting the Christmas tree and decorations ready for mid-December, her birthday. She felt that 'I think I have done that as a memory to mum, that I've kept that going.'[7]

These were objects and practices, then, reminding Marie of her mum. But they were more than that. A piece of writing was special, offering a more intimate connection. The method for fruit cake is explained carefully, over two pages, with instructions on how to prevent the eggs and butter curdling, and advice to put a small indentation in the batter when in the tin, to 'give the finished cake a flat top'. There is a sense of her mother's voice in these words. The handwriting is careful and even, with the reader in mind—'cont. overleaf' one instruction reads.[8] The pages are discoloured, with smudges to some of the inked words, and the odd mark expected of any much-used recipe. For Marie, her mum's writing case, her written recipes and other pieces of writing in this family book, and their use over many years, as well as more recently Marie's writing about her mum, all helped to remember her since her death in the 1960s, and connect the family's history to broader events and social change.

When a person dies, their own writing, like their possessions or photos of them, can become particularly special precisely because they have died. But the writing of the dead is different to other types of things. Keeping hold of the writing of a person who has died, such as their letters or recipes, can be especially valuable as a window on to their thoughts, experiences, and emotions, and as a way of tapping into the things they did. Handwritten documents, like Marie's mother's recipe, often feel significant as a means to remember. As we saw in Chapter 4, families who were lucky enough to keep hold of the writing of someone who had died, like the Cooper family had of 10-year-old Harold in his school exercise book, could feel a particularly intimate kind of connection to their relative.

[5] Marie, interview with Jessica Hammett, 26 January 2018.
[6] Marie's booklet (2018), held privately.
[7] Marie, interview with Jessica Hammett, 26 January 2018.
[8] Personal collections of Marie.

The letters and writing of the dead that survive are kept for a reason, and subject to multiple and repeated decisions to keep each individual thing, rather than discarding it, perhaps by several relatives. Over multiple generations, the perceived social and historical value of writing is an important factor in the chance process of preserving items, alongside the emotional value of that writing in a process of remembrance. The letters sent between family members in both world wars are perhaps the most significant example of the power of writing in remembrance in the twentieth century, powerful both because such letters could create a personal connection between a distant serviceman and his family back home, and because they linked an individual death to a wider global conflict and a sense of mattering in the historical record. Millions of words in millions of letters were exchanged between relatives during both conflicts, and when the letter writer died, particularly in military service but also as a civilian, perhaps many years later, their words took on a new significance. Hundreds of thousands of families still have these letters today, and many reside in museums and archives.[9] The writing of someone who has died offered the possibility of not only bringing a person back to mind after they were no longer around, but also understanding their inner world, their subjectivity, in ways not possible by other means. A handwritten letter, such as from a serving soldier, might provide a window into their final weeks and days, though less personal print documents, such as First World War field postcards, mattered too.[10] All sorts of writing can be significant.

Many families have collected and passed on letters, diaries, and other writing of the dead after their death, in peacetime as well as war, in part because of increasing literacy and opportunities for all kinds of people to write to their loved ones. As Melanie Tebbutt highlights, her father's collections of letters, diaries, and other ephemera served as a reminder not only of particular people but also of emotional ties and networks between family members, friends and neighbours, and the deceased's relationship with the place they lived. For Melanie's father, these pieces of writing came to represent memories of his younger days, memories of family who had since died, and memories of places which, by the 1970s, had changed irrevocably. Since his death in 1997, these collections of writings symbolize Melanie and her family's memory of him, too, as well as the family's past experiences more broadly.[11]

[9] The most notable collection is that of the Imperial War Museum, available here: https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/documents [accessed 19/5/2023]. For work on writing during the First World War, see Carol Acton, '"You Yourself Are Here Now Looking over My Shoulder as I Write": Emotional Dialogue and the Construction of a Shared Intimate Space in First World War Letters', *L'Atelier* 8, no. 1 (2016), 194–219; Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War* (Manchester University Press, 2010).

[10] Michèle Barrett and Peter Stallybrass, 'Printing, Writing and a Family Archive: Recording the First World War', *History Workshop Journal* 75, no. 1 (2013), 1–32, doi:10.1093/hwj/dbs04.

[11] Melanie Tebbutt, 'Imagined Families and Vanished Communities: Memories of a Working-Class Life in Northampton', *History Workshop Journal* 73, no. 1 (2012), 144–69, doi:10.1093/hwj/dbr025.

Writing About the Dead

But perhaps even more significant are the many types of writing *about* the dead, written as a form of remembrance. Writing something in the aftermath of a death, or in memory of that person years after, can be understood as a 'dedicated' type of writing, something written in response to someone dying.[12] There have long been practices of writing in the aftermath of a death to provide condolence to the bereaved, cope with the emotions of a bereavement, and to help remember the dead. Printed memorial cards informing others of a death usually included some lines of verse and were adapted to reflect the circumstances of death.[13] The culture of condolence letters created an emotional network through which mourners could offer support and sympathy to the closest relatives, and work together to highlight the most positive aspects of that person's life and character. The aftermath of a death offered a moment at which a person's legacy was shaped into a positive story, and this creation of an idealized version of the person who had died helped those grieving, from an epigraph on a grave to a eulogy and even written and perhaps published obituary.[14] The use of letters could be found across the social spectrum.[15] Memorial cards, condolence letters, and other written tributes were often a means of coping with grief. Families used networks of 'fictive kinship', to use Jay Winter's term, to collaboratively mark the death and commemorate the life of their loved one.[16]

Writing about the deaths of those in military service was crucial for many families, particularly as the circumstances of the death of a loved one might be obscure. Letters from fellow servicemen and their commanding officer detailing the circumstances of a soldier's death, his bravery and good service, and the regard of his comrades were deeply important for the bereaved, alongside the last letters and postcards the soldier himself might have sent.[17] Winter notes how such letters offered 'condolences and memories in equal part', and gives an example of a long correspondence between an officer's wife and one of his soldiers, which entailed many letters, a poem from the soldier about his officer, and numerous parcels from the officer's wife to her dead husband's unit. Here, a continued relationship between the two brought solace to both, and shared stories of the deceased officer.[18] During the First World War, the practice of writing about the

[12] Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (Berg, 2000), 50.
[13] Ann-Marie Foster, 'The Ephemera of Remembrance in the Wake of War and Disaster, 1899–1939' (PhD thesis, Northumbria University, 2019), 89–90, https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/41204/.
[14] Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 307–18.
[15] Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 213.
[16] Foster, 'The Ephemera of Remembrance', 86; Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[17] Foster, 'The Ephemera of Remembrance', 95–6; Meyer, *Men of War*, 74–96.
[18] Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 51–2.

dead in the immediate wake of their death reflected both continuity and change. Such writing had a long history, yet the specific circumstances of the war also prompted new networks of emotional support to emerge, especially between the families of fellow servicemen, who would not have known each other otherwise and might come from very different social backgrounds.[19]

Such letters and other writing, setting out the qualities of a person who had died as a means of offering sympathy to close relatives, continued throughout the twentieth century. Some of the more elaborate and public forms of memorial writing—mourning cards and memoirs explicitly published as memorials—declined in the wake of the First World War.[20] But the practice of writing to remember, and to feel, preserve, and pass on a connection with the dead continued. Pieces of writing produced in the wake of a death were not only kept by the immediate relatives of a person who had died, but might be passed on to succeeding generations.

The choice to write something about a loved one who had died was not limited to condolence letters and could span anything from poetry to memoir. Julie-Marie Strange found examples of such writing amongst working-class families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as part of a practice of creating mementoes of the dead which did not incur much expense. Yet, as she notes, writing something about the dead did require a certain degree of literacy, and the holding on to objects of the dead was more common than writing about them.[21] As compulsory and, later, free education for all children was introduced from the latter decades of the nineteenth century, and later with the school leaving age being raised to 14 with the Fisher Act of 1918, literacy improved. What followed was a burgeoning of all types of writing from working-class people and, as the twentieth century progressed, writing about the dead as a form of remembrance, amongst other impulses, became an option for an increasingly broad range of people, and one that cost little.

Poetic Forms

Poetry has long been a popular way of expressing grief at a loss, fondness for the dead, and capturing that person's 'spirit' in some way. Families used existing poetry and wrote their own in response to a death, even combining the two in new forms.[22] Poetry became a particularly powerful medium for articulating the experiences and losses of the First World War, on a national level, to articulate the

[19] Foster, 'The Ephemera of Remembrance', 87–8; Pat Jalland, *Death in War and Peace: A History of Loss and Grief in England, 1914–1970* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 35–59.

[20] Foster, 'The Ephemera of Remembrance', 182.

[21] Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty*, 213.

[22] Barrett and Stallybrass, 'Printing, Writing', 15–18.

horror of experiencing death on the battlefield and grief and bereavement for those away from it.[23] As Winter describes, in Britain, certain poets and their poetry came to stand as a broader symbol for the war, its futility, its cultural memory, and specifically, remembrance of those who died during the conflict.[24] Poetry provided a way to collectively and publicly 'keep the voices of the fallen alive, by speaking for them, to them, about them'.[25] Family, friends, and comrades of the deceased found the genre compelling as a way to mark the lives of their deceased privately as well as in public spaces such as in newspaper death and in memoriam notes and printed broadsides.[26] Whilst the Second World War did not produce the same canon of war poetry, poems continued to be a positive way to remember on an individual level. The very context of the war poetry of the First World War rendered this genre powerful in the years that followed. Reading and writing poetry was widely understood to facilitate the expression of powerful emotions throughout the twentieth century, and particularly during the Second World War.[27]

Jean Barker was 10 years old when her two older brothers died in the Second World War. She recalled how difficult life became: 'Things were never the same after the War with half the family gone.' The national opportunities to commemorate and celebrate the lives of her two brothers seemed insufficient or inappropriate, and Jean's mother rejected these. Jean remembered that there wasn't a street party in her street on VE day: 'Maybe our neighbours thought we hadn't much to celebrate.' Yet Jean could recall lines from her brother Jack's poem written when Alan died in January 1944, and felt it was 'wonderful'. Jack had been distraught at the news of his brothers' deaths; when Alan died, Jean remembered, 'Jack was always a hard nut to crack but God! he cried that night.'[28]

Jean recalled the final lines of the poem when noting down her memories to give to Leeds Libraries. When I interviewed her, she came back to the poem several times. Jean spoke about a particularly emotional event in the family's story of the war and their loss of her two brothers, including her father's anger and disgust at the way the War Office had treated the family in the wake of her brothers' deaths. Jean broke off from the story of her father's complaint though: 'I think the war is cruel. But you get some emotion with it… But I love our Jack's poem [it's beautiful] Everybody's liking that.'[29] For Jean, Jack's poem allowed her to

[23] Jay Winter, *War beyond Words: Languages of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 107; David Cannadine, 'War, Death and Mourning in Modern Britain', in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, edited by Joachim Whaley (Routledge, 2011), 215–16.

[24] Winter, *War beyond Words*, 92–115.

[25] Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 204.

[26] Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 51; Foster, 'The Ephemera of Remembrance', 113–14, 166–9.

[27] Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 9–10.

[28] Jean Barker (née Wiggins), 'Childhood As I Remember It', LQPB BAK, Leeds Central Library Local and Family History.

[29] Jean Barker, interview with Laura King, 7 June 2018.

alleviate the difficult emotions associated with the war in which she lost two brothers, and her father's difficult last days and death soon after.

It is not clear precisely when Jack wrote this poem about his brother. It now sits in Jean's large collection of family items, with a photo of Alan in his Royal Air Force (RAF) uniform pinned to it. Jean's son also had access to a digital copy on a computer; he printed me a copy to take away. Perhaps Jack read it aloud, and perhaps he sent copies to his relatives and friends. Jean wasn't sure, and Jack died in 1987. But the poem has survived. Four pages in total, it summarized Alan's life, starting with the lines,

> In a little place called Meanwood
> A little child was born,
> He was a bonny little youngster,
> That tiny little form.

It recalls funny memories from their shared childhood, such as a time they dressed Alan up in girls' clothes which made the family laugh, though 'he sulked for all the night'. It charts his relationship with his siblings, his job as a painter, his membership of the Boys' Brigade. It takes in the start of the war, when all three brothers joined up, and Alan chooses to join the RAF as a gunner, 'although we asked him not to', a portent of things to come. Jack then turns to Alan's experiences in the war, and the two telegrams the family received, first that he was missing, and then confirming his death. The closing verses resolved his death as something to be accepted, placing it within a Christian narrative that Alan now 'serves his Maker, so there's no need for tears', and within a framework of heroism; he was a man who 'fought for peace and freedom'. Jack's poem established a sense of Alan's continued presence and that he lived on in an afterlife:

> He has just crossed the great Divide,
> They can still hear his laughter,
> And there'll be sweet reunion,
> For those who follow after.
> They're proud of this young airman,
> Who sacrificed his life
> That we may go on living
> To grow to man and wife.

There are other poems in Jean's family collection. Many of these are handwritten and anonymous. Jean thinks some were also written by Jack, but she's not sure.[30] We can't know whether Jack wrote anything to mark Arthur's death, the other

[30] Personal collections of Jean Barker.

brother who died fighting in the same conflict. Did he write this special poem for Alan because they were particularly close, born less than eighteen months apart? Did he write anything of his other two siblings who died earlier, as small children, or when his father died? Even with the ability to look through the Wiggins' family archive, and in interviewing Jean twice, many questions remain unanswered. But what's clear is that this poem has provided comfort for Alan's siblings for decades since his death.

Jean gave a short memoir to Leeds Local and Family History Library, a history of her childhood over eight typed pages. It focused predominantly on memories of the siblings she had lost, and their deaths, and followed with a range of events from Jean's youth, as memories 'bobbed up'. She included mention of the poem Jack had written, and that her mum, Edith, had treasured a particular letter from Arthur written after he had left to serve in the war, a letter which mentioned how the Himalayas reminded Arthur of Woodhouse ridge in Leeds in the spring. This letter, and the idea of a similarity Arthur found between the two places as he wrote home, had been the source of Edith's love for the hymn 'All in an April Evening'. There were layers of remembrance: a keeping of the letters Alan and Arthur had written home to their family, and a treasuring of the words in them and what they represented, as well as Jean choosing to write an account and deposit memories of them in the local library. In both Alan's poem and Arthur's words about the Himalayas, about his home in Leeds, and their connection to a favourite hymn, particular aspects of their lives have been preserved after their deaths.[31]

Memoirs and Family Biographies

Several of our family history group chose to write similar pieces to Jean: autobiographies, memoirs, or profiles of relatives who had died. Carolyn Huston had inherited a large amount of material relating to her family. She too had various pieces of writing of her deceased relatives and ancestors, including diaries and letters. Carolyn treasured what she had, as well as wishing more had survived, particularly her mother's letters. The writing Carolyn had was emotionally significant because it was personal in nature, but also interesting to Carolyn because of its value as historical source material. She told me about how numerous generations of her family had kept holiday diaries, and one diary of her mum's, for example, was particularly interesting because it was a window on to Europe just before the Second World War: 'one of my mum's holiday diaries is just pre-war and she went to Switzerland and, it she's talking about…the Germans and the

[31] Barker, 'Childhood As I Remember It'.

Hitler Youth and things'. Carolyn was perhaps unusual in having writing that went much further back, too, notably the poetry of her great-grandmother, Agnes Jeffrey. These poems were not handwritten, like the diaries and letters, but had been printed. The family had collected Agnes's poems, covering the period 1840 to 1910, and printed and bound them in a book, a copy of which was given to various family members. This was a conscious process of preservation and pride, of choosing to bring together the writing of an ancestor and make it last for as long as possible. Agnes's poems had been published elsewhere, such as in a collection of modern Scottish poets. Carolyn had obtained a reprint of this collection, first published in 1886, featuring four of Agnes's poems. For Carolyn, Agnes's writing was a way to connect to a relative she had never known—Agnes had died decades before Carolyn was born. But the writing was also significant for its historical value, something to be kept and preserved for younger generations as a historical document of the nineteenth century and to recognize an important figure within the family and beyond.

As part of her family history research, Carolyn wrote up various memories and stories about her relatives, 'projects' as part of previous family history courses she had taken, and blog posts for our website. Like Jean, Carolyn had deposited something she thought to be of wider historical significance in an archive; a copy of her father's Second World War diaries, typed up by Carolyn, now resides with the Second World War Experience Centre. She was also writing up an autobiography. Now a retired doctor in her seventies, Carolyn wanted to write to pass on information to her son and grandchildren about relatives they never knew, as well as her own experiences and life. In an interview, I asked Carolyn about what her parents told her of their backgrounds and family histories. She replied, 'there's lots of stuff that I've recorded, because of course [my parents] didn't, so I've written down, I'm—I'm doing an autobiography [mm], not for any publishing but so that it is there, for my son and his kids', something she hoped her daughter-in-law's parents would do too. She found herself writing in a lot of detail: 'I'm too wordy and I've got to cut it all down', she said. Sue Child felt a similar impulse to write about her life and background for her children and grandchildren. As well as a booklet for our project, Sue had written books specifically for each of her children. These were tailored to their interests and priorities, and reflected Sue's feminist principles and desire to tell the lesser known stories: 'in my daughter's, I've put lots of things in about the women's side of the family and, and you know how that, how that panned out'.[32]

There were many reasons why an individual might choose to write some form of autobiography, memoir, or family history. For some families, like the Luptons in Leeds, this was a self-evident imperative; for a family so well-known, charting

[32] Sue Child, interview with Jessica Hammett, 8 December 2017.

their history for the record seemed a natural move. A first book (1965) was written by Charles Athelstane Lupton (born 1897), whilst numerous family members wrote short pieces for the second book (2001). The Luptons were involved in textile manufacturing and civic life in the city, with family members taking on positions such as Lord Mayor and Pro Vice Chancellor of the University of Leeds. In the first book, Charles Lupton wrote of his intentions in writing: 'because a family tree makes but a bare and forbidding picture, I have tried to paint leaves upon it, and to sketch in (albeit more faintly) some of the other trees in the wood.'[33] *The Next Generation*, the second book, adds detail of the family in the twentieth century. One powerful part is its inclusion of numerous letters between four young men who died in the First World War; here again is the choice to not only keep but try and preserve the writing of the dead for as long as possible. Most of the rest of the Luptons' book consists of short accounts of each individual member of the family, written by a different relative who knew them.[34] Here, we can see how the writing of and about the dead were woven together into a neat account, and turned into not just a collection of memories of the dead, but an edited history of the family. The transformation of these letters in this way, and the depositing of these written accounts in a library, mirrored other families who sought to create a legacy for the writing of the deceased, by reproducing it, depositing it in an institution, or even publishing it.[35]

Writing a book-length autobiography, memoir, or family history was not something many of our group did, though most had written up parts of their families' pasts, or did so as part of our collaborative project. Most families did not produce lengthy accounts of their members, like the Luptons. Yet, writing wasn't something out of reach for many families, either. The hundreds of accounts I've looked at in archives and libraries are, I think, the tip of the iceberg. Libraries are often more receptive; vast amounts of unpublished autobiographical and family history writing currently reside in libraries big and small across Britain. Their accession policies are often much less formal and stringent than local archives; libraries are often able to take in almost anyone's informal, perhaps battered, very partial records of their and their family's life. Depositing something of a family's history in this way can help mark that history as valuable.[36] In the latter part of the twentieth and start of the twenty-first centuries, the opportunities for self-publishing and the number of small publishers interested in publishing life writing about

[33] C. A. Lupton, *The Lupton Family in Leeds* (Wm. Harrison & Son, 1965), 'Age Quod Agis' [foreword].

[34] Francis Lupton, *The Next Generation* (F. Lupton, 2001).

[35] Foster, 'The Ephemera of Remembrance', 82; Richard Hoggart, *A Local Habitation, Life & Times, Volume 1, 1918–1940* (Oxford University Press, 1989 [1988]), 192.

[36] Kate Hill, 'Collecting Authenticity', *Museum History Journal* 4, no. 2 (2011), 203–22, doi:10.1179/mhj.2011.4.2.203.

'ordinary' people have shifted the way writing can be used for remembrance.[37] Writing the lives of the dead as a form of remembrance takes place at a community level too: groups like the Jamaica Society Leeds record and research in an effort to preserve the legacies and histories of individuals and the community as a whole, as we saw in Chapter 1, and write these up too. Biographies of members of the first generation of the Leeds Jamaican community work as both an individual and collective written form of remembrance in the Jamaica Society's book *Eulogy*, published in 2019, which also acts as a history of the community in the city.[38] But the urge to write and record goes much further; others wrote simply for their families, noting down a few memories or pages that are still held by their relatives. Both writing and publishing have been increasingly 'democratized' through the twentieth century.

From the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was an increase in the writing and publishing of working-class memoirs, initially from men and increasingly women, and from those who weren't noted figures. The most 'ordinary' people came to claim that their lives were worth recording.[39] As the twentieth century progressed, opportunities increased for women and others marginalized in the historical record to tell their story.[40] The decision to start writing might come from either an external or internal pressure, to assert the individual's own value or the value of their community or heritage.[41] A changing culture in which the voices of a wider range of people were seen as significant in both historical and literary circles opened the door for any potential writer to understand their own story as important. As well as the tangible opportunities to publish and have one's story heard, writing a memoir needs time, space, and a belief that the writing will matter. Asserting the value of one's own story and community often requires confidence and privilege. In the wake of the history from below, oral history, and women's history movements, a wider range of people and their families have been able to understand their writing and their family history as important, even if this writing was kept within that family itself.

[37] See Ben Jones for a discussion of QueenSpark books, one example of such a publisher. Another is Yorkshire Art Circus, whose records are held by West Yorkshire Archive Service. Ben Jones, 'The Uses of Nostalgia', *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 3 (2010), 355–74, doi:10.2752/147800410X12714191853346.

[38] Susan Pitter (ed.), *Eulogy* (Jamaica Society Leeds, 2019), 71, 77, 81.

[39] Emma Griffin, *Bread Winner: An Intimate History of the Victorian Economy* (Yale University Press, 2020), 9–14.

[40] On the rise of women's and working-class autobiographical writing, see John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall, eds., *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated Critical Bibliography, Vol. 1: 1790–1900* (Harvester, 1984); Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield, eds., *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods* (Routledge, 2000); Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents*; Jones, 'The Uses of Nostalgia'; Helen Rogers and Emily Cuming, 'Revealing Fragments: Close and Distant Reading of Working-Class Autobiography', *Family & Community History* 21, no. 3 (2018), 180–201, doi:10.1080/14631180.2018.1555951.

[41] T. G. Ashplant, 'Life Writing "from Below" in Europe: Authors, Archives, Avenues, Arenas', *European Journal of Life Writing* 7 (2018), LWFB10–LWFB48, doi:10.5463/ejlw.7.241.

Keeping the Dead Alive on the Page

The process of constructing a life on a page is an active, creative, and constructed form of remembrance, which allows the person remembering to place themselves and their relationship with the deceased at the forefront. Alongside practices of preserving the writing of the dead, writing about and for the dead helps to preserve the individuality of the deceased and the relationship between the deceased and those remembering, even if the person remembering had never known the dead personally. Writing about and for the dead, as well as using and preserving their own writing, exposes the multiple relationships at work in remembrance practice, between the person remembering and the dead; between the person remembering and their intended audience, future generations who, it is hoped, will continue to remember the dead; and between the idealized individual who has died and the messy reality of their life. Writing memoirs as a form of remembrance of the dead takes several forms, from collective family portraits to personal recollections of intimate moments with a close relative. It might include images too, of original documents or reproductions of family photos of those people being remembered.

Carl Vaughan, for example, was a Jamaican RAF recruit in the Second World War, who came to settle in Glasgow. In his autobiography, first printed and published in 2013, his family added their thoughts as a postscript, with his grandson concluding the book with the words '[I] am very happy to know that Grandpa's fascinating story will not die with him and that I can get to know him more through this book.'[42] Connecting Jamaica with Glasgow, and recording the contribution of a Jamaican man to the Second World War—part of the history of the Second World War little discussed in Britain—this piece of writing allowed his family to celebrate and remember Carl's life, and to assert his right to be remembered, as a Black British-Jamaican man. Autobiographical writing not only offers the possibility of helping to preserve and make tangible memories of someone once they have gone, but also offers the opportunity for younger relatives to 'get to know' better their older family members.

The careful assembling and preserving of memoirs of the dead became especially visible from the 1970s onwards. A common form of writing involved two generations of the same family, most often parent and child.[43] In this case, the older relative might write, or even narrate, their memoirs, which were then collated and printed in some form by younger members of their family. Many writers, and particularly women, have articulated the need to connect the memories they had

[42] Carl Vaughan, *From Jamaica with Love: The Carl Vaughan Story*, edited by Gordon Davidson (Carl Vaughan and Gordon Davidson, 2013), 99.

[43] For an example, see Anne Wynne-Jones, *Everything Gets Over: The Story of Lena, My Lancashire Mum* (i2i Publishing, 2012).

of beloved relatives, notably grandparents, aunts, uncles, and parents, to their own descendants. In Suzie Lee's memoir of her family life, for example, the book is framed around Suzie's granddaughter asking about her grandmother's history.[44] As for Sue and Carolyn, grandchildren are frequently an imagined or explicit audience for this knowledge of the family's past.

The way writers describe their decisions to write about their relatives, either from first-hand memories, inherited stories, or through their research, and the form and shape this writing takes reveal the relationship between writing of all kinds and its ability to 'carry' the memory of the dead. Writing often has a dual meaning, of remembering relatives who have died alongside taking part in the creation and curation of one's own legacy, before death. Writing can tackle that frustration that almost every family historian has, for the next generation at least, the wish that they had asked more and listened more when their relatives were still alive. And in the multi-generational projects to bring together, print, and even publish a family member's writing can be found something of the relationship between the urge to remember the dead and the imperative to place value on particular lives and find their place within a wider historical record. Moreover, these examples show the relationship between the urge to remember one's relatives and the need to face one's own mortality. Remembrance of the dead is never a straightforward act of recording or recovery, but a complex negotiation of memory, historicism, and one's own place within a wider community. It is about the future as much as the present or past, about asserting the need for future generations of a family to remember, too.

Ralph Finn exemplified this practice. Ralph, born in 1912, grew up in Aldgate, in the East End of London, to Jewish parents who had migrated from the Russian–Polish border. Ralph began his first autobiographical book, *No Tears in Aldgate*, with a foreword describing why he wanted to write: 'Everyone in this book existed. No, exists. For me they can never die.'[45] Both this book and his follow-up, *Spring in Aldgate*, are works written with the explicit desire to commemorate the lives of Ralph's relatives and friends. *Spring in Aldgate* begins with a similar thought, that though most of those he writes of are dead, 'the aliveness of their spirit is indestructible', and with a dedication to his mother, 'whose memory will never die.'[46] Throughout his writing, there is a sense of recording and paying tribute to the place, community, way of life, and experiences of the Jewish East End. Like much autobiographical writing, Ralph's writing is infused with nostalgia for a time and place now gone. Ralph rejected a notion of death as solely

[44] Suzie Lee, *One in a Million: A Story of Hardship, Endurance and Triumph in a Traveller Family* (Essex County Council Learning Services, 1999).
[45] Ralph L. Finn, *No Tears in Aldgate* (Robert Hale, 1963), 7–8.
[46] Ralph L. Finn, *Spring in Aldgate* (Robert Hale, 1968), 5, 9.

about the biological body, suggesting instead that as long as they are remembered, the dead remain in a very real sense alive.

A Series of Family History Booklets

In inviting the family historians I worked with to write something of their family history in 2018 for this project, our group sat within these trends. Each participant was asked whether they wanted to write something about their family history, which we would pay to be professionally printed and deposited at Leeds Local and Family History Department if they wished (see Figure 6.2). Our collaboration focused on family history in broad terms, but all members of the group knew my research focused on how families remember their dead. Eight members of the group chose to take up this offer, out of thirteen, with seven of those eight depositing their works at the library. These booklets could take any shape the family historian wanted and focus on as long or short a period and as many or few relatives and ancestors as they liked. Some of the group wrote an overview of

Figure 6.2 The booklets produced by our group of family historians. Photo taken by author.

their family history, going back as far as they could and covering as many ancestors as possible. Maureen Jessop, one of the most experienced genealogists, chose this route and produced an impressive narrative through multiple branches of her family, which ended with a dedication to her mother, still alive at 92 at the time Maureen wrote the piece.[47]

Janet Coles took a slightly different route. Janet had been professionally involved in academic research in the past, working as a researcher in adult education at the University of Leeds before her retirement in 2013. Janet had started something similar, writing up an overview of her family history, of which she knew quite a lot. She had found out about Huguenot ancestors on her mother's side, for example. Janet had used a wide range of sources to piece together events in her ancestors' past, including land enclosure documents relating to farmland owned by her ancestors and details of a burglary at her great-grandparents' house in 1860, including the court reporting in the local newspaper.

But Janet changed her mind part way through drafting her piece, losing patience with researching her great-grandfather, Robert, who was most visible in the records available in part because of his role as a local 'Overseer of the Poor' and 'Surveyor of Highways' in the village of Askham Richard, near York, where he lived. She disliked him: his letters and newspaper reports of his taking his neighbours to court for various small issues showed him to be, in Janet's words, 'an opinionated, arrogant man'. She instead decided to spotlight the histories of the three great-grandmothers that she knew about, the 'Three Remarkable Women' as the title of her booklet tells us. These three, whose lives Janet tried to reconstruct as far as possible, were 'strong and determined women', Janet surmised in her writing, who constitute 'a heritage to be proud of'. Janet did not write from her own memories of these relatives but used her extensive research to imagine the lives of these women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though her three profiles of these women brought in the lives of their husbands, children, and other relatives, in choosing to frame her piece of writing in this way, Janet sought to centre the lives of her three female ancestors. And even though each had died before Janet was born—in 1905, 1911, and 1937—Janet created an emotional link with each of them, empathizing with how difficult their lives might have been. 'To overcome such adversity, she must have been a strong, resilient and remarkable woman', Janet wrote of her great-grandmother Martha.[48] Janet continued this work: along with another family historian, Sue Child, Janet contributed an essay about her great-grandmother Rachel, grandmother Emily, and mother Freda, to an edited collection on inherited objects. Sue wrote about a

[47] Maureen Jessop, 'Life on "The Bank": My Family's Story' (2018), 942.819 LIV, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.

[48] Janet Coles, 'Three Remarkable Women: The Lives of My Great Grandmothers' (2018), 942.819 LIV, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.

chair she had inherited, and of the 'lasting imprint' her 'beloved great-grandmother' Florence had left on her, despite never knowing her. She ended the piece noting that 'The small library chair is at the back of me as I write this.'[49] Both Sue and Janet had found the process of writing cathartic in some way; it had been full of sadness, reflecting on memories of those who had died, and the difficult times in their lives, but they had felt better for doing so, and more joy in remembering after this process of research and writing up.[50]

Most of the group, like Janet, focused particularly on between one and four of their relatives in their booklets. Parents were, perhaps unsurprisingly, prominent. In their varied decisions, these family historians reflected the different impulses at work in deciding how to remember previous generations, and who mattered. There were two key forces which influenced this: the closeness of the relationship between the family historian and their relative, and the urge to chart the lives of more distant relatives whose experiences were deemed important to the writer. Marie, who had done much work on her family history, wrote almost exclusively about her mother, who died in 1967. Marie reflected the desire of many of the group to record something of her memories of her closest relatives who had now died, but the ultimate decision to write about her mother, over other relatives, came because Marie felt the memory of her mother would soon be lost. Her mother had died when Marie was 17, and when we interviewed her, in January 2018, Marie reflected that 'any of the memories that are around will go and that's something I would like to do in the future is to put together…a eulogy to mum so that she isn't forgotten and [my son] has that knowledge to take with him, where it goes from there, who knows.'[51] Marie started to write up her memories because of this, so that the knowledge of her to pass on was of her as a person, not just a name. As part of our project, Marie wrote a forty-page booklet about her mother, subtitled 'Daughter, Sister, Wife, Mother and Auntie', which detailed her knowledge of her mother's life before she was born, between 1918 and 1949. It included Marie's own memories of her mum from her childhood in the 1950s and 1960s, and a section on 'family stories and memories', which detailed some of her mum's interests and family rituals and traditions. The final section included photos of her mother through her life and of some family documents relating to her parents' wedding. Her mother's death is just briefly recorded.[52] She added that 'it's something that's stopped with me all my life that was something, I want to remember people as they are when they live and not as they are when they have

[49] Sue Child, 'Florence Kate and the Library Chair', in *Inheriting the Family: Objects, Identities and Emotions*, edited by Katie Barclay, Ashley Barnwell, Joanne Begiato, Tanya Evans, and Laura King (Bloomsbury, 2025); Janet Coles, 'A Mantelpiece of Memories', in *Inheriting the Family*, edited by Barclay et al.

[50] Family historians' group discussion on the impact of the project, 21 June 2018.

[51] Marie, interview with Jessica Hammett, 26 January 2018.

[52] Marie's booklet (2018), held privately.

died'.[53] Marie, then, had treasured the snippets of writing her mother had left behind, and as part of our work together, had chosen to write the life of her mum as the most lasting form of remembrance. These were tributes to those relatives, and there was a sense of giving a voice to the dead. Sarah Sykes reflected on how she was fulfilling a wish of one of her relatives in the final paragraph of her booklet: 'My Grandma, Joan Noble (nee Wrigglesworth) often said that she would like to write her life story and hopefully I've made a start.'[54]

Cherril Cliff loves writing. She has written journals for years, going back to the 1990s, recording all aspects of her life and national and global events. She described herself as 'a big letter writer' too, writing to relatives, pen pals, and, in the past, regularly to local newspapers. She contrasted herself to her parents, who were 'very poor writers'; from a young age, Cherril had to help them navigate official documents.[55] Cherril was also writing a novel when we worked with her, was taking a writing class, and had been attracted to our project partly to help her write. The novel, she explained, is 'not a biography in any sense of the word but I wanted to write about the central protagonist's mother and the mother is based on my mother and so therefore I had to look back, to the journals'.[56] Writing had been a cathartic experience for Cherril, a way to deal with difficult experiences in her life. But the fictional world, as well as her journals, was much easier for Cherril to engage with than anything like a family history or biography, partly because many of those memories of her mum were fraught. Fiction can, of course, be as honest and 'true' as any historical account. Cherril's childhood had been a difficult one. And so, whilst Cherril enjoyed working with us, and finding out a little bit more about her family history, she also felt stymied at points. Unlike many of the group, she struggled to feel engaged in researching her family history. Cherril chose not to write anything down as part of our work together, though she considered doing so, in part because she thought it was important to tell the stories of those families for whom life was difficult and unhappy, and for those from poorer backgrounds who didn't have much 'stuff'. But writing about her family history in the way we invited the group to do was not the sort of form that was useful to Cherril. Writing could offer a way to connect with the dead, a way to represent a family's past, but a straightforward write up of those people and histories might not always be an easy or welcome way to remember the dead either. The world of fiction and creative writing, and writing in her journals, was, for Cherril and others, a more useful genre, for cathartic purposes, but also as a meaningful way to tell her story.

[53] Marie, interview with Jessica Hammett, 26 January 2018.
[54] Sarah Sykes, 'Journey to Leeds' (2018), 942.819 LIV, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.
[55] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 26 October 2017.
[56] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 September 2017.

Conclusion

Writing is powerful. But what is it that writing offers? There is something specific here, in putting pen to paper, fingers to keyboard, to turn a life, a person, into words on a page. In doing so, a writer makes more purposeful choices about how the dead should be remembered. Many of those who did write their family history down in some form conflated the process of research with the writing itself. But the process of narrating a life, a history, is something slightly different too, however factual, fictional, or creative that form takes. As Alison Light writes, in her memoir of her husband, historian Raphael Samuel, writing offered the possibility of combating loss and absence. In the wake of his death, she describes collating his writing, noting down things he had told her about his life, again demonstrating that entangling of the writing of the dead with the writing about them. This was 'a version of the searching which confirms the absence but also incorporates the presence of the dead, making tangible and visible again what perishes first of all—the body of the beloved.'[57] Writing was creative. Writing was about a choice to present a family's past and its characters in a certain way. It was about the future, an assertion of the wish for younger generations to take part in remembrance. As Light writes in another piece, her book about her own family's history, 'history writing is always the chance to change the terms in which some are remembered and others forgotten.'[58] As Vinciane Despret suggests, the choice to write can feel not only like a way of remembering the dead, but also a gift from and to them. The ability to write can be a creative relationship with the dead.[59]

The writing of the dead and about the dead become entangled. The words of the dead and writing about the dead are two very different things in one sense, but in all the families I have worked with, they became muddled—in the typing up of a letter to better preserve it, the binding together of the collected poems of a great-grandmother, or in recalling the phrases and stories of a deceased relative and describing that in one's own memoir.

The writing of the dead combined with writing about them, and for them, provides a compelling form of intergenerational communication. Like nothing else, writing has a promise of lasting. It holds the promise of overcoming the frustrations of lost knowledge, lost stories, as people die. If research is about the present, writing is about the future, that imagined audience of a different moment. Publication, and increased opportunities for community publishing and self-publishing, have helped enhance this sense of permanence. Whilst objects and places can last for centuries beyond a person's life, the meaning attributed to such

[57] Alison Light, *A Radical Romance: A Memoir of Love, Grief and Consolation* (Penguin, 2020), 175.
[58] Alison Light, *Common People: The History of an English Family* (Penguin, 2015), 253.
[59] Vinciane Despret, *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind*, translated by Stephen Muecke (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 59.

things may be lost between generations. The writing of a person who has died has a seemingly more fixed meaning, providing something of a window on to the past, even if different readers might take different things from that writing. And writing about a person who has died is even clearer, as the writer often articulates their wish that this person's memory should live on. Writing, like nothing else, offers the chance to create a collective memory of the dead within a family.

For our family historians, there was an inherent tension in writing about the dead; it felt profoundly personal and uniquely about that person, but at the same time could fix their memory to a particular relationship or aspect of their life. Likewise, any autobiographical writing was only partly about its author; such writing also reflected the context in which the person was writing, in what was selected and how the writer made sense of events in the past and their telling since.[60] And indeed, I too am part of that process, in writing about my own family as well as others. With the right lens, we can start to unpick these processes of how history is made through families, and through their writing of, for, and about the dead.

Through writing this book, I have started to put into words the history of my own family, the Kings. I'm not the first to have done this, really. My aunt's ex-partner, a writer and photographer, wrote down some family stories, using the memories of my grandmother Anne and of my dad's cousin Maureen as inspiration for fictional pieces. We have eulogies from funerals and bits and pieces of writing from those who have died—the odd letter, for example. I've now weaved some memories, stories, and knowledge of my deceased family members, those I knew and those I didn't, into an academic book—this book. Throughout it, I have chosen some relatives over others, some stories over others, some histories over others, shaped by my own interests and the moment in which I write. It has left me questioning what the best way of sharing and preserving this history might be; like many family historians before me, I've been faced with the question of whether a tree, a written account, or perhaps something more creative is the best way to bring together a family history, and to remember the dead. And I don't know. As well as writing this academic book, I have tried to write something more specifically for my family, to capture a more complete picture of my family, of the bits that aren't here in this book. But I can't find the right form, the right shape for that writing. Any form of trying to fix knowledge usually obscures more than it preserves. In writing about the history, I change that history.

Living with the Dead: Memories, Histories, and the Stories Families Tell in Modern Britain. Laura King, Oxford University Press. © Laura King 2025. DOI: 10.1093/9780191915697.003.0006

[60] Jones, 'The Uses of Nostalgia'.

7
Researching

A Scrap of Paper

Bill Rollinson's starting point from which to research his family's history was a tiny scrap of paper. When his mother was reaching older age, in the 1990s, Bill had scribbled down a few bits of information on this scrap, in pencil (see Figure 7.1). It includes details about his mother's family including her father's name, her parents' dates and places of birth, and her paternal grandfather's first name, as well as the fact he was 92 when he died. This much folded, torn, scruffy fragment of paper was the seed from which Bill started his family tree. Bill hadn't done as much research as some of the other group members when he started working with us, but he wasn't the most inexperienced either. He managed to track his family's history back to the early nineteenth century, and piece together lots of information about his ancestors. Like most family history researchers, he combined family stories and memories, photos, and objects with a process of research using online and archival resources. As for many family historians, Bill's process of research was about finding out more about those members of his family he had known personally—his parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles—but also learning about ancestors who had died before he was born.

Bill described how 'I've had to start from scratch'. He had visited Somerset House 'many years ago' to try and find more about his grandfather, but hadn't been able to find much relevant information. Yet online search tools, and Ancestry particularly, enabled Bill to piece together much more about his family history, although being overwhelmed by the information available and finding the best way to record what he found was a challenge. For Bill, this was a process that was both rewarding and exasperating: he enjoyed making new discoveries about his deceased family members, but was frustrated frequently by questions and family mysteries he couldn't get to the bottom of, and berated himself he hadn't asked more questions of his relatives when they had been alive. Typical of many family historians, Bill had taken up this hobby in the later part of his life, in his seventies, and so most of his older relatives had now died and couldn't help him with the questions he wanted to answer. Bill wanted to pass the information he found on to his daughters. Family history, for Bill and millions like him, was a particular kind of relationship with the dead, that sought to remember and preserve their lives for posterity. Research could both add to and rub up against those family stories passed between generations.

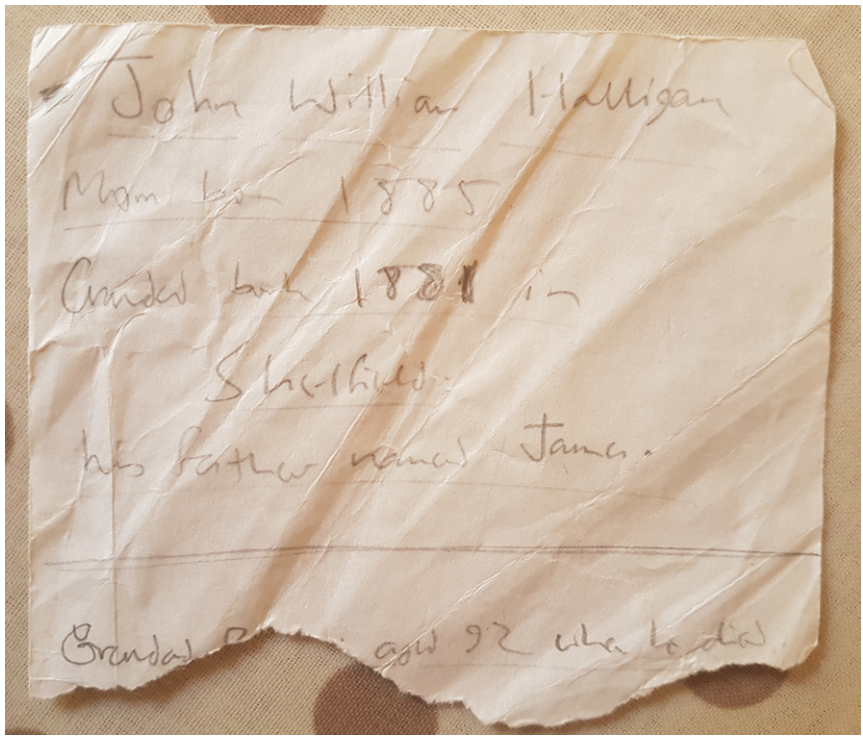

Figure 7.1 Bill's scrap of paper, held in his personal collections.

Bill was born in 1946 in Shelfield, a village near Walsall, in the West Midlands. His parents were both from this area, and he had lots of relatives nearby, including an aunt and uncle he was particularly close to. His father, William Rollinson, was a builder and ran a smallholding, renting a small piece of land from a local farmer. Bill has fond memories of spending time outdoors with the animals they kept. Bill's mother, Lillian Halligan, was a dressmaker, but gave up work after a period of ill health to look after Bill and his siblings. Both his parents were from working-class mining families, but Bill's dad had resisted the assumption that he too would become a miner. Bill described how his mother's family were quite religious and 'prim and proper', in contrast to his dad's family. His parents married in 1935.[1]

As he worked through his research, Bill assembled his notes into folders. He collected the scant sources of information he had—the scrap of paper from his mother with a few family photos and objects. Bill combined these with documentation of the research he had done—annotated print outs from Ancestry and a

[1] Bill Rollinson, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 8 November 2017.

handwritten family tree, for example. In doing so, Bill sought to create a clearer picture and record of his family's past, but he was doing something more too. Going beyond the urge to preserve for future generations, as families had done with their family bibles and the like, or even those written accounts which documented what was known, Bill and many like him sought to build a clearer and more detailed picture of his relatives, for himself and for others in his family who were interested. This was a process of bringing together the past with the future, and of a different kind of historical viewpoint.

Family History and Immortality

All sorts of families find ways to record and pass on their histories, using a range of technologies and tools to keep family members' memories 'alive', to link past, present, and future. Families are spaces in which history and historical knowledge itself is made. Religious institutions have long provided a key space in which families' histories are recorded, not least the noting of births, marriages, and deaths, but also through the more active documenting of family linkages and trees, with the church of the Latter Day Saints offering perhaps the best-known example. But family history can also offer an alternative sense of an afterlife or legacy.[2] Ronald Lambert's surveys and interviews with Australian and Canadian family historians in the 1990s suggested that a lack of belief in an afterlife, in a religious form, correlated to interest in family history. Family historians sought to restore 'forgotten' family members to the family's memory, and to generate a legacy to pass on to younger generations, creating another sort of afterlife for their relatives, and themselves too. Their genealogical research often started in the wake of a relative's death, and had been a help in navigating grief.[3] One of Lambert's respondents commented that genealogy is 'much better than a gravestone'.[4] Family history and genealogy are acts of grief, memorialization, comfort, and a way to connect with the dead.[5]

These impulses were tied together: family historians tried to make sure both ancestors and they themselves would not be quickly forgotten. Tanya Evans found similar urges amongst the family historians she surveyed in Australia, Canada,

[2] The Latter Day Saints—the Mormons—hold a vast collection of genealogical records and provide family history services through 'FamilySearch', part of their efforts to offer proxy baptisms for the dead. Susan Moore, *The Psychology of Family History: Exploring Our Genealogy* (Routledge, 2020), 12–22.

[3] Ronald D. Lambert, 'The Family Historian and Temporal Orientations Towards the Ancestral Past', *Time & Society* 5, no. 2 (1996), 115–43, doi:10.1177/0961463X96005002001; Ronald D. Lambert, 'Constructing Symbolic Ancestry: Befriending Time, Confronting Death', *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying* 46, no. 4 (2003), 303–21, doi:10.2190/EU0D-J1B0-JKJ0-GHMD.

[4] Lambert, 'The Family Historian', 123–4.

[5] Stéphane Gerson, 'A History from Within: When Historians Write about Their Own Kin', *Journal of Modern History* 94, no. 4 (2022), 910, doi:10.1086/722420.

and the UK in the 2010s: leaving some kind of legacy behind was a key impetus for research.[6] As one participant noted, 'Family history is in a sense conferring immortality.'[7] Others highlighted family history research as an alternative legacy to having children.[8] Some family historians, then, might be seeking a form of afterlife for themselves or their relatives that they think is unlikely to be found in a different spiritual plane, or is perhaps more appealing than or a complement to religious ideas of the hereafter.

There were two processes at work in the families of our group members. For many centuries families have used various forms of documenting to pass on information about their kin. From a brief list of births, marriages, and deaths in a family bible to rich stories overlayed with many tellings and many meanings, families passed on a sense of themselves and a sense of their past over and between generations in written, oral, and non-verbal forms. In the latter twentieth century and into the twenty-first, increasing numbers of people from a wider range of backgrounds also took part in active historical research using archives and online resources to find out more about relatives and ancestors. These impulses of both recording and actively researching were and are about the connection with the dead and remembrance of those who have died.

Bill's example, in the twenty-first century, reflects the rising popularity of family history research amongst a wide range of people from the 1970s onwards, a trend accelerated by the growing availability of digital tools and archives from the 1990s.[9] Projects like Alex Haley's *Roots*, the huge television sensation in the 1970s, proved that family history could be for anyone, whatever their background, and was a spur for many to start their own research.[10] Increasingly, family history was about 'ordinary' ancestors, perhaps even 'deviant' ones, and investigating what were seen previously as shameful parts of a family's past, such as illegitimacy or same-sex relationships.[11] Indeed, those stories can be the ones that last.[12] But the usual selective processes as to whose lives are preserved within archival records apply in bounds for family historians. Digitization processes have made family history more accessible to more people, but also furthered inequalities inherent in who gets to be part of history. The vast databases of information made increasingly available have prioritized researchers from Anglo-Western backgrounds,

[6] Tanya Evans, *Family History, Historical Consciousness and Citizenship: A New Social History* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 123–7.

[7] Evans, *Family History*, 126.

[8] Evans, *Family History*, 124–5.

[9] Tanya Evans, 'Secrets and Lies: The Radical Potential of Family History', *History Workshop Journal* 71 (2011), 58–9, doi:10.1093/hwj/dbq065; Simon Michael Titley-Bayes, 'Family History in England, c.1945–2006: Culture, Identity and (Im)Mortality' (PhD thesis, University of York, 2006), 28–48, http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/14193.

[10] Titley-Bayes, 'Family History', 139–86.

[11] Aoife O Connor, 'An Ancestor in Crime: Digitisation and the Discovery of Family Deviance' (PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 2021), 10–11, https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/29186/.

[12] Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagran: A History of Stories* (University of Washington Press, 2004), 25–6.

from richer countries, with the money to pay for that access.[13] Moreover, research often takes a patrilineal line, meaning those with knowledge of their parents, in normative family forms, might find the process easier.

Lives Unrecorded and the Power of Remembering

There has been a shift in the way that the histories of non-elite families have been valued, from 'just' stories of only limited interest within that family itself to a history worth recording for others, echoing trends in social and public history more broadly. Yet at the same time, what the academy, the market, and what public narratives deem important is not the end of the story. As Kendra Field writes of the American context, there have long been 'historians without portfolio', historians who documented their histories within their families and within their communities, even if the academy was not willing to acknowledge them or that work. As she suggests, the twenty-first century has seen the extending of the 'privilege' of who gets to write about their family history, both in academic and public spaces.[14]

Many family historians have sought to use family history to connect to the past when national or 'official' histories felt remote.[15] Some chose to frame their pasts through their connections to national and global events, whereas for others, a familial or local framing of their story was more effective and appropriate. The necessity of remembering, furthermore, has had a more political edge for some groups, as a mode of resistance and protest. For Black people in Britain, this has at times coalesced around the murders of Black individuals at the hands of the police. Kennetta Perry describes how the murder of Kelso Cochrane in 1959 'provided Black Britons with an opportunity to retool the injured Black body as a grievable subject and citizen in such a way that recalibrated the parameters of public debate over the dimensions of Britons' "colour problem"'.[16] Remembrance can become highly political and a tool of activism, a way of paying respect to that individual but simultaneously fight for change. A similar urge can be found in the

[13] Julia Laite, 'The Emmet's Inch: Small History in a Digital Age', *Journal of Social History* 53, no. 4 (2020), 979–80, doi:10.1093/jsh/shy118.

[14] Kendra T. Field, 'The Privilege of Family History', *The American Historical Review* 127, no. 2 (2022), 600–33, doi:10.1093/ahr/rhac151.

[15] Evans, *Family History*, 14. Also see Anna Clark, 'Private Lives, Public History: Navigating Historical Consciousness in Australia', *History Compass* 14, no. 1 (2016), 1–8, doi:10.1111/hic3.12296.

[16] Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London Is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship and the Politics of Race* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 129. The death of David Oluwale, likewise, in 1969 in Leeds, has led to a decades-long campaign 'Remember Oluwale', leading to political campaigning, artistic projects, and a new sculpture for the city, opened in 2023 in a newly created park. See https://rememberoluwale.org/what.html [accessed 19 May 2023].

experience of LGBTQ* communities in the wake of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s.[17]

Family history recording and research might offer an alternative when other forms of remembrance are impossible. Examples include those with Jewish heritage whose families were persecuted and murdered and their histories lost in the Holocaust when heirlooms were confiscated and stories died with relatives. For this community, there were no graves to visit. As Marianne Hirsch has described, the very particular and traumatic experience of the Holocaust has led to a specific type of memory culture amongst Jewish people across the globe, whereby subsequent generations who did not experience the Holocaust first-hand have felt an intense need and pressure to remember, to pay tribute to those relatives who did experience it and to continue to 'witness' and communicate in some form the horrors of the genocide. Such memory cultures combat part of the purpose of such genocides: to destroy memory, culture, and heritage as well as the murder of individuals. This culture has taken various forms, such as memory books, which Hirsch describes 'acts of witness and sites of memory. Because they evoke and try to re-create the life that was and not only its destruction, they are acts of public mourning, forms of collective Kaddish [a form of mourning and remembrance in Judaism].' She adds that 'Many communal organizations think of them as their memorials or monuments or, as Raczymow says, they "take the place of graves for those who had no graves"'.[18] Ivan Jablonka's family history is an example. Aged 7, he wrote to his maternal grandparents who had survived the Holocaust, in contrast to his father's parents who had been killed in the genocide: 'You can be sure that when you are dead, I'll be thinking of you sadly for the rest of my life. Even when life is over for me too, my own children will know about you. And even their children will know about you when I am in my grave.'[19]

For those with enslaved ancestors, processes of violent erasure of both the lives and the names of relatives can make family history research a difficult pursuit. Within the context of the British Empire, records might be difficult to find because they have been deliberately destroyed. Yet, family history is a powerful tool for reclaiming and remaking the past. Saidiya Hartman describes this urge at the beginning of her account of not only the parts of her family's history that she could recover, but also her emotional journey through discovering it and the many erasures of that history: 'As both a professor conducting research on slavery and a descendant of the enslaved, I was desperate to reclaim the dead, that is, to

[17] Christopher Capozzola, 'A Very American Epidemic: Memory Politics and Identity Politics in the AIDS Memorial Quilt, 1985–1993', *Radical History Review* 82, no. 1 (2002), 91–109, doi:10.1215/01636545-2002-82-91; Matt Cook, '"Archives of Feeling": The AIDS Crisis in Britain 1987', *History Workshop Journal* 83, no. 1 (2017), 51–78, doi:10.1093/hwj/dbx001.

[18] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 246–7.

[19] Ivan Jablonka, *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had*, translated by Jane Kuntz (Stanford University Press, 2016), xiii.

reckon with the lives undone and obliterated in the making of human commodities.'[20] As she puts it, 'the gaps and silences of my family were not unusual: slavery made the past a mystery, unknowable and unspeakable.'[21] Such unknowability and *lack* in some family's pasts make the need to discover, recover, and reclaim all the more urgent. For Field, family history could be a 'form of enslaved resistance and antislavery argument'.[22]

Within families, there are processes of inclusion and exclusion too: choices made about whose lives to record, whose experiences to research. Defining who is included in a family, as a 'blood relation', is a point at which intolerance towards racial, ethnic, and religious difference can emerge.[23] Family trees and genealogies can work to connect individuals to one particular grouping over another, often forgetting the multi-racial and complex histories so many families have.[24] But in this sense, family history research can be radical.[25] It can unpick the categories of race and undo presumptions of what families should and do look like.[26] In Evans's surveys of the UK, Australia and Canada, family historians' research provoked new experiences of empathy, and allowed them to 'interrogate national historical myths and storytelling, to produce new versions of the past that include their family's stories and the life stories of those marginalized by official histories, including the poor, people of colour, and women'.[27] For our family historians, their research and our collaboration prompted them to question the very idea of national and ethnic boundaries, and Englishness as a useful identity. As Geoff Hardwick reflected, 'there's no such person as an English person'.[28] Moreover, researching families in the past can lead family historians to a new appreciation of diverse, non-nuclear kinship ties.[29] Whilst family genealogies might entrench notions of the heteronormative family unit, research into the realities of those relationships often showed the messiness of what emotional families could look like. For many of our group, family history research meant rethinking the boundaries of what a family was. It often took on a feminist slant, as members of the group wanted to know more about their female ancestors and pass that knowledge on. For John Hague, such an urge developed as we worked together: our questions prompted him to investigate his female relatives in more detail.[30] Others questioned the structures of class and wealth, and the dynamics in which

[20] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), 6.
[21] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 13–14.
[22] Field, 'The Privilege of Family History', 602.
[23] Sally Alexander, '"Do Grandmas Have Husbands?" Generational Memory and Twentieth-Century Women's Lives', *The Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (2009), 167, doi:10.1093/ohr/ohp078.
[24] Richard Shaw, 'A Tale of Two Stories: Unsettling a Settler Family's History in Aotearoa New Zealand', *Genealogy* 5, no. 1 (2021), 26, doi:10.3390/genealogy5010026.
[25] Evans, 'Secrets and Lies'.
[26] Field, 'The Privilege of Family History'.
[27] Evans, *Family History*, 113.
[28] Family historians' group discussion on the impact of the project, 7 June 2018.
[29] Evans, *Family History*, 99.
[30] Family historians' group discussion on the impact of the project, 7 June 2018.

a working-class background has a form of cultural currency.[31] There were radical and critical impulses here.

Family history research, then, provides a compelling way of connecting with deceased ancestors, but it is a highly unequal process. This fact is reflected in this project: those who came forward to join our group of family historians were all of predominantly white British heritage and most were comfortable enough financially to be able to spend money on their hobby. I didn't think enough early on about how a broad call for family historians would attract a somewhat narrow spectrum of people. Our group's families had suffered extreme poverty in the past, as well as discrimination and prejudice, and been through difficult experiences of violence, abuse, criminality, and ill health. Because of the poverty and working-class background of many of their ancestors, there was often frustratingly little of them in the archive. This was at the heart of both the appeal and the frustration of family history research.

This political, even activist, strand to what is often dismissed as an anodyne hobby is connected to the question of remembrance, and the desire to ensure those who are often marginalized at the hands of the state or sidelined by 'mainstream' histories have their place in the records too. The answer to this can be the creation and depositing of some kind of written record, such as the many written autobiographical and family history accounts I've found in local libraries and archives, or it may be the piecing together of those histories within a community, and the sharing of that knowledge through exhibitions and websites.

Technologies of Recording

Practices of recording, passing on, and creating continuity over generations have their roots in older rituals.[32] One discovery that many family historians made was the patterns of naming relatives after those who had died, to create a sense of continuity and intergenerational linkage. This was an everyday and accessible practice of creating connections between generations, a living family tree of sorts. In some parts of Britain, such as within communities in Scotland, naming

[31] On this impulse, see Dan Hancox, '"Who Remembers Proper Binmen?" The Nostalgia Memes That Help Explain Britain Today', *The Guardian*, 15 November 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/nov/15/who-remembers-proper-binmen-facebook-nostalgia-memes-help-explain-britain-today.

[32] For example, see Chris Fowler, 'Social Arrangements. Kinship, Descent and Affinity in the Mortuary Architecture of Early Neolithic Britain and Ireland', *Archaeological Dialogues* 29, no. 1 (2022), 67–88, doi:10.1017/S1380203821000210; Gheorghiță Geană, 'Remembering Ancestors: Commemorative Rituals and the Foundation of Historicity', *History and Anthropology* 16, no. 3, 349–61, doi:10.1080/02757200500219248; Hans Ruin, *Being with the Dead: Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness* (Stanford University Press, 2018); Lyle B. Steadman, Craig T. Palmer, and Christopher F. Tilley, 'The Universality of Ancestor Worship', *Ethnology* 35, no. 1 (1996), 63–76, doi.org/10.2307/3774025.

patterns were often strictly adhered to, with new babies being given a relative's name because of their birth order.[33] In the Leylands in Leeds, amongst Jewish families, there was a 'one in, one out' policy whereby children could only be given a family member's name once that individual had died.[34] In other families, naming a new child was a way of recognizing relatives who had died young, such as in the First World War.[35] Using middle names in creative ways could also reflect a family's experiences. Sarah Sykes's grandmother was given the middle name 'Seacroft', because her great-grandmother was seriously ill when pregnant and treated at Seacroft hospital in Leeds: 'it was either right when she was due to give birth or quite far on into the pregnancy because my great-grandad was warned he might, they might both be lost [mm] but they were both fine so they called her Seacroft, Joan Seacroft'.[36] Sue Child told us of how the name 'Helen' linked many generations of her family: 'Now we're all called Helen, it's my second name, it's my daughter's name, my grandma's name and her mother's, just sort of passed on down the generations. But whereas my grandma was called Nelly, her mother wouldn't have that, she had to be called her proper name [laughs].'[37] Renaming, too, was powerful. Rather than use the name her mother had given her, Saidiya Hartman writes of choosing to take on the name 'Saidiya' whilst at university. Choosing a new name was a way of reclaiming her African heritage, a move that 'pruned the bourgeois branches of my genealogy', even if, ultimately, this attempt to 'rewrite the past' would be thwarted by the 'ugly histories of elites and commoners and masters and slaves'.[38]

Some families took careful records of their histories, whilst others passed on information orally, and some had little interest in preserving the past. Since the early modern period in Britain, a range of types of recording took place, often combining family information with accounts, recipes, and other practical knowledge.[39] As well as the written word, knowledge about a family and its members could be passed on in other material ways, via words and images, such as through

[33] Andrew Purves, *A Shepherd Remembers* (Tuckwell Press, 2001), 8–9.

[34] Geoffrey Raisman, *The Undark Sky: A Story of Four Poor Brothers* (Harehills Press, 2002), 52, 53, 74, 84–5.

[35] John Edward Davies, *Ramblings of a Rolling Stone* (Transverity Publishing, 2007), 10–11; Amy Flynn, *Memories of a Lancashire Lass: An Autobiography* (A. Flynn, 1999), 7; Mark Connelly and Jessamy Carlson, 'Naming, but Not Shaming: The War Names Phenomenon, 1914–1920', *Critical Military Studies* 7, no. 4 (2021), 384–96, doi:10.1080/23337486.2020.1821534.

[36] Sarah Sykes, interview with Jessica Hammett, 30 April 2018.

[37] Sue Child, interview with Jessica Hammett, 8 December 2017.

[38] Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 8–9.

[39] Elaine Leong, 'Collecting Knowledge for the Family: Recipes, Gender and Practical Knowledge in the Early Modern English Household', *Centaurus* 55, no. 2 (2013), 81–103, doi:10.1111/1600-0498.12019; Imogen Peck, '"Of No Sort of Use"? Manuscripts, Memory, and the Family Archive in Eighteenth Century England', *Cultural and Social History* 20, no. 2 (2023), 183–204, doi:10.1080/14780038.2022.2144093.

quilts and other sewn pieces.[40] Whilst more elite families might have established 'archives', and historically, affluent families were more likely to preserve materials and information relating to their history, working-class families too sought to keep records of their relatives and ancestors. A family bible was a popular choice.[41] The use of family bibles was common in other countries too, not least America and (former) British colonies. C. L. R. James, for example, who grew up in Trinidad in the early twentieth century, recalled amongst his family's collection of many bibles 'the large one with the family births and deaths'.[42] Whilst some families bought bibles with dedicated sections in them in which to record births, marriages, deaths, and family trees, others simply noted such information in the flyleaf of a book they owned—often a bible, but another book could do, too. These items provided a way of recording births, marriages, and deaths, a family's personal equivalent to the state's own record-keeping.[43] They were used to record, remember, and trigger stories to be told: as Peter Brears described of his childhood in mid-twentieth-century Leeds, the family's 'enormous morocco-boarded, brass-bound and brass-clasped family bible' was brought out regularly, and the telling of stories around it 'drew the family together and gave them a sense of identity, with themselves, their ancestors, and their localities'.[44]

When I interviewed her, Jean Barker, née Wiggins, not only told me about her family bible, but brought it out for me to look through. Born in 1933, Jean had grown up in Leeds, the eighth of nine children. Two of her siblings died in infancy and two of her brothers were killed in the Second World War. Jean's father became a tram driver after serving in the First World War, and her mother worked as a housewife, looking after Jean and her siblings. The family bible Jean showed me is a large, heavy book, worn by use over decades. The bible is bound in a simple tan cover, with a much more decorative inner title page. The preface suggests that 'heads of families' will find commentaries on bible passages useful, particularly as 'Everything should be done by parents to make their family altar agreeable to the young.' No mention is made of the pages for recording family details; this was seen to be self-evident to any purchaser or user. These pages, entitled 'Family Register', invite the reader to add 'parents' names' and 'children's names' but there are long columns too in which the keeper can fill in family marriages, births, and

[40] Tanya Evans, 'The Use of Memory and Material Culture in the History of the Family in Colonial Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2012), 207–28, doi:10.1080/14443058.2012.678584; Deborah McGuire, '"Remember Me": Domestic Textiles in Britain: Memory, Identity and Emotion' (MA thesis, Oxford Brookes, 2022), doi:10.24384/fjy7-9c32. On the history of quilts in Britain, see Sue Pritchard, *Quilts 1700–2010: Hidden Histories, Untold Stories* (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2012).

[41] Evans, *Family History*, 131–9.

[42] C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Yellow Jersey, 2005 [1963]), 23.

[43] For examples, see Jack Lawson, *A Man's Life* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1949 [1932]), 12; Flynn, *Memories of a Lancashire Lass*, 27; Ted Walker, *The High Path* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 42; Christabel Burniston, *Life in a Liberty Bodice* (Smith Settle, 1995 [1991]), 98; Peter C. D. Brears, *A Leeds Life: Charles Brears, Collier to Shopkeeper 1854–1938* (Quacks Books, 2013), 31.

[44] Brears, *A Leeds Life*, 2–3.

deaths. In this sense, this family bible invited both an individualized or patrilineal/matrilineal approach to family history—filling in one's own place in the family through naming parents and children—but also a more collective and historical approach, by adding details of births, marriages, and deaths from a wider network of kin. This was how the Barker family had used the bible, a mix of Jean's natal family with a broader family history.[45]

Jean didn't know much about her family bible. At the time we spoke, she had loaned it from her nephew, Peter, who had become its keeper for the family. Jean had taken copies of its pages to add to her many folders of family documents and family history records before it was returned to Peter. Jean had forgotten about the bible altogether, despite her interest in family history. She had been reminded about it by her niece, Susan, and in the months leading up to our interviews, in 2018, the family had been passing it round a few interested relatives. Jean didn't immediately recognize the writing and had little recollection of who might have added to it, kept it, and passed it on: 'I didn't know we had it. [Susan] says, you did, when we lived in Cliff Mount. That's—oh forty-five year ago. It's a long time, it was before I was married. And she went, I might have seen it then, but I don't remember.'[46] She assumed her brother Jack had kept it, and then passed it on to Peter, his son. The family's memories were patchy, but by the appearance of the bible, it seemed it had been in the family's hands quite some time before this, detailing Jean's mother's family history since 1796.

The parents' names section of this family bible indicates that the first owner of the bible was perhaps one of Jean's grandparents or great-grandparents. The first names recorded, in the section asking for details of 'husband' and 'wife', are Jean's great-great-grandparents, Thomas Ovington (born 1796) and Mary Paget (born 1807). These are recorded alongside their children, in the same copperplate handwriting. A generation was skipped in this section, and the linking generation of Mary Ann, Jean's great-grandmother, does not appear at all. Here, we can see how the recording of family history across different generations could leave gaps, unknowns, silences. It appears the book was started by a previous generation, and then taken up by Jean's parents. After the Ovingtons and their children there are details of Jean's parents, Edith and William Wiggins, in a different hand. Other pages only start with Jean's parents' generation; the marriages section begins with Edith and William's marriage in 1916, and continues with a hand drawn family tree, in yet another hand, detailing the marriages of Edith and William's children, including Jean, and their marriages and offspring.

In the children's names section, the same hand that wrote of Edith and William's children's births and marriage—likely either Edith or William themselves—listed eight of their children, born between 1920 and 1934. It was

[45] Personal collections of Jean Barker.
[46] Jean Barker, interview with Laura King, 7 June 2018.

more likely Edith doing this work; women have historically been more involved in the informal archiving and preservation of family history within the emotional community of the family itself.[47] This list of children gives just their names. Below this, on the same page, is another list of those same children and their dates of birth in a different hand. However, this list also includes another boy, Jim, who was Edith and William's fifth child, born in February 1927. He is missing from the first list, although a later, different writer has added in 'Jim' in small letters in the margin, next to where he 'should' have been placed in birth order. This original omission was presumably because Jim died young, at one year and eight months old, in October 1928. His younger sister, Mary, who was born in 1934, also died as a child, aged 3, in 1938. She, however, is included on the first, original list. This potentially indicates that Edith or William filled in their living children's names, missing off Jim, when Mary was alive, between 1934 and 1938.

These collective family documents acted as a testament to deceased relatives, combining the long dead with those who had died more recently. Yet, this discrepancy between the two lists of Edith and William's offspring illustrates too how some family members could disappear from their family's records. As Joanne Begiato has shown of the eighteenth century, though families were defined diachronically, with emphasis placed on dead as well as living relatives, the deaths of young children could mean their place in the family's memory, or broader cultural memory, was lost.[48] Whilst another relative had chosen to add Jim back in at a later date, one of his parents had presumably decided he should not be included in that list because he was no longer alive. This could have been because including that information felt too painful in the aftermath of his death, or because it was felt he didn't 'belong' in the list of children. He was included instead as the first name of the deaths page, in the same handwriting used to add Edith and William's marriage and their original list of children's names. Such technologies to record family histories could obscure as well as pass on information.

Family bibles, and other ways of recording life cycle events, naturally told a partial story of a family history. They could be as much about establishing a sense of identity and lineage for those alive as emerging from a desire to truly remember those who had gone. Even for the most avid recorders of births, marriages, and deaths, or the adding to a family tree diagram, the passing on of a bible from

[47] Jane Hamlett, 'Mothering in the Archives: Care and the Creation of Family Papers and Photographs in Twentieth-Century Southern England', *Past & Present* 246, Supplement 15 (2020), 186–214, doi:10.1093/pastj/gtaa036; Liz Gloyn, Vicky Crewe, Laura King, and Anna Woodham, 'The Ties That Bind: Materiality, Identity, and the Life Course in the "Things" Families Keep', *Journal of Family History* 43, no. 2 (2018), 157–76, doi:10.1177/0363199017746451; Lucy Noakes, '"My Husband Is Interested in War Generally": Gender, Family History and the Emotional Legacies of Total War', *Women's History Review* 27, no. 4 (2018), 610–26, doi:10.1080/09612025.2017.1292634; Evans, *Family History*, 41–2; Helen Holmes, 'Material Affinities: "Doing" Family through the Practices of Passing On', *Sociology* 53, no. 1 (2019), 174–91, doi:10.1177/0038038518777696.

[48] Joanne Begiato, 'Family and Household', in *A Cultural History of the Home in the Renaissance*, edited by Amanda Flather (Bloomsbury, 2020).

generation to generation focused on a particular part of a family, and cousins and more distant descendants of the oldest relatives recorded might fall away in favour of those members of a family who owned and kept hold of the bible. This kind of knowledge prized a patrilineal or matrilineal version of the family, focusing on parents and children over multiple generations. Those who died without children were more likely to be forgotten in such family history recording.

For those who are part of such family structures, these items, and the knowledge they represent, provide a way for families to keep a record of themselves, to feel connected to parents, grandparents and older relatives who had died, but also their own sense of history. The deaths page of a family bible might be the most obvious aspect of this; Jean's family bible contains a list of her siblings' and parents' deaths across the century, covering the period 1928 to 2013. But in charting the other details of family members' lives—their births and marriages, and how they connected to the family more broadly, could be found the desire to keep alive both a broader record of one's family, heritage, and background, but also the trace of as many individual family members as possible.

Collating and Collecting

Scrapbooks and folders of assembled documents were also common. Jean had a mixture of such items, as well as the borrowed family bible. She kept original materials in these scrapbooks and folders, such as photos and letters, with documents relating to her research into her family's past. There was a mix of past and present, such as the documents relating to her brother Arthur's death in service in the Second World War, which sat alongside recent photos of Jean's granddaughter visiting his grave in what is now Yangon, Myanmar. These items were assembled into several folders.

Jean and her husband collated together information about both their family histories, through templates specifically designed for this purpose, such as 'The History of Our Family' book, a leather-bound volume which invited its owner to fill in as much detail about their family as they could find. As its introduction described:

> There are sections where you can enter the origins of your family: where your ancestors came from and when, what happened to them, and the things they did. You will also be able to record, perhaps for the first time, stories about your family that have been handed down from preceding generations. There are other sections devoted to family photographs, traditions and such memorable events as weddings and reunions.

This precise volume was first published in 1977 in the USA and had been subsequently published in Britain in 1986 by Studio Designs, London. Jean and her husband Cyril had filled in the first page in 1993, dedicating the book to their sons and their sons' families. The family's history started with their marriage in 1955 and spiralled out from there in multiple directions. Some branches of their families' history were detailed, going back in time to 1633, whilst other relatives' details had been lost. Some relatives are only mentioned in the basic dates of their lives, whereas Jean had filled in a little more about some relatives she had more knowledge of, such as her great, great, great, great-grandparents, who 'rebuilt the Anglers Inn at Kilnsey in 1768'. As well as some family photos, Jean had filled in other sections about her more immediate family, and her children, such as details of the homes she and her relatives had lived in and their involvement with the local church under the section entitled 'Religious Activities'. Like much recording of family history, this template book promoted a particular vision of family life, rooted around heterosexual parents and their children, in an Anglo-Western, Christian tradition. There are pages for including memories and details of friends as well as relatives, and plenty of opportunity for any individual owner to personalize and use this template as they wished. Yet in providing a template for 'curating' one's family into this form, such books made it clear what parts of a family, and what kinds of families, were valued.

As well as inviting its owner to fill in all sorts of details about their family from personal memories and their research, the book specifically invited a process of memorialization of the dead in its 'In Memoriam pages'. The book suggests, 'Here you may record names of those who have died about whom you have special memories. You may write stories you have heard or your own personal thoughts.' Jean filled in these pages in detail, writing of her two brothers, Alan and Arthur, who had died in the Second World War: 'Alan & Arthur will always be in my thoughts, as long as I am capable of remembering.' She followed this with memories of the two young men. Later, in a different pen, Jean had added to her memories of Arthur's life, 'Arthur didn't come home from Burma.' Under her entries about these two brothers, she later added thoughts about another brother, Jack: 'Jack survived and had five lovely children and 12 grandchildren. I miss him dearly. Just like Dad he had a twinkle in his eye. All the family roared with laughter at his jokes!' This section also featured tributes to Jean's parents and her sister—'Our Ruth was my best friend. She would do anything to please me'—and mention of her husband's brothers and sisters who had died. The pages are dated 1996. There are also tributes to the deceased in the military service records, including Alan and Arthur, as well as Jean's uncle who died in the First World War. Such books capitalize on what records are readily available to the family historian and encourage the celebration of military service as a special part of families' and individuals' lives. Jean chose to use some of the 'friends' pages to

extend the section on military records, detailing further her relatives' service in both world wars.

Jean also assembled many other documents relating to her family, collected from her relatives and from her own research, as well as putting together photo albums, often annotated with notes and memories. This mix of research with handed down materials provided a testament to many family members. Jean's two brothers who had died in the Second World War featured most strongly, and Jean was keen to ensure their memory didn't fade with her; the folders included letters sent between Jean and Alan and Arthur's fellow servicemen, providing further detail of their life away from the family and their deaths.[49] But Jean's folders also told anyone who wanted to look at them about many other family members, both those she had known personally, and those she knew only by name. Since retiring, she had had more time to dedicate to this family history project, adding more detail through research from the 1990s onwards. As for Bill and countless other family historians, family history was a popular hobby in later life. As well as having more time available, this practice was also part of the process of facing one's own ageing and mortality.[50]

Carolyn Huston went through a similar process to Jean. She was lucky to have inherited materials collated by her grandmother, father, his sister, and his cousin: 'their family had this thing of keeping scrapbooks', she told me. These processes in part reflected Carolyn's affluent background; many of her relatives had been in professional occupations, with her grandfather achieving a career as a well-known gardener, throughout England and Scotland. Carolyn had grown up in what was at the time Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. Her parents' move from Britain was part of why they became interested in documenting their histories and their lives, and both were involved in putting together scrapbooks and family trees: 'I think they did it as a way of staying in touch with their British lives [mm]. My dad always felt he'd missed out on a lot of stuff. My mum also felt she had missed out on a lot of stuff.'[51]

The combination of her relatives' noted careers—the scrapbooks contained newspaper cuttings about their work—and the free time available to her father had allowed this family to preserve its history fully. Her father had done much of this work after retiring as a forestry officer and returning to England, in the 1970s and 1980s. She described how 'him and his cousin and his sister, and a lot of the stuff—that's why my family tree's so advanced, because I started off with all this.'[52] Carolyn had built on what she had inherited, filling her spare room with as many

[49] Personal collections of Jean Barker.

[50] Matthew Stallard and Jerome de Groot, '"Things Are Coming Out That Are Questionable, We Never Knew About": DNA and the New Family History', *Journal of Family History* 45, no. 3 (2020), 284–5, doi:10.1177/0363199020906853.

[51] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 9 January 2018.

[52] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 9 January 2018.

objects and documents relating to her family's history as possible. These had been acquired and inherited from other family members, especially after her parents had died, and supplemented with rigorous research. Carolyn was a particularly dedicated and avid family historian, spending a lot of her spare time as a retired doctor learning more about her family's past, and that of her husband too. She described herself as 'nosey', and that this nosey impulse drove her to find out more. She reflected that family history research continually changed her attitudes to both her family and herself. Carolyn had found many avenues to increase her knowledge of her family, also taking part in DNA testing, a route through which she had made contact with a distant relative. She sought to collect her family history knowledge and materials together, and to write her memoirs, in part for her son, so that he and his children knew about their roots. She reflected that having grandchildren who lived far away also fuelled this desire:

> I like to know where I come from, I like to know my background and that has increased, now my son is living in America and I have two American grandchildren who have links with the Philippines, and I would hope that they, the other side of the family are doing family trees.

Carolyn had inherited less knowledge and 'stuff' from her mum, Hilda, in part because they had been living in Southern Rhodesia when Carolyn's grandmother, Amy, had died, and had not returned for the funeral. As a result, most of her grandmother's belongings had been discarded or given to her friend. When we interviewed her, Carolyn at points described her mum as interested in family history, and at others thought her less so. Carolyn described how 'she wasn't a storyteller, she didn't put any weight on the family stuff, but she did make out a little family tree', as well as passing on a family album to Carolyn.

Carolyn's maternal grandmother, Amy, had been quite interested in family history, making visits to places around Yorkshire to find out more about the family's past and building up a family tree towards the end of her life, in the 1950s or 1960s, which Carolyn now has in her collections. Both Hilda and Amy had also been organized, which had helped the preservation of items relating to the family's history: 'mum was very structured, very organized, so was her mum.'[53] Carolyn considered herself to be less organized than her mum, grandmother, and her sister, but had done a lot of cataloguing, labelling, and cross-referencing her own collections of things too, as well as putting together a lot of information online via Ancestry. Carolyn's mum wasn't so much interested in finding out more as preserving and documenting what she did have: 'She wrote it down and also labelled all the photographs as to who they were.'

[53] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 29 January 2018.

One issue that had affected her mum's interest in family history, that led to the ambivalence Carolyn described, was the discovery of a potential source of shame when looking into the family's past. Carolyn reflected on her mum's lack of inherited things: 'my mum sort of lost her childhood really, in a funny sort of way. It was so—that's why I think the family history mattered. But my mum sort of stopped I think, when she discovered illegitimacy in the family and she never, ever, ever mentioned it.' Carolyn explained that there was a 'reluctance to look at anything bad because it always had to be good and the best and look good on paper'.[54] She explained they were 'a very sort of moral family and always did things right'.[55] The emotions instigated by such family 'secrets' meant continuing research could be too difficult. This wasn't unusual. Several members of our group told similar stories, of both the shame and secrecy around cases of illegitimacy, suicide, and other difficult experiences, but also the ways this might interrupt an urge to find out more through research. Discovering such things about one's family came with a mix of emotions and confusion for our family historians. It became a complex question, of whether to find out more, what to share with relatives young and old, and how much the secrets discovered were indeed the family historian's to tell.[56]

The Loss of Knowledge

All these family historians sought to do several things with their assembling of materials and continuing research. The act of assembling a family tree, often the starting point for many family historians, is indicative of how family history as a practice focuses on placing oneself with a personal temporal framework. Situating oneself within historical framings might happen through engagement and identification with national events—from living through wartime to watching a memorable national sporting event to being part of a wave of new migrants coming to that nation. It can take place through local communities or emotional communities, which are bound together through shared heritage or interest. Or in this case, it can take place through family relationships, as an individual seeks to visualize how they fit into a wider web of inter- and intra-generational relationships.

For many of our group, capturing knowledge before it was lost was crucial. Those stories were valued by family historians and many of our group had found ways to capture the knowledge such stories held through orally recording

[54] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 9 January 2018.
[55] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 29 January 2018.
[56] On secrets, see Ashley Barnwell, '"Given It Is All So Remote from Us": Family Secrets, Ancestral Shames and the Proximities of Emotion', *Emotions and Society* 1, no. 1 (2019), 83–98, doi:10.1332/263168919X15580836411869.

relatives or writing down their accounts. Overriding Bill's urge to research was a feeling that a lot of information about his family had been lost. He described how,

> I've got so little…first-hand knowledge I suppose, that I've found really quite upsetting about this, really…annoying you know that I could have found out some more because what I'm really interested in is fleshing out the lives these people lead, yeah you can get the facts and that but it's, you know, what was it like for them you know what, and…so yes it's been, it's been very…very absorbing for me.[57]

In the desire to research family history there is a strong urge to remember those who have died. This urge is part of a wider impulse to focus on the marginalized, and rescue past relatives from anonymity.[58]

The loss of details of the lives of Bill's relatives was 'upsetting' for him, and he returned throughout our interview, visits, and discussions in our group to the frustration that so many memories and such a lot of information about Bill's family had not been recorded or passed down to him. Particularly in the wake of the death of his sister, Val, who had known a lot about his family, Bill felt a loss: 'foolishly I never talked [to them] you know'. Beyond Val, Bill felt 'quite sad that I didn't spend more time with some of these people who I could have done'.[59] The loss of people and the loss of their knowledge went hand in hand. Bill wanted to understand various mysteries about his family members' pasts, from where and how his parents met, to why his grandfather had bequeathed to Bill a small First World War medal given by the Scottish town of Auchinleck, even though there was no knowledge about his grandfather's war service or any connection to this place. This process of research was about Bill's relationship with several of his relatives: Val, whose knowledge had been lost, Bill's parents, and other family members who had held knowledge of the family's history, as well as a wide range of relatives and ancestors whose stories were at risk of being forgotten. The deaths of relatives, as well as losing contact with family members and the destruction of physical places related to the family's history, such as Bill's childhood home, all contributed to a sense of loss, and an urge to reconstitute that past as far as possible.

Research was, then, as much about the future of Bill's family as their past. It was about connecting relatives who had died before Bill had been born and those who had died recently with Bill and his younger relatives. He reflected:

[57] Bill Rollinson, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 8 November 2017.
[58] Evans, *Family History*, 25–40.
[59] Bill Rollinson, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 8 November 2017.

> I just wish I'd found out more, at the time, I mean that really is a message I would give to anyone in any family even if you're not interested at the moment just ask, make a note of it, put it away and then you've got something because as soon as avenues close off you know it just needs one or two people to die and there's nothing, nothing, and like what photos you've got, there's nothing written on the back to say when it was or why, why was it taken you know.

Bill had also spoken to his daughters, and though he felt they weren't much interested in his family history research, his older daughter (aged 31 when we interviewed Bill in 2018) had urged Bill to write about his own memories and experiences 'because we won't remember'.

Out of this emotional landscape of sadness, frustration, and curiosity came Bill's starting of his family history from that small scrap of paper, and his decision to join our family history group in 2017. Bill was keen to research a wide range of relatives, and all sorts of aspects of his family's history, from the dominance of mining as an occupation to a branch of his family in Huddersfield he had little knowledge of. He was interested in piecing together a full picture of both his parents' backgrounds. Like many family historians, Bill did this research because it was enjoyable and he found it interesting to learn about his family's past. But there were individuals who Bill wanted to learn more about and more specifically to place them on record, and to avoid their being forgotten. He sought to 'put things right' by finding out about relatives little recalled in his lifetime. At the time of our interview, Bill was trying to establish the details of his grandmother's death: 'I haven't found yet, when she died, it was around when I was born or just before then just '45, it would be '44, '45 or '46 when she died, so I obviously never knew her.'[60] Bill wanted to try and create more of a picture of each relative, so that every member was put on record in some way, with at least their name and the key dates of their life.

Perhaps the person for whom this urge to restore some kind of memory was most powerful was Bill's other sister, who had died at just three months old, in 1936, before he was born. Bill found the process of research one of the few ways he could remember his sister and pass on knowledge about her, a way of dealing with his feeling, an emotion of regret and sadness, that the family had not done so. Like Jean's brother Jim, Bill's sister was at risk of being 'lost' in the family's collective memory because she had died so young. Through his research, and sharing this with his family, Bill has managed to ensure that his sister Eileen hasn't been forgotten, despite the fact she died at just three months old. The recovery of information about largely unknown siblings who died young was not uncommon, in periods of higher infant mortality; Bill spoke of another friend

[60] Bill Rollinson, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 8 November 2017.

who found the same in his family history research. This process of research, collating family stories and memories with genealogical research, provides a compelling way to 'remember' those unknown to the person researching, even if there are no family stories or memories, photos, objects, or other traces of that ancestor, and even if their grave is unidentifiable, as in Bill's case.

Indeed, the loss of knowledge or particular items could spur on research. A process of research, and the knowledge resulting from it, could act as compensation for the loss of a person after their death, but also a loss of things relating to that person. Family history research offered lots of things to Eric, from using and honing his digital skills (he had been an IT teacher before retirement) to the challenge of finding out more and more. He said what kept him going was 'I think the success of, of trying you know trying to get back that little bit further'. Family history research had broadened his view of history too: 'I think it's given a greater respect for…people in the past [mm], and a greater awareness. You tend to think, I've tended to think that maybe…what sort of lives that they had, yes, it does make you realize that they had lives like we did, like we do.' He reiterated it had allowed him to understand ancestors from as far back as the 1700s 'as people'. Eric had been born in 1940 and grown up in York, in a house which his parents had had built in the mid-1930s, and in which they both lived up until their deaths, his dad in 1997 and his mum in 2007. Eric had one brother, who had died in 1985. He described himself as 'not a terrifically sentimental person'. When we interviewed Eric, and asked him about what he did to remember those who had died in his family, he said that his 'memories are in here, in my head and I don't need to go to a place, I don't need to, to look at things in particular, to look back and think of people'.[61]

Eric had been able to find out a lot about his great-grandfather, known as J. J. Chidgey, and the research he had done had in a sense taken the place of a family item that had been lost. When we invited members of our family history group to write about their research and how they remembered the dead, the story of this lost item and Eric's great-grandparents were what Eric chose to focus on. This item had been known as 'the regalia' and had been given to Eric's brother when their grandparents' house had been emptied after their grandad's death in 1960. After Eric's mother's death in 2007, Eric and his family cleared out his parents' house and found a decorative mirror and plaque, inscribed with the words 'Presented to JJ Chidgey P.A. G.G. G.C.E. by the Bros. of the Auld Lang Syne Lodge 445 A.O.D for valuable services rendered, June 7 1894'. 'These', Eric wrote, 'had been presented to my grandmother's father who had been in a Masonic Lodge.' Eric had been told that the mirror and plaque were 'to go to my brother at some stage as he had "the regalia". I was never aware of what "the regalia"

[61] Eric, interview with Laura King, 26 January 2018.

consisted of.' Because his brother had died before his parents, Eric offered these items to his nephew: 'I offered the mirror to him so that all could be kept together. He asked that I should keep the mirror. There is now no family contact with my brother's son and what happened to "the regalia" is anyone's guess.'[62]

Eric still has the mirror and plaque, with some family photos of his great-grandfather. After starting work with our group, Eric and his wife had dug out their family paperwork and had rediscovered birth and marriage certificates relating to this part of his family. These documents had allowed them to find more information about Eric's great-grandfather through online research into newspaper databases and censuses. Eric had also contacted masonic lodges to try and find more about J. J. Chidgey's involvement with the Masons. As such, this process of research was for Eric both an interesting challenge, a part of his family to discover more of, but also a way of compensating for the loss of the unknown 'regalia', owned by a part of his family with whom he no longer had contact.

Choosing Who and What to Research

This process of seeking to research particular family members was uneven and patchy, dependent on the family historian's own priorities, the availability of records, and a wider national memory culture which prioritized certain people and deaths over others. Again, biological family connections dominated, with a focus on parents and grandparents often at the heart of research. Family members whose stories connected with a wider local, national, or global history were seen as particularly significant in a family's history—like Jean, who felt a particular responsibility to remember her brothers who had died in the Second World War. An urge to pay tribute to those who had died in war was important to many family historians in the lead up to, during, and after the centenary of the First World War. One of the most notable national projects around this centenary was the 'Lives of the First World War' initiative, which aimed to create a 'permanent digital memorial' to those involved in the war through crowd-sourcing information from the public. Such initiatives tap into an idea of not only remembering the dead, but researching their lives to create a fuller public memorial to them.[63] The memory of the war has become a key part of families' sense of their pasts, and likewise family history is the key area in which memories of the war are transmitted between generations. These are gendered processes, with a focus on remembering male relatives who fought in both world wars, even where women

[62] Eric, 'My Grandad's Lost Regalia', Living with Dying, 26 September 2017, https://livingwithdying.leeds.ac.uk/2017/09/26/my-grandads-lost-regalia/.

[63] Jerome de Groot, 'International Federation for Public History Plenary Address: On Genealogy', *The Public Historian* 37, no. 3 (2015), 117–18, doi:10.1525/tph.2015.37.3.102.

have historically been more involved and invested in the passing on of family knowledge.[64] Cultural memories of key national events, like the world wars, have influenced who is well remembered within families. Both the broader cultural memory and families' collective memories of the First World War, and other wars, have focused on the figure of the soldier/victim.[65]

Geoff Hardwick's family history exemplified this pattern. Geoff had done some initial research into his mother's family, combining his excellent memory for details with research online. He told us no one else in his family was interested, but for him, it was important: 'I don't know why I've got that interest [in family history] but I just have', although he often also joked that 'I just want to know whether I'm famous or not'. Following that initial period of research, Geoff particularly wanted to find out about two relatives: his father, Henry, a bus conductor, and a relative named 'Eldred'. Geoff wasn't sure how he and Eldred might have been related, but the name had stuck with him. Geoff's story illustrates the processes by which families remember some family members and forget others, and what pushes individuals towards particular paths of research. In his desire to focus on these two individuals, Geoff wanted to fill in knowledge about his dad, Henry, who had left the family in 1966, when Geoff was 11; that was the last time Geoff had seen him. Geoff wanted to make up for that lack of relationship and the lack of knowledge of his paternal family history. This urge was particularly important because Geoff attributed many of the difficulties he had growing up to his father's departure: he had been sent to approved schools in his teenage years. As he put it, 'that's when all the trouble started…bother…but not proper trouble, just petty crimes', as it 'unsettled me and probably still to this very day'.[66]

The urge to find out more about Eldred came from a similar place: Eldred was a Hardwick, from Geoff's dad's family, and the only other paternal relative Geoff had any recollection or knowledge of at all. Vanessa came along to our groups to help Geoff navigate his family history research and had in the past worked with Geoff to get going with his research through the Seacroft Stories project, a local heritage initiative.[67] As she described in some notes, 'Geoff's main objective was to learn more about his father, Henry's background. As in many families, there was a big gap in historical knowledge. The relevant generation had gone and not told its story.' But Geoff's desire to know more about Eldred was also spurred on by his connection to the First World War. As well as his distinctive name, it seemed that this name had stuck with Geoff because of how Eldred had died: it turned out that he lost his life at the Battle of Arras in May 1917, aged 21. When we

[64] Noakes, 'My Husband Is Interested'.
[65] Lucy Noakes and James Wallis, 'The People's Centenary? Public History, Remembering and Forgetting in Britain's First World War Centenary', *The Public Historian* 44, no. 2 (2022), 56–81, doi:10.1525/tph.2022.44.2.56.
[66] Geoff Hardwick (with Vanessa Manby), interview with Laura King, 18 December 2017.
[67] Seacroft Stories, LS14 Trust, https://www.seacroftstories.co.uk/ [accessed 19 May 2023].

ordered Geoff's father's birth certificate on his behalf, the connections between his father and Eldred became clear: Geoff's paternal grandmother, Ethel, was Eldred's sister. Geoff hadn't known his grandmother's name before this point.

Geoff took up our offer of writing up his family history in a short, printed booklet. Co-written with Vanessa and me, Geoff told the story of his own childhood and what he knew of both his mum and dad's histories.[68] Our research revealed lots more about the family's experiences: Geoff's paternal grandfather had not been recorded on his dad's birth certificate; in fact, we pieced together that Ethel had given birth to Henry in Hull Union Workhouse, although this wasn't immediately clear from the birth certificate, where just the street address was given to protect children from the 'stigma' of their birth. Further research showed us that Ethel, Geoff's paternal grandmother, had died just two years after Henry's birth, aged 30.

Like in almost every family, Geoff's family history was therefore partly one of secrets and silences, perhaps because of the circumstances of his dad's birth, in 1926, and perhaps because of his own lack of relationship with Henry after he left the family when Geoff was 11. As Geoff put it, 'I don't know why, a lot of them kept it secret in them days I don't know why but you never knew owt.'[69] The research revealed more, which Geoff was pleased with. Yet, what's interesting is that as well as the remembrance practices for his mother, who had died in 1990, such as leaving cards on her grave at Christmas and meeting up with his sister on the anniversary of her death, it was Eldred's death that stuck with Geoff. He had sought out Eldred's name on war memorials, such as in Whitkirk church in Leeds. The nature of Eldred's death, intersecting with the national, cultural memory focus on the First World War throughout the twentieth century and particularly at the time of our interview in 2017, worked to push Eldred's legacy to the fore in Geoff's family history. These processes, of who to remember and who to research, were also gendered. And whilst his mum had been a crucial and much-loved figure in Geoff's life, it was those male family members who Geoff had inherited more of in material terms. Whilst Geoff had his maternal grandfather's medical scissors—he'd been a nurse—Geoff's sister held on to other family items relating to their maternal grandmother.

Radical Family History

Whilst the framing of global, national, and local history can encourage families to remember some relatives more than others, community history projects can push

[68] Geoff Hardwick, 'In Search of Fame and Fortune…' (2018), 942.819 LIV, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.

[69] Geoff Hardwick (with Vanessa Manby), interview with Laura King, 18 December 2017.

back against these tendencies. The intersection between the community and the family is a particularly powerful and potentially radical way of making lives more visible.[70] In Leeds, one major example of this has been the Jamaica Society's work. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, the Society put together 'a cross-generational and multi-media oral history project', building on oral storytelling traditions, to record the oldest generation's experiences of life in Leeds and Jamaica before that. The project involved over forty young people, involved in documenting and interpreting the experiences of their elders. A book was produced as a result, bringing together a written account of the Jamaican community in Leeds with long quotations from interviews, images, and poems.[71] In 2019, a new wave of work followed, led by Susan Pitter and Dawn Cameron, with exhibitions and a festival celebrating the first and second generation of Jamaican migrants to Leeds. The first exhibition out of this new project was entitled *Eulogy*, an explicit declaration of tribute to that generation who were now dying, and an explicit wish to keep alive their history and memories. The exhibition told this history 'through the prism of eulogies and images included in the typical Jamaican funeral programme', because 'if one funeral programme tells a singular life story, a collection would tell the story of a generation'.

This project was about preserving records and memories of both individuals and a particular Jamaican heritage:

> Today, Jamaicans in their 80s and 90s are the gatekeepers of their traditions and socio-political histories. As this pioneering generation ages, funerals become more frequent and their increasingly 'more British than Jamaican' descendants tasked with writing the eulogies become less connected with their 'Jamaicaness', the stories of that generation fade away.
>
> Capturing and preserving those stories before they disappear, in the voices of that first generation, their families and peers; sharing them widely and creating new gatekeepers has been at the heart of Eulogy.[72]

The way *Eulogy* told stories was through the prism of family. This pioneering first generation are pictured alongside their descendants, children, and grandchildren who are often holding a particular item that represented their older relative, from medals to hairdressing tools. Family and community are inseparable here, as oral histories, stories, and objects were shared through this project across generations and with a wider public audience. The project was accompanied by events and training in storytelling, Jamaican ancestry, and memoir writing, something the

[70] Evans, 'Secrets and Lies'; Evans, *Family History*.
[71] Melody Walker, *A Journey Through Our History* (Jamaica Society Leeds, 2003).
[72] Susan Pitter, 'Introduction', in *Eulogy*, edited by Susan Pitter (Jamaica Society Leeds, 2019).

Society continued to resource in its more recent *Out of Many* festival.[73] As Pitter wrote in the introduction to *Eulogy*, preserving these stories is a way to continue a sense of Jamaican heritage for those families, but likewise it is about providing a fuller picture of the history of the city, and documenting the challenges this community faced as migrants and people of colour, and the ways many of those challenges continue today. Whilst there are a significant number of autobiographies written by Black Britons, this group remains under-represented in personal writing within local libraries and archives, and often the focus of such writing is on political activism or fighting the racism they faced. For a community like those of Jamaican descent in Leeds, community history projects like *Eulogy* offer the possibility of telling their history on their own terms, of registering the need to record and remember their elders, and of combining these impulses with a broader story of migration. Remembering those who have passed away is inextricably interwoven with the telling of a whole community's story and the preserving of a particular Jamaican-British heritage.

Many family historians sought to 'correct' the imbalances of national history-making, which prioritized male achievements over the lives of women, and individuals who had connections with national stories over those who had lived less 'visible' lives.[74] Sue Child felt this urge particularly. Sue, born in 1945, became interested in family history in the wake of her parents' deaths in 1980 and her grandparents' deaths shortly after that. She spoke of why her family history research took her in particular directions: 'My brother's done all my dad's military history and all that, him being a soldier, and he's done blogs and things. But I have to be, my dad sort of dominated the family history and I've compensated for that because other people's stories are worth telling.' Sue found family history a way to create links between her family members who had died and her children and grandchildren. When we asked why she got interested in family history, she described how 'Well, I've always been interested in it. But when both parents died, I wanted my children to know who they were.' This mattered to Sue: she reflected on the shared traits between her ancestors and her descendants, such as that her son's voice sounded just like her grandad Alfred's, a fact that really resonated with her. She also found ways to preserve and pass on this family history. A fantastic storyteller, Sue spent lots of time with her grandchildren telling them about her family's past, working out both what was appropriate for them at different ages, but also what would entertain and engage them.[75]

[73] 'Announcing the Eulogy project', Jamaica Society Leeds, 22 February 2019, https://www.jamaicasocietyleeds.co.uk/eulogy-announcement/.
[74] Evans, *Family History*, 113.
[75] Sue Child, interview with Jessica Hammett, 8 December 2017.

Emotional and Intellectual Connections to the Past

Family memories and histories are contingent on the interests of living family members. Family members who were never personally known may be confined to documents and photos, and it can be difficult to conjure a solid sense of a person from the traces that remain. This was certainly true of many families studied here: the frustrations that Bill felt in not being able to reach parts of his family history through discussions with family members because they had died was part of this. Yet passing on memories between generations could help this process of connection: both stories and research could help solidify those ghostly shapes of ancestors. Genealogical research, especially if it started to reveal more than simply a name and key dates of a person's life, could create an emotional connection with the dead. As Carolyn noted, this depended on how closely connected an ancestor was in familial and temporal terms: 'the closer they are, the more emotional it is. The further away they are, the less so.'[76] But both preserving and researching the lives of relatives and ancestors, those unknown as well as personally known, could enhance and create these connections—to the sister Bill never knew, for example. Family history research, as an active process, was a way to create the impression of memories of relatives never known, to remember and honour known relatives, and to pass those memories on to future generations.

Not all family historians found family history to be primarily an emotional experience. Family history could be a more intellectual hobby. Male family historians in particular might resist the idea that research is an emotional journey.[77] Paul Cave explained how he'd become interested in family history:

> I was conscious of the fact that my grandparents had died when I was young and my grandad, my Uncle Earnest had now died and almost like that entire generation was you know, I was looking at this picture and I was like, there is no one alive from this picture and it was only taken in like maybe the late '50s or early '60s and I just thought, wow you know this is incredible and I kind of felt like a responsibility to do something with this before it got too late [see Figure 5.6, p. 109].

Paul's parents didn't know a lot about his family history, so he felt it was a 'fork', a time to make a decision about whether to piece together the stories represented in a single photo or let it go. He had since found the process 'addictive', and started a blog about his research, as well as the usual Ancestry family tree. Yet, Paul was reflective about the relationships he had with his ancestors:

[76] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 9 January 2018.
[77] Evans, *Family History*, 60.

> in many ways it's a bit silly to attribute everything that I, or certainly like major factors in my personality or…the things that I like doing or whatever to my family, you know, that it's that I'm sort of the apex of this great big family tree and therefore I am the culmination of everyone else's sort of hopes and dreams.

He challenged the idea that biological family links automatically generated some kind of social or emotional relationship between individuals. Contrasting himself with celebrities on programmes like *Who Do You Think You Are*, Paul reflected that 'I find it hard to have that sort of emotion about people who are so far removed.'

In the end, Paul came to a similar conclusion to Carolyn:

> I personally found that whole, that that thing of looking at sort of close relatives to be a lot more rewarding than, when it gets back it becomes interesting, but as I said, to me it becomes a bit more like, I'd probably get the same out of doing *your* family history because it's just interesting to, it's like a puzzle almost, you know, you are kind of finding these things

He added that the family connection wasn't always the most important aspect of doing research: 'I don't know how much it's actually because they're your relatives, it's just the kind of interesting thing to do full stop.' Whilst remembering deceased relatives could be an important part of the process for any family historian, it carried different emotions for different researchers, and less emotion for some. Paul felt an urge to do research, and a 'responsibility' to his ancestors, but for him, this was as much about the future as the past: 'I thought, you know, and it would be really nice to sort of have something so that when you know we have children I'm able to sort of say, this is your family and not just I only know X.'[78] Paul and his partner went on to have a baby in 2022, which made his research even more meaningful; he hoped his son would be interested as he got older.

Conclusion

Research might offer an option for remembrance and connection with the dead when there were little material traces available. As Maureen Jessop put it, though her own memory of her childhood and past events was in her words 'poor', 'I'm remembering all these people aren't I by doing this [both laugh] they're all in my little memory now, all these hundreds of people.'[79] For those who had experienced care or been cut off from families, research could be a way of tackling

[78] Paul Cave, interview with Jessica Hammett, 30 April 2018.
[79] Maureen Jessop, interview with Jessica Hammett, 30 August 2018.

absence and a lack of knowledge of and connection to a family.[80] Over the last century, there have been some significant shifts. Families are less likely to share a multi-generational home and are more likely to be spread across the globe. This disrupted sense of identity, collectively and individually, has fuelled the turn to genealogy.[81] Family history—preserving, passing on, researching—is about self-discovery, about feeling a sense of belonging, and a very particular connection to the dead. Perhaps families spend less time together discussing their histories now we have television, the internet, and smartphones. But I'm not so sure. Family history is ultimately about stories, and its popularity only grows. This is a story of continuity as much as change. Families might now pass on online family trees rather than family bibles, and family history research and the sources that fuel it have become increasingly accessible. But in many ways an urge to remain connected to the dead through the sense of a collective family past is a constant.

I've mentioned elsewhere that no one in my King family, my dad's side, has done much research into our past. There are stories, there are some photos, there are a couple of sketchy family trees. My mum and I did a bit of digging on genealogical websites about ten years ago. My older relatives—many of whom have since died—met in around 2014 to share knowledge about family history, and there is certainly an appetite to know more and to share information. But no one, as far as I know, has had enough interest to do much more, in contrast to my mum's family. Amongst her family, a cousin brought together research, wrote it up in a printed booklet, and presented it to my grandad on his ninetieth birthday in 2013.

When I finally got round to joining the family history site Ancestry and creating a basic family tree of three or four generations, I found there are distant cousins, who as far as I know no one is in touch with, on both my grandmother, Anne's, side—the Wrights—and on my grandfather Joseph's side—the Kings—who have done quite a lot of research into their parents and older ancestors, some going back well into the eighteenth century. My grandparents are already part of others' family histories. In writing this book, I too have joined the masses who do genealogical research, who produce family trees online, and who write down and share those histories.

Is this process of research, for me, about remembering the dead? It's entangled with it. Writing this book has coincided with a generation starting to leave: four of the six siblings of whom my dad is the youngest have died over the last seven years, and many of their spouses and ex-spouses. I think my interest in this topic came from elsewhere, from my academic interests—but how can I separate that

[80] Delyth Edwards, *Cultural, Autobiographical and Absent Memories of Orphanhood: The Girls of Nazareth House Remember* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), especially chapter 7. For an example, see Maureen Cooke, *Mother in the Shadows* (Maureen Cooke/Penfolk Publishing, 2000).

[81] Noakes, 'My Husband Is Interested', 613.

from what's personal? The turn of this research from being about dying and death to being about a relationship with the dead, and my eventual turn to including my own family, my own relationship with the dead, has happened alongside these deaths. And there's a mix of emotions here. I employ a genealogist based in Belfast to do some more digging, to try and find out more about my family. She does, both about Anne's family, and Joseph's too. But I find it a strange mix of fascinating and boring: I can't wait for her to email me the results, but the actual details are less interesting. There isn't much to find about most of my relatives; there's no trace of my grandmother and her family beyond the censuses and usual birth, marriage, and death certificates. This mix of emotions replicates the experience many family historians have in their research: the potential joy of connecting with the dead coupled with the frustration of being unable to find them, to pin down the details of their lives, to feel something of their presence in the existing records.

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8
Stories

They Dragged Her by Her Hair

Stories are the filler, filling in the cracks between and around everything else. There might be places, buildings, objects, documents, photos, written accounts of family history, tangible things that record the past in different ways, provide triggers for memories, or resurrect traces of the dead at different moments. Research offers tantalizing but often unfulfilled possibilities for making up for lost stories and knowledge, for plugging the gaps of forgetting. But stories are more slippery, more flexible, providing a space for the bits of family life and families' pasts that might be otherwise forgotten. The flipside of this is that family stories are the bits that matter most; the stories, how they are told, and the meanings behind them are significant because they persist over generations. That stories survive alongside more tangible things, or despite little trace of those events or experiences elsewhere, shows their tenacity and importance within a family. Oral recording, after all, persists through so many human societies: storytelling is the oldest form of history, and a form of history that can resist, subvert, and challenge.[1] Stories, as Vinciane Despret puts it, 'keep the presence present, the dead alive. The stories insist on relaying.'[2]

These stories are partial truths, partial lies, partial exaggerations. Stories bend and flex in the telling, are moulded by the many mouths that tell them over and over. Stories are not just told verbally. As Sally Alexander writes, 'generational memory is affective, relational, and deliberate, but it is communicated and internalized through bodily feeling and thinking.'[3] Whether stories are 'correct' or not often doesn't matter. These stories are true because they are what's told. There might be 'facts', 'lies', or 'mistakes' in there, but these are the legends of families that are true emotionally if not factually. And everyone can have a story—even if families might not have heirlooms, houses that last, or even a gravestone to mark

[1] On the role of storytelling as both history and resistance, see, for example, Jewel Amoah, 'Narrative: The Road to Black Feminist Theory', *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 12, no. 1 (1997), 84–102; Chantae D. Still, 'Walking Tall: A Narrative Critical Family History of a Grandmother's Fight for New Normals', *Genealogy* 4, no. 2 (2020), 58, doi:10.3390/genealogy4020058.

[2] Vinciane Despret, *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind*, translated by Stephen Muecke (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 125. On the power of stories, see also Elizabeth Stone, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us* (Times Books, 1988).

[3] Sally Alexander, '"Do Grandmas Have Husbands?" Generational Memory and Twentieth-Century Women's Lives', *The Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (2009), 163, doi:10.1093/ohr/ohp078.

a burial site. Yet, there are many reasons why families might remain silent. Reflecting on her childhood in the 1980s and 1990s, Tracey Loughran describes her working-class family as one 'for whom the tally man is a more vivid presence in intergenerational memory than the ancestors who were our blood relatives'.[4] Some families told few stories of the past. But for others, stories worked hard. Whether through poverty, family break up, forced migration, or other circumstances, physical things could get lost—whilst stories could survive and stick. Families are often the places in which our own stories of ourselves evolve. As Richard Shaw writes, of his own family and its colonialist history in Aotearoa New Zealand, families 'are the curators of the stories and the keepers of the memories; it is within families that the origin myths are crafted and subsequently cemented down through the long years of retelling. It is they who choose what is remembered and what is tacitly forgotten.'[5] Such family stories interact with those narratives of a community or a nation that provide a sense of authenticity and claims to authority through history and heritage.[6]

Part of my own family's way of remembering comes through stories. As well as, and more important than, things, photos, and documents we have of my grandparents and other relatives are the verbal forms of remembering and passing on a sense of those who came before. Some of these are shaped into stories: my dad and his siblings remembered being told about their grandparents and other relatives. There were wild tales here—the myth of a 'pirate' ancestor, for example. But many stories that seem to have lasted through to my generation were the stories that told of the violence my grandmother, Anne, and her family experienced as Catholics in and around Belfast in the 1910s and 1920s, and why they left Ireland (and went back) many times. Two stories stuck in my aunt Sylvia's memory. Each was signified with a known starting line to the tale. These could even be a shorthand: the story itself didn't need to be told, as these phrases came to act as a way of referring to these experiences without the telling of the whole thing. Sylvia explained:

> you'd always get these little phrasette stories, 'and they dragged her by her hair', 'and he ran without his coat'. There'd always be these windups to the stories and the signal of which story it was would be this phrase 'and he ran without his coat', and 'they dragged Granny by the hair'. There was a whole series of them, do you know what I mean? They were kind of little refrains in the, in the

[4] Tracey Loughran, 'Distance, Intimacy and Identification: Reflections on Writing a History of Trauma', in *Museums, History and the Intimate Experience of the Great War*, edited by Joy Damousi, Deborah Tout-Smith, and Bart Ziino (Routledge, 2020), 139.

[5] Richard Shaw, 'A Tale of Two Stories: Unsettling a Settler Family's History in Aotearoa New Zealand', *Genealogy* 5, no. 1 (2021), 26, doi:10.3390/genealogy5010026.

[6] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, 20th anniversary edn. (Beacon Press, 2015).

> dialogue and…and it was always about injustice in Northern Ireland, about the fact that…Catholics weren't allowed to work in certain professions. Well, professions, even certain jobs. I mean I'm not talking you know, frigging lawyers or anything, I'm talking about you could only have a cleaning job or in-service, basically, if you were a Catholic, mostly.

'He ran without his coat' was about Anne's father, George, who was working in the shipbuilding trade; apparently, he had been hired to fill a quota of Catholics as part of British requirements of Irish businesses. George Wright was born in 1871, and aged around 40 when his sixth child of eight, Anne, was born. Two of her siblings had died before her birth. When she was only a year or so old, the family fled their home in Belfast to Scotland, after being tipped off at work by George's Protestant friend that 'they' were after him. Sylvia reflected that she never knew for sure who 'they' were.[7] There was a generalized sense of 'they' which combined both the British state and military forces with Irish Protestants in all these stories.

George's escape from his shipyard workplace and the 'they' who were coming for him, I've come to understand, must surely have happened as part of the July 1912 wave of violence in Belfast. The Dublin based newspaper *Freeman's Journal* reported on the 'Orange Ruffianism in Belfast' on 5 July, which had led to 2,000 Catholics being out of work 'either as a result of violent treatment or acting on "friendly warnings"', echoing the family story about a tip off from George's Protestant friend.[8] By 26 July, the same newspaper was describing a 'Reign of Terror in Belfast Shipyards', with 'Catholics brutally attacked and driven from their employment'.[9] George, it is said, worked in Harland & Wolff, the biggest of the Belfast shipyards. I grew up being told he worked on the *Titanic*, built there ahead of its launch in 1912. George would have been one of the hundreds forced out of work there, in 1912. The family moved to Port Glasgow. They lived there over the course of about ten years—but with periods spent in Ireland during this time too. George worked in a similar occupation in the docks on the Clyde, a labourer in the shipyards according to the 1921 census. He and his wife Catherine had two more children before his death in 1921. Catherine and her children returned more permanently to Ireland after he died.

So, what of 'They dragged her by her hair'? This story referred to Catherine, née Morgan, born in 1880. The story served much the same purpose, and referred to an incident in which the family were told to leave their home and find somewhere else to live, and 'Granny', Catherine, tried to refuse. In response, 'they'

[7] Sylvia King, interview with Laura King, 11 June 2021.
[8] 'Orange Ruffianism in Belfast', *Freeman's Journal*, 5 July 1912, 7.
[9] 'Reign of Terror', *Freeman's Journal*, 26 July 1912, 7. Also see 'The Party Trouble at the Shipyards', *The Northern Whig*, 26 July 1912, 7; 'Belfast Rowdyism', *The Donegal Independent*, 26 July 1912, 3.

taught Catherine a lesson, by dragging her away from her home by her hair. Sylvia reflected that she couldn't remember the details of these stories because these phrases did all the work:

> I've no idea because at the end, at—they'd tell you up to there and 'They dragged Granny by the hair', and that said it all. Do you know what I mean? It sort of summed up that this is what happened. They were driving her out of the street, so they were going to have to move again.

Granny, it was said by another of my aunts, Cath, was always after a better house in a better area, a reflection that she had come from a family with a bit more money, a family who hadn't approved of her marriage to George, a relatively poor shipyard labourer. These moves often meant living in Protestant-dominant neighbourhoods, leading to more conflict. It is hard to say when this took place; Cath thought it was in the 1920s, in the wake of the Irish Civil War, when they returned from Scotland. Catherine took on 'posher' houses and filled them with relatives to be able to afford them.

The final story that dominated the family's memory of violence in Ireland was when their house was burnt out by 'them'. Details of this story are few, and there is little to go on beyond my aunts' and dad's memories of being told the family's house was deliberately set on fire. Photos of the relatives involved show them living in Belfast until at least 1930. The story when it is told is usually set around the late 1920s. Cath recalled the fire took place on 12 July, in violence following the Orange Order marches. The violence in Belfast continued into this period; in 1935, there was another flare up of violence around 'the twelfth' (12 July, the day of Orange Order parades). On 20 July 1935, *The Mid-Ulster Mail* reported 'Fifteen houses set on fire' under the headline 'Rioting in Belfast', which had taken place in reaction to the parades.[10] None of my relatives who were around at this time is still alive. This incident could have taken place any time throughout the late 1920s or mid-1930s, up until Catherine and her family moved back to Ballymoney (a mixed Protestant/Catholic town). Anne stayed in Belfast until becoming pregnant, when she returned to Ballymoney to have her first baby, Cath.

Cath was born in 1937, after the fire happened, and after the family had moved to Ballymoney. But she remembered being told the story: that many of the family were living in the house, including Catherine and her children, but also other cousins and an uncle who was tipped off at work about what was happening: 'eh kid your house is on fire' he was told, according to Cath, who had some memory of being told that IRA (Irish Republican Army) members tried to save the family from the fire the Protestant Orangemen had started. The story went that Catholic

[10] 'Rioting in Belfast', *The Mid-Ulster Mail*, 20 July 1935, 5.

priests turned up at the house to help get them out, because there were allowances made for priests: they were allowed to come in and intervene in such situations. These stories all united around the theme of 'us' being the victim; they were about 'us' being chased out, and physically hurt by 'them'. Over several generations, this sense has continued, of being other and victimized, of being Catholic in Ireland, Irish in England. These were personal stories that told the big themes of modern Irish history, of the actions of the British state in sowing division and violence, and the growing acrimony between the Protestant and Catholic communities who lived in Northern Ireland.

One further story was significant to Anne and told regularly to her children. Here was another 'what if', here perhaps was the escape from the violence, the poverty, the lack of power she experienced as a young woman. A rich relative, likely a stepbrother of Catherine, had very nearly adopted Anne as a child. This couple were unable to have their own children and had taken Anne to stay with them for some time, presumably after her father, George, died in 1921. This couple gave her many new clothes, her own bedroom, a good education, and a 'loving home'. The plan was for her to be adopted by them, as her own mother, Catherine, had little money and many children, but in the end, Catherine couldn't bring herself to 'lose' her child. Anne returned to her family. She spoke of it to her children often, the sense of a different life not lived, and 'great things' she might have gone on to.

These stories seem to be the ones that have lasted most strongly, though their timings, their details, and even they key players involved in each incident seem to have been muddled, mixed up over decades of telling and remembering. These were puzzles, clues, traces of the past, distillations reduced to short phrases. My account, here, written in some chronological form, is mostly an inaccurate way of representing these stories, a contortion. The stories are not a logical narrative, not a neat tale. Instead, they are bits. Fragments. Contradictions. Not a carefully woven piece of fabric, more a tangle of yarn, loose threads fraying away, a threadbare and ragged piece of an original whole. Not even a neatly stitched quilt of reused past pieces, making up a new whole, but perhaps a rag rug: the making of something from shreds and pieces.[11] Maybe not even that, but a pile of shreds to be constantly reassembled each time the story is told.

The Shifting of Stories Through Generations

These were also not stories I knew until I asked about relatives I had known—Nanny King—and those I had not—my grandfather, Joseph, and my

[11] On rag rugs, see Carolyn Steedman, 'What a Rag Rug Means', *Journal of Material Culture* 3, no. 3 (1998), 259–81, doi:10.1177/135918359800300301.

great-grandparents and other relatives. These were stories that had passed through three generations, but I only had a vague sense of them, growing up. They had been distilled into 'phrasettes' and condensed further into a more generalized sense of being forced to leave Ireland. In my childhood of the 1980s and 1990s, the family's sense of its Irish heritage, combined with its more recent Black Country roots, were around me, intangible and not necessarily articulated, but always there. I had a strong sense of them leaving because of the violence, and always knew that Anne and Joseph's was a mixed marriage. I only found out later that she was pregnant when they married. Big histories, those of nations and conflict and religion, could provide a cover for those individual secrets. We only visited Ireland a couple of times as kids, as most of the family had left, but we did once tour round Ballymoney and other meaningful places, my dad pointing out significant spots in the family's past. The stories changed as time went on: whilst Anne had told her daughter Sylvia, and perhaps many others, about her parents, I, along with many of my (mostly older) cousins, was mostly told stories about my Nanny King, as she had died when I was 6. It took me longer to disentangle the people in these stories, and what happened when in the family's experience of conflict in Ireland, and the many moves both away and back there.

Whilst in many families, grandparents are the storytellers, in my family this didn't work. Firstly, the physical separation from kin through migration meant that most of the six siblings didn't see their (maternal) grandmother very frequently. My eldest aunt and uncle had spent the Second World War in Ireland with Catherine, their granny, but were very young at the time. Anne herself, their mother, and her sisters were the storytellers, passing on memories of childhood and knowledge of their parents' and other families' experiences. Secondly, the mixed marriage of my grandparents—she Catholic, he Protestant—meant Joseph became estranged from his family. He seems to have spoken little of them and passed on very little information to his children. This was compounded by the fact that he and Anne split up around the late 1950s—the dates are fuzzy, and it wasn't one clean separation. He didn't have much of a relationship with most of his children before or after the split.[12] There weren't really opportunities for learning about those who had died in his family, and about his past, although I have learnt a bit more through research since. A further, third related factor here about the silencing as well as telling of stories is the age of my grandparents and great-grandparents: Joseph was 60 when my dad was born and died just six years later. My dad's maternal grandfather, George, was 40 when Anne was born, and died when she was about 10. Her mother died in 1946, when my eldest aunt was only 9. My dad and Sylv, the two youngest, never met any of their grandparents.

[12] On how absent fathers shape family histories, see Martin Bashforth, 'Absent Fathers, Present Histories', in *People and Their Pasts: Public History Today*, edited by Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 203–22.

The long generations and relative old age of both my grandparents and great-grandparents meant that most stories were told between parents and children.

Or aunts and uncles. Mostly aunts. Many of the stories I was told came from my aunts. They in turn remembered their aunts as key storytellers, sisters sitting around chatting about the past and the Ireland they had left. Two particular stories were told and retold in my childhood about Anne and my grandfather, though he was much less mentioned. The stories that were told about him were not positive ones; my dad remembered regularly hearing how he would take sandwiches to the pub to share with his friends, leaving the family at home with not enough food, a story also shared as part of a family gathering to learn about the family history in 2014. As my dad put it, 'he was good to his friends at our expense'. He could be violent, and his lack of involvement with his children's lives left little appetite for repeating those tales. Much as theirs was a family that looked like many others—a mother, father, children—the relationships that mattered were those between a mother and her children, between the six siblings, who were close, and between sisters and aunts.

The first story I remember was of their leaving Ireland. I knew from a very early age that the fact she was Catholic and he was Protestant had led to them coming to the West Midlands. It was only much later that I found out more detail: that Anne had been pregnant when they married, and they'd had to leave. Joseph lost his job in Belfast as a grocer because of marrying a Catholic. The story depended to an extent on who told it. My aunt, Sylvia, felt that Anne had probably, cleverly, plotted a way to escape Ireland and the 'matriarchal oppression' there. Less a victim of fate, she had probably assessed her options, got pregnant on purpose, and married my grandfather as a strategy to make her life more as she wanted it, a rational response to the options available rather than a black and white choice between conformity or resistance.[13] This was Sylvia's view, at least:

> I think the theory was that Mom had had a cunning plan and the only way she was going to get out of the kind of matriarchal oppression in Ireland was to marry a Proddie, so she'd have to leave. So that's what she did. Mom was…Mom was ambitious actually. Mom was a thinker. She was looker ahead and I swear to God that's what she did.[14]

My dad had a slightly different view; he thought Anne had probably been forced into marrying my grandfather, perhaps under pressure from her mother, after becoming pregnant accidentally. Leaving was the best choice available to her, in a 1930s Ireland where single motherhood often meant forced adoption, or the baby

[13] Nimisha Barton, 'Pushing the Boundaries: Power, Privilege and the Problem with Inclusion', *Gender & History* 36, no. 2 (2024), 775–89, doi:10.1111/1468-0424.12651.

[14] Sylvia King, interview with Laura King, 11 June 2021.

and/or mother being placed in institutional care.[15] Cath felt he was probably the best prospect available; good-looking, with a decent occupation in shop work, and he was good to her in their courtship.

The other story my brother and I were more particularly told, alongside the more general ones shared amongst the family, was about our not being christened. The rest of my nine cousins were baptized as babies in Catholic churches, following the wishes of our devout grandmother. Sylvia, having married in a registry office wearing a boiler suit in 1976, had decided to make something of a peace offering by getting her two daughters baptized. There were mixed levels of belief amongst my aunts and uncles, and only one, Joe, remained a practising member of the church, but with various levels of assent and disgruntlement, they all christened their children. My parents decided not to do this, a reflection of their own lack of faith, despite Anne's worries. For them, standing up in a church and making false promises about bringing us up within the Catholic faith would have been disrespectful and too much of a lie. My dad remembered his mother understanding this reasoning, but her fears for what would happen to our souls, should we die, took over. And so she took matters into her own hands. Anne got some holy water—Sylvia thought specially from the priest, Cath remembered she always had some in the house at the ready—and got reassurance that a DIY baptism would suffice in God's eyes. One evening in the late 1980s or early 1990s, when babysitting us, she performed her own baptism ceremony, allegedly when we were asleep. Who knows quite what that looked like, but she later told some of her children she'd done it, and that she felt better for it. She could put aside her worries that if my brother or I died, we'd be stuck in limbo.[16]

What's particularly interesting about this story is that there remained a sense of secrecy around it. I think my parents found out about our makeshift baptism after I did, and some years or so after Anne had died. I found out this story as a teenager, from Sylvia: a funny story, but it also said a lot about Anne. I was told my parents didn't know. It's impossible now to work out quite who knew what when, and how my parents and I found out in the wake of Anne's death. There was some fun in sharing a secret, some sense my parents would not be impressed Anne had—to some extent—gone against their wishes. The story had a currency, and worked within the family, creating a sense of closeness—such as between my

[15] Delyth Edwards, *Cultural, Autobiographical and Absent Memories of Orphanhood: The Girls of Nazareth House Remember* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 7–8; Leanne McCormick, *Regulating Sexuality: Women in Twentieth-Century Northern Ireland* (Manchester University Press, 2011), 54–6. Also see Leanne McCormick and Sean O'Connell with Olivia Dee and John Privilege, 'Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries in Northern Ireland, 1922–1990', Report (Department of Health and Social Services, Northern Ireland, January 2021), https://niopa.qub.ac.uk/bitstream/NIOPA/13991/1/doh-mbhl-final-report.pdf.

[16] On the power of the idea of limbo in Irish culture, and its decline, see Liam Kennedy, 'Afterlives: Testimonies of Irish Catholic Mothers on Infant Death and the Fate of the Unbaptized', *Journal of Family History* 46, no. 2 (2021), 236–55, doi:10.1177/0363199020966751.

aunt and I—but also some sense of discord, that there might be surprise or disappointment because of Anne's actions. It worked to create a sense of Anne beyond her death, representing both her care as a grandmother and her strong Catholic faith. It's probably the thing that mostly strongly links my brother and I to her, and a story that makes me feel her care for me as a grandmother, even if I remember little of experiencing that care.

Connecting and Distilling

Stories are a way to connect with the dead, both beloved family members known and lost, and ancestors only known through inherited tales. Stories can help the teller and the listener feel close to someone who has died, and keep them close. Stories can form a way for families to create a sense of themselves, to weave individuals' experiences into wider historical events, and to connect multiple generations, through past, present, and future. As Annette Kuhn writes, in her work on family secrets:

> A compulsion to tell and retell the same stories, to the point indeed that they become formulaic, has about it the air of a wish to forestall, even evade, death. People seek to hand on the contents of their memory-bank to future generations, and so to ensure collective immortality.[17]

Gaiutra Bahadur, too, reflects on the relationship between telling stories and forgetting, in her account of her family's history, a tale of migration and indentured labour, of 'brown-skinned people with many gods and peculiar, stubborn habits'. As she puts it, the tests of time and travel mean 'Details get smudged and dialogue garbled. The will to remember the past is undermined by an equally formidable will to forget.'[18]

Stories act differently on different individuals within a family; rather than being a straightforward description of events, stories are agents, acting over generations. They take on many, sometimes contradictory meanings. Stories can be formulaic and create a static picture of the past. Yet, stories can also be forms of experimentation, containing multiple possibilities, a sense of *perhaps*. As Despret puts it:

> The stories of the dead are endless stories, deliberately endless, they can always be reopened, begun again. These are stories that welcome, that acknowledge

[17] Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, 2nd edition (Verso, 2002), 166.
[18] Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (C. Hurst & Co, 2013), 18.

> that something calls for thought, which means hesitating and fabulating. Actively. Stories are experiments. They are workshops where being is made.[19]

How, then, do stories and memory work together, clash, interact? Stories are the link between individual and collective memory, and give meaning to the family in the present.[20] While, as Jan Assman notes, memories cannot themselves be passed on, a sense of the dead and the past can be transmitted and shaped through stories.[21] Collective or communicative memory, then, within a family setting, is the way that knowledge of the past is transmitted across around three to four generations, and when that knowledge becomes performed, ritualized, and institutionalized.[22] Families are a 'switchboard' between individual memories and collective remembering, at a community, national, or global level.[23] This process is a form of history-making that resists the global and national scale and instead zooms in on the everyday, the perspectives of each and every person, a point made by Jennifer Nájera in studying collective memory in migrant families.[24] These memories are shaped collectively, mythologized into stories, and passed between generations. Both the past and present change; the stories continually shifting in their telling and retelling, those individuals in a given present reacting to and being shaped by those collective memories and stories.

The Negotiations of Young and Old

The youngest member of our group of family historians was Katie. She was in her late twenties at the time of our collaboration and wanted to learn more about her family's past. When we sought to interview each of our historians, Katie suggested we interview her and her grandmother, Dorothy, together. Katie thought her grandmother's memories and knowledge of the family's history would be valuable, and she'd be better placed to answer our questions. But in involving Dorothy, the interview took on another significance. A conversation between a granddaughter and grandmother as much as an interview, this was a moment in which the processes of storytelling were laid bare. Katie and Dorothy talked not only of

[19] Despret, *Our Grateful Dead*, 126.

[20] Radmila Švarícková Slabáková, 'Family Memory as a Prospective Field of Memory Studies', in *Family Memory: Practices, Transmissions and Uses in a Global Perspective*, edited by Radmila Švarícková Slabáková (Routledge, 2021), 10.

[21] Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 20.

[22] Marianne Hirsch, 'Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (2008), 110.

[23] Astri Erll, 'Locating Family in Cultural Memory Studies', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 42, no. 3 (2011), 315, doi:10.3138/jcfs.42.3.303.

[24] Jennifer R. Nájera, 'Remembering Migrant Life: Family Collective Memory and Critical Consciousness in the Midcentury Migrant Stream', *The Oral History Review* 45, no. 2 (2018), 211–31, doi:10.1093/ohr/ohy037.

their family's past, but of the ways in which stories had been told over generations, and what Katie did and did not know. Stories were made as much by the younger generation as the old, in the questioning and making sense of the loose threads of family passed on over many moments.[25]

Dorothy and Katie both gave a sense of stories being an innate part of their family life, part of the fabric of their emotional relationships, with each other and other relatives. Katie reflected on her growing interest in family history and wanting to join our group: 'I think you've always told stories about different people…and then when the, when the opportunity came up to join the group, I think I just thought oh that's a good opportunity to like, like put a bit of structure around it.' Dorothy agreed, reflecting on Katie's childhood, when her husband, Katie's grandfather Alf, was still alive:

> Well, I think—I think both, your granddad and I tend to talk [laughs] about—you know, we both sort of like to tell stories…[Katie: Yeah] He had a great fund of stories, 'cause he had a couple of a different upbringing and, and…so we…shared them with you when you [Katie: yeah] were children.

She added, 'it was just natural to talk about it'. For both, family stories, the family's history, and broader social, political, and cultural histories were entangled. Katie described how her interest in family history research was directly born from these stories: 'I think some of the stories are too good to not…[all laugh] record somewhere', she reflected. Dorothy replied that they were 'just an ordinary' family, but her interest in history, at school and beyond, had meant she wanted to pass on knowledge about the family's past to Katie and her sister.

These stories were much repeated. Katie knew most of the tales Dorothy told in the interview. When Dorothy left the room for a moment, Jessica, as interviewer, asked Katie about how much she had heard Dorothy's stories before. Katie reflected on this: 'maybe, because growing up all those stories were so much a part of what was going on around me, I never really thought to ask specifically [mm] for things'. She had asked for more—more stories, more details—since, and found out about older generations. Dorothy told a story about her dislike of meat as a child in the 1930s. Dorothy's mother would buy the family ham sandwiches from a nearby shop, but Dorothy would prefer plain buttered bread. She added 'but you've heard this all before'. Katie agreed: 'Yeah I think you told me most, most of those stories before, yeah.' But that didn't detract from the value of these tales—indeed, quite the opposite. The telling and retelling of these stories was part of the making of Katie and Dorothy's relationship. After Dorothy's recounting of the story of the ham sandwiches in the interview, Katie reflected on how

[25] Alexander, '"Do Grandmas Have Husbands?"', 167.

this connected her grandmother to her granddaughters: 'Well I was thinking earlier when you were talking about Nana being interested in clothes…I think, all of us, like you and mum and me and [my sister] have all been interested in clothes during our lives, and then, also me and [my sister] have ended up as…vegetarians.'

This was part of the role that stories played: to give a 'sense' of people. As a young child, Katie reflected on what the stories around her did:

> I think I…I think, I just remember people talking about other people in the family a lot, so even if I didn't see them very often, or I didn't really know who they were talking about, I still had a sense of who that person was…through people mentioning things that they'd done or…what they were like, I suppose. [pause] I can't really remember any…specific things, really, I think, more of just a sense of…[mm] of people.

Whether they were living relatives or dead ones, stories were a source of knowledge about people, a way of creating a sense of connection, a source of group identity. Both Dorothy and Katie remembered family get togethers as a particular time for stories to be told. Their telling to children, at family events, repeated over and over, meant stories acted; they bound families together across living and dead members, across generations, across time. Katie found it hard to remember the details of each tale; stories were just there in day-to-day family life.

One of the most important dynamics in the stories told in Katie and Dorothy's families was humour. There was sadness, too, some difficult experiences, and painful memories of those who had died. But some of the most lasting stories, and the stories that were told in most depth in our interview, were the funny ones. Dorothy started telling a story about a particularly penniless Christmas in her childhood, when her dad was serving in the Second World War, and her mother struggled to pay for many of the usual festive luxuries. As she was describing this Christmas, Katie interjected—'the time you got the tree?', she asked. What could have been a story of poverty, or of Dorothy's mother's illness around this time, had become a humorous story, of Dorothy asking a stallholder in Leeds market how much a 'tatty' Christmas tree was so many times, he finally succumbed and sold it to her: 'the third time I went back he said, "Take the bloody thing for sixpence!" [all laugh]'. Dorothy also enjoyed telling a story Katie didn't know, of her granddad, Dorothy's husband Alf, getting stuck in his shed. When he told Dorothy he'd tied a rag to a stick and waved it to try and get her attention—she was in the kitchen—she remembered laughing so much she had hidden from him, to spare his feelings: 'I can't help it, so I went and sat in the bathroom, and laughed quietly to myself [all laugh].' Much as it was funny, this was also a story that provided a way to remember Alf's kindness; Dorothy explained that she hadn't realized he was stuck in the shed because she'd assumed he was, as usual,

helping a neighbour. A funny story allowed Dorothy to remember her husband with joy and remember his good qualities—through telling this to family members, telling it in the interview, and telling it to her friends, as she said she had been doing just a few days before the interview. After the laughter stopped, Dorothy reflected, 'I just don't believe in…I don't, I don't find necessary to go back. My grief is my grief, and eventually I get over it, and you can't live in the past [mm]. You have very many happy memories, but you can't live there, it's gone.'

Not everything was open and joyful, of course. Whilst Dorothy thought there were no big secrets in their family, she also discussed the stories she only learnt as she grew older, and a family rift that meant one relative would not speak of another. There were things that were 'never mentioned', even though Dorothy thought her parents and family were 'very open'.[26] Some parts of families' histories are never verbalized, and cannot be spoken of, even as traces of those past remain in photos or documents hidden away. What changed over the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, were three dynamics in the telling of stories. Firstly, perhaps, a growing culture of emotional openness, a prizing of sharing, and a move away from the keeping of family secrets entailed the growth of confession and exposure by the 1970s, as the family itself as a positive space for privacy was questioned. This shift was uneven and patchy, with factors like race, class, and cultural background affecting the ways in which families and individuals may and may not want to talk and share. Secondly, what is seen as shameful has changed; a criminal ancestor is often now something to be proud of, whilst domestic violence is now hidden in ways it was not a hundred years ago. Within the world of family history, discoveries that were previously seen as sources of shame—illegitimacy, homosexuality, mixed-race relationships—are less likely today to be seen as shameful.[27]

During our project, Janet Coles changed her mind about whether to discuss publicly her mother's illegitimacy. Her mother, Freda, had been born in 1918 and only when Janet's grandmother, Emily, died did she realize Emily had not been married. Whilst initially Janet thought it was best to keep this a secret, out of respect for her mother's wishes, by the end of our collaboration she had changed her mind and decided to write a piece for publication about her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Freda being born 'illegitimately' was part of this story, but it was also a story of pride, of a history of strong women in Janet's family. Janet had felt that this 'secret' was not hers to tell, but she had come to think that being proud of her female ancestors and their history meant sharing the

[26] Katie and Dorothy, interview with Jessica Hammett, 26 June 2018.
[27] Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: The Things We Tried to Hide* (Penguin, 2014); Tanya Evans, *Family History, Historical Consciousness and Citizenship: A New Social History* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 70–6.

details of Freda's birth, and how her grandmother Emily and mother Freda managed this situation, despite the stigma attached to being a single, unmarried mother in this period.

What has also changed, thirdly, is the context in which stories themselves are told, and the relative value placed on the oral story. Dorothy reflected on this in her interview. Addressing Katie, she said, 'I think probably it's different because you grew up in a different world [Katie: mm] in many ways, because…even radio was scarce [Katie: mm] when I was small, so families got together more.'[28]

The Tellers of Stories

Telling stories amongst family members and friends has long been a way of dealing with grief and remembering the dead. It is a practice available to anyone, the 'cheapest form of commemoration' as Julie-Marie Strange puts it, in her work on nineteenth-century cultures of grief and remembrance amongst the working classes.[29] Throughout the interwar period, amongst working-class Lancashire families, Elizabeth Roberts found families spoke of the dead extremely regularly, 'almost as though they were still living' as one of her interviewees put it.[30] Family stories about the past more broadly were the very making of family life. Light describes how her older relatives and their friends 'constantly made a theatre, an entertainment, of the travails of the past by telling stories, joking, gesticulating, singing', part of a world where the spoken word was far more important than anything written.[31] 'The point of a good story was in how you told it', she writes, remembering witnessing tales being told when she was a child.[32]

Storytelling takes different forms in the twenty-first century; through shared memories on social media, through conversations about discoveries on the web community Ancestry, or even the capturing of stories told via a voice note or recorded conversation. The different leisure opportunities towards the end of the twentieth century, the new forms of communication and media, and the increased geographical and social mobility of families have perhaps threatened or at least shifted the oral forms of this practice. Paul Cave compared the big family gatherings documented in his family photos, of a generation or two older than him, in the mid-twentieth century, with his experiences growing up in the 1980s. He felt that social changes, around the importance of friendships over family and the

[28] Katie and Dorothy, interview with Jessica Hammett, 26 June 2018.
[29] Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 214.
[30] Elizabeth Roberts, 'The Lancashire Way of Death', in *Death, Ritual and Bereavement*, edited by Ralph Houlbrooke (Routledge, 1989), 205.
[31] Alison Light, *Inside History: From Popular Fiction to Life-Writing* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 2.
[32] Light, *Inside History*, 150.

greater geographical spread of families into the later twentieth century, had eroded that practice of family gatherings and storytelling as part of it. The decrease in family size—and so the number of aunts and uncles as well as siblings an individual might have—had an impact here, with such family groups becoming smaller on average. An only child, Paul remembered his parents telling him about their early lives, but not much of times and people before their own experiences. His grandparents had all died when he was relatively young, which had meant he hadn't had the opportunity to talk to them much; the stories that were told to him as a child he felt had been 'sanitized'.[33] But stories persist despite dramatic social change and despite the disruption to individual families.

Sarah Sykes, who was a few years older than Paul, remembered her grandmother as the storyteller in her family: 'my grandma would tell me things my mum didn't', she told us. Sarah spent most Tuesday evenings with her as a child and described stories as a key part of these times, as well as on weekends away in the Yorkshire Dales when she was a bit older. Sarah remembered lots of stories from her grandmother, of life in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. The first that came to mind was of her grandmother's father, who, her grandmother told her, worked in a pawn shop: 'he had a big, like a hat pin or something like that, I think it was a hat pin he used to stab lice and fleas on [both laugh] on the counter, that's something that sticks in your mind'.[34] Often, as in my family, it was particularly women who seemed to tell the stories. Jean Barker described how in her childhood in the 1930s and 1940s, 'I don't think men did, it was all women that did [talking about family]'.[35]

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other older relatives were often significant as storytellers and the sources of information about family history. Grandparents, and specifically grandmothers, had the 'careless time' for stories.[36] Both Paul and Sarah reflected on this; older family members might know more of a family's past, but conversations with parents could also be too fraught with emotion to make conversation always welcome or comfortable. Sarah was very aware of not wanting to upset her dad by asking too much about his unhappy childhood and family background, something he hadn't in the past enjoyed discussing. Paul had different reasons for finding these conversations tricky; in the lead up to his mum's death, he was 'very conscious' of not asking too much about her past:

> I didn't want her to think that I'd given up on her, so I didn't…feel that, even though I really, really wanted to kind of like, you know, record her voice and this, that and the other [mm], I didn't feel like I could and I think that's a real

[33] Paul Cave, interview with Jessica Hammett, 30 April 2018.
[34] Sarah Sykes, interview with Jessica Hammett, 30 April 2018.
[35] Jean Barker, interview with Laura King, 7 June 2018. See also Stone, *Black Sheep*.
[36] Alexander, '"Do Grandmas Have Husbands?"', 167.

> shame, you know like, I really wanted to do that, I wanted to kind of have something to take away so that I could, you know, it's, obviously it's quite a maudlin thing but I wanted to have something that's…something of her I guess that I felt like, I could revisit if I was ever missing her or feeling sad.[37]

He thought that perhaps quite a few stories had been lost because he hadn't felt able to talk to her before she died.

What several of our family historians grappled with was how to place stories alongside what else they knew about their families, through documents, other information, and their own research. Family stories were crucial dynamics within families, acting as a form of presence for the dead, creating a sense of community across time and space. Family history practices often enabled these tellings, providing new spaces, opportunities, and material for discussion of a family's past. But within the context of the boom of genealogical research in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, stories' truths came under scrutiny in new ways. In a world of online family history databases, family stories can be cross-checked; just as I sought corroboration and explanation of the tales of violence my family members experienced in Belfast in the early twentieth century, others found themselves questioning or at least checking the veracity of family tales because of their research. Stories make a claim on the past, a claim which can be tested.[38] The decades of the twentieth century saw a greater valuing of the history of 'ordinary' people, with, by the 1960s and 1970s, history from below, microhistory, feminist history, and oral history all emerging as significant movements. Within and outside of the academy there emerged new spaces inviting the contribution of everyone and anyone to history as a practice, from the History Workshop movement to the growing popularity of family history, from community oral history projects to social media local history groups.[39] These developments have meant that all sorts of families could see their histories as significant beyond the realm of the family. Yet within the greater valuing of 'ordinary' people's histories there are still clear hierarchies. The process of valuing different stories, histories, and lives themselves is uneven, in both public and in academic history, as well as within families themselves.

As the latter decades of the twentieth century did see a partial turn to more 'ordinary' lives as important, though, another hierarchy became important. The overlap of family history practices—the keeping of family bibles, the telling of

[37] Paul Cave, interview with Jessica Hammett, 30 April 2018.

[38] Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagran: A History of Stories* (University of Washington Press, 2004), 21.

[39] As Carter notes, the interest in the 'ordinary' and 'everyday' had its roots in the interwar period, with a turn to the study of everyday life within school history curricula and museums. Laura Carter, *Histories of Everyday Life: The Making of Popular Social History in Britain, 1918–1979* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

stories—with more formal types of history—recording data, visiting archives—also meant the creation of a hierarchy in which stories could be dismissed. Why did those traces, fragments of stories matter—a grandma's wild tale of a runaway relative, an aunt's faded memory of an informal adoption—if more 'provable' truths were available to families through the process of research itself? Our family historians reflected on this conundrum themselves; on the one hand, there was a frustration for many members of the group that the process of research lacked what stories offered: the richness, the emotion, the sense of people that dates and facts could not provide. Many were frustrated at what they couldn't find in the records and what they hadn't asked now dead relatives when they had had the chance. All the older members of the group agreed with Cherril's frustration, that 'you just wished you'd asked more when people were alive'.[40] But at the same time, stories were liable to be dismissed as inaccurate or distorted in their telling. These were often gendered power dynamics, as the narration of stories could be dismissed as women's gossip versus the more masculine forms of knowledge represented by the written and archived form.

Some members of the group found their views changing as we worked together. Sarah came to re-evaluate the value of her mother's stories: '[in the past] I've not discounted them, but not valued them as history […] but it is history, isn't it?',[41] something that had shifted for her as she worked through her family history research. When writing up her booklet about her family's past, Sarah ended up choosing to include one of her mum's stories as an extract, in her mum's words, of her father's pawn shop (with the fleas he caught with a hat pin), and with details of a beautiful Indian carpet that had come home from the shop and made her childhood bedroom cosier.[42] Such tales have become even more important to Sarah since she first told me about them: her mum died in 2022, and so those stories, and Sarah's preservation of them, have taken on a new significance as a form of connection to her mother now she has gone.

Stories That Last

Stories, then, have a sometimes questioned value within families, their fleeting and fluid nature making them liable to charges of falsehood. Their interweaving of different temporalities, with different generations and audiences in mind, make storytelling a complex process. Stories can often become more positive, or the more positive stories may perhaps survive longer across generations, because of a desire to celebrate the successes, the positive parts of deceased people's lives.

[40] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 26 October 2017.
[41] Family historians' group discussion on the impact of the project, 7 June 2018.
[42] Sarah Sykes, 'Journey to Leeds' (2018), 942.819 LIV, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.

But stories of death, adultery, violence, and abuse last too. In Anna Green's study, many of the most enduring stories were the ones that in fact subverted the 'triumph over adversity' type narratives.[43] What matters here is audience. Across years of working with our family historians, and through a range of types of conversation—interview, written pieces, my searching of their collections, emails, phone calls, and the most informal catch ups—I found all kinds of stories that persisted within families' histories. Which ones were told, and the manner of their telling, depended on the moment at hand. Some of these stories were dramatic, some positive, some negative, but often they defied being categorized in such simple ways. The meaning and tone of a given story could change because of the different moment in which it was told.

Some tales were downright mundane. Carolyn Huston, who knew a lot about several different parts of both her mother's and father's families, partly through inherited knowledge, partly through research, told me one story which stuck through generations of her family. She brought this story up three times over the course of our two interviews, partly because she was struck by the story's apparent relative insignificance. It was a tale of Thomas King, her mother's maternal grandfather, who was from a village in North Yorkshire, Brompton-by-Sawdon. It was said that Thomas, a tailor by trade, had walked all the way to Scarborough. Carolyn had thought about the places and terrain this involved: 'I now know the way he will have walked because from Brompton you go up the sort of hills and then you walk across and back down into Scarborough, but it was a big adventure.'[44] She reflected on the contradiction this story posed:

> [it was a] big family story about how he'd walked to Scarborough from Brompton. It's not that long a walk, actually! [both laugh] But it was the big thing, you know, of leaving home [yeah] leaving his father and walking—'cause you can easily walk, it's only about nine miles… [both laugh].[45]

This story had taken on a different life in Carolyn's telling. It had long been the story of the 'big' walk, of a son leaving his family home and walking 'all the way' to Scarborough, in the 1860s. Over the 150 years of its narration, its meaning had shifted. Carolyn's telling of the story was framed around humour; that this 'big' story of a 'big' walk was actually about Thomas walking only nine or so miles, at a time—and Carolyn was well aware of this—when working-class people would have been well used to walking significant distances, partly because of the lack of

[43] Anna Green, 'Intergenerational Family Stories: Private, Parochial, Pathological?', *Journal of Family History* 38, no. 4 (2013), 388–97, doi:10.1177/0363199013506987.
[44] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 29 January 2018.
[45] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 9 January 2018.

alternatives available. But at the same time, Carolyn knew—of course—the significance of the story, that it wasn't important because of the walk itself but because of what it symbolized. As she put it:

> he set up in his own business which again I think that was the big deal was them setting up as a tailor in Scarborough, and the shop is still there that, that they lived in and, and it's right bang in the middle of Scarborough, so I think *that* was the adventure rather than the actual walking but he left his family he didn't stay and take over from his father which he could have done because they were both tailors.

A mundane tale, then, of a big walk that wasn't, was about a significant moment in that part of Carolyn's family history.

The question of audience mattered, too, in which stories were perceived as interesting and which boring. The 'big family story' of Thomas walking all the way to Scarborough had come to Carolyn via her father, even though the story was of her mum's grandad. Carolyn explained:

> I'm sure my dad told me I think, I think what happened was my grandma told my dad 'cause he would listen [Laura laughs] whereas my mum wasn't desperately interested 'cause she'd heard it all as a child, of course which my dad hadn't and my and so and that my dad used to tell me these tales.

Her dad was very interested in family history and researched his own; her mum less so in hers, but she did spend a lot of time organizing documents, photos, and other items into folders and boxes to make sure knowledge of her relatives and ancestors wasn't lost. When her parents visited Carolyn later in life, in their retirement, when Carolyn lived in Yorkshire, they enjoyed visited places significant in their pasts. Both her mum and dad enjoyed driving to Scarborough with Carolyn and driving through places like Brompton-by-Sawdon. But still, her dad remained the storyteller: '[my mum] didn't talk about it whereas my dad would tell you the stories of the places as we went through'.[46] Carolyn felt that this process went both ways, too: 'just like I learned more about my father's family from my mother, I learned more about my mother's family from my father'.[47] Listening to in-laws was, for Carolyn's parents, a more significant dynamic in telling stories; her parents were a new audience for grandparents' and other relatives' stories.

[46] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 29 January 2018.
[47] Carolyn Huston, interview with Laura King, 9 January 2018.

Telling Difficult Stories

Cherril's childhood was very different from Carolyn's, but she too recalled how she learnt about her father and his background through her mother. She didn't spend much time with her dad when she was growing up in the 1950s, so there was little chance to talk to him about his background. She recalled how he worked long hours, and 'often we'd be in bed, you know, by the time he got home, 'cause he'd go straight to the pub'. Her mother told her about his 'poverty stricken' background, as well as details of her own childhood. Cherril remembered 'nagging' her mum to tell more stories: 'You see, for all my mother was a very difficult woman, we did use to love her to tell us stories about when she was young.'[48]

For Cherril, telling stories about her past was complicated, because her parents had experienced severe mental health and addiction problems throughout their lives. She described her childhood as 'violent' and 'dysfunctional' and characterized by neglect. She reflected on her emotions towards her parents when she was a child: 'I think they did love us in their own sort of skewed way, but they were both very scary, very scary people, my mother particularly.' As Cherril got older, she described how 'I found it harder and harder to understand why my mother and father were, were like they were really, I lost patience I think.'[49] Cherril told us about how her maternal grandmother, Nana Duffield, had done much of the caring for her and her siblings when they were young, and had been responsible for looking after Cherril when she was very ill as a baby. Cherril described her as 'an absolute one-off, a one-off'.[50] Yet, Cherril had maintained a relationship with both her parents up until their deaths and was remarkably forgiving about her experiences. She reflected on her approach: 'I always try to be philosophical about stuff and I think to myself well, if this hadn't have happened that wouldn't have happened and, there's all, every cloud, has a silver lining I think doesn't it and I truly do believe that.'[51] Cherril had since managed to go to university as a mature student, build a career, and get involved in local politics as a councillor for some years, as well as bringing up her daughters and being close to her grandchildren, creating a much more positive family life as an adult.

It was not just the neglect she experienced as a child that meant Cherril's family history and experiences were distressing to remember and pass on. Cherril's sister had died by suicide at 32 years old, in the early 1990s. Cherril didn't go into the details of her sister's life and death until our second interview, and reflected on when and how she spoke about her sister:

[48] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 26 October 2017.
[49] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 September 2017.
[50] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 26 October 2017.
[51] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 September 2017.

> I mean I don't know if your work ever sort of involves things like suicides and the impact of that [mm], whether people always admit to it, I don't know… It's not something I sort of… I know lots of people and I know them really well and I've never told them.

Cherril reflected how all these difficult experiences 'cast a long shadow over the family'.[52] She more than once discussed how talking of her family's experiences might be difficult for us as interviewers, and how the stories of her family were not easy ones. Perhaps the fact that Cherril was quite a bit older than Jessica and me encouraged her to navigate these stories carefully, out of consideration and care for us. She told us she'd been thinking about what we might talk about ahead of our first interview:

> I was very aware that some of it is, it's not a happy story but, as I say, that is my story and I can't change it and I wish I could, and what I tried as an adult to do was to make it a different story for those people that I love and I think that's all you can do.[53]

For Cherril, the best way to think about these experiences, and to tell them to us, was to balance them out with a much happier story of her family life as an adult. At the end of our second interview, Cherril showed us photos of her grandchildren: 'I mean, I think it has been heavy on the misery, but… I definitely, you know, I mean, I don't know if I've shown you this, but well, it's, it's just my screensaver, really, on my computer but… These are my grandchildren.'

Cherril grew up, then, with some stories of her parents' pasts, from her mother, but her difficult childhood also meant telling family stories was complicated and had to be thought through with different audiences in mind, because of how traumatic some of that past was. Her relationship with her maternal grandmother, Nana Duffield, was something that meant a lot to Cherril, and remembering her and her husband, Grandad Sydney, was a less fraught experience than her memories of her parents. Cherril remembered being told a lot about Sydney, who had died when she was only 2 or 3 years old in 1954, partly because her mother had loved him dearly. Sydney's was a less difficult story to tell, and a source of fun in the family: 'My kids love this story', Cherril told us. He, it was said, had loved taking baby Cherril out in her pram for walks, and was deeply upset when he could no longer do so because of his failing sight. Cherril had vague memories of him, including that 'I do distinctly remember me being really small, I couldn't see over the top of the table, and he was smashing a Minto [a sweet] with a hammer so that he could give me a tiny little piece of this Minto.' The story Cherril's

[52] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 26 October 2017.
[53] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 September 2017.

children particularly enjoyed referred to his presence after his death, in the house Cherril and her parents had shared when she was a baby with Nana Duffield and Grandad Sydney:

> when he was living there, at the end of his life, when—with his blindness, he used to tap his way to the bathroom. Course when he died, he was still tapping along, or so they said. [All laugh] Can you imagine? I don't know if it's true. But they both said it, both me mother and father, and me Nana Duffield said it. [Laugh] Yeah. I always felt that house was haunted.

Such tales of the uncanny brought some humour as well as sadness to remembering Cherril's grandparents. The stories that were funny or light-hearted were the ones that Cherril told us in her interviews that she talked about with her children and grandchildren; another story was of how they were a 'family of great big boobs!', having inherited that trait from her paternal grandmother. She told us that her daughters 'often laugh and say, "We know, we blame it on Grandma Martin!" [all laugh]'.

For Cherril, the experience of whether stories were a present and welcome dynamic in family life was largely down to how happy that family life was. She explained:

> I suppose it depends on whether your parents are cooperative, you know, [mm] I didn't have very cooperative parents, so it were always on a whim as to whether they'd do what, you know, if you asked 'Oh, tell us about the olden days!', you know. And my kids love to hear about stuff, and my kids have phenomenal memories for, for stuff I've forgotten when they were, they can remember the toys they had, all that stuff. And I like to think that's because they had a nice childhood. I tried to make it as, as nice as I could, obviously! [laughs][54]

Stories, then, were as much about the future as the past, about the generations who listened and heard those stories as about the subjects of them.

Sue Child was particularly aware of this dynamic. Sue had done quite a bit of research into her family, and had also volunteered at local heritage sites, both as a researcher and as a children's storyteller. Telling stories to her grandchildren was something she really enjoyed. But like Cherril, Sue had done a lot of work thinking about what to talk about and what to leave out, and how to communicate the more difficult aspects of her and her family's pasts. She had written up stories about her family history for her children and grandchildren, and these sat alongside other forms of knowledge, such as astrological birth charts, recollections of

[54] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 26 October 2017.

her grandchildren's first few days as babies, and stories Sue had invented to entertain her grandchildren. She told us, 'if I were to die tonight there'd still be things for them, so things will never really go'. She reflected on how being a mother and grandmother had reinforced these storytelling practices:

> When they were little children and we were taking them home, we'd always sing. I sing songs that my mother used to sing, and tell them stories my mother did. And so, they've got all that stuff, you know, that repertoire. Now if you have children, you will suddenly have something that comes into your mind and it's about things that you've been told and sung. I'd forgotten – honestly, I'd forgotten loads of them. But then I sung them and [my husband] would join in.[55]

Sue wrote a booklet summarizing her family's history as part of our collaboration, and in her introduction reflected on why it was important:

> I felt I also needed to present my research to my children Helen and Matthew who know so much about my husband Ian's family as his mother and father were loving grandparents to them even into adulthood. My grandchildren Harry, Lucas and Tabitha have always found my maiden name hilarious, but they are also interested in stories about the olden days. I hope this will help them realize their Leeds Roots, which actually goes back far into the 18th century. Perhaps this will come to them when they are older and have more time to ponder about life?[56]

Sue, like Cherril, had experienced suicide at close hand. Her dad had died by suicide in 1980, shortly after her mother's death. Sue was, like Cherril, working out how to continue to talk about her dad and how he died, and to tell her grandchildren about him at the right point: 'I mean, I will tell this generation of children about my dad, and I will say that he committed suicide when they are old enough to handle it [yeah]. Because it's a big thing but it's important because it's part of their history.' For Sue, it was crucial to ensure her grandchildren heard the story from her, and got the whole 'truth' of it:

> But they have to know, I don't want somebody to say, "Oh you know," I want them to know the truth as I know it. And when I do my family history I always—it's got to be the truth. Anything that I see I like to have it backed up rigorously like with certificates and things.

[55] Sue Child, interview with Jessica Hammett, 8 December 2017.
[56] Sue Child, 'Pontefract Lane: Five Generations' (2018), 942.819 LIV, Local and Family History, Leeds Libraries.

Like Cherril, Sue also empathized with us and tried to protect us as researchers, reflecting that 'I didn't mean to dump anything on you if it [Oh no, not at all] if anything's very sad and that…But it's part of who I am [yeah] and the history.' And she too found balancing the sad with the happy a good way to deal with potentially traumatizing memories and find bearable ways of passing them on. When reflecting on her parents' deaths, which happened just a few weeks apart, and which were relatively quickly followed by her paternal grandparents' deaths, Sue summarized, 'we're okay, we got through it, you know. But the good memories that you have come to the surface and you just come to terms with things…You need your humour.' In her interview, always a good storyteller, Sue had bookended talking about her parents' and grandparents' deaths, a very difficult time, with a funny tale of a brazen neighbour who, on the day of her father's death, had told Sue that her dad had promised to give her his music system. To finish the tale of her dad's death, Sue said, 'Shall I tell you what we did with the music centre? [yeah (Jessica laughs)] My brother got the plug and soaked it in water and gave them it. And he said, "I hope it blows them to smithereens."'[57]

Conclusion

Stories could be burdensome, lifting, inspiring, or saddening. They often asserted their right to be told, and persisted through generations, bringing together past, present, and future. For some of our group, as they researched their families, the obvious move was to record some of these stories. Pinning down these stories in some way, either via a recording or on paper, was the point at which sharing stories turned into something else, to the process of a more conscious curation of history. As Sarah captured one of her mum's tales in her booklet, and Sue wrote down stories for her grandchildren, other family historians decided to record their relatives speaking. Recording stories, now an easy process because of readily available apps on even basic smartphones, was appealing because it quickly captured a lot of information and because it captured the voice of the person speaking, often so linked with their individuality and character, and the orality of the stories told. Orally recording family members became increasingly popular in the latter decades of the twentieth century, as oral history as a form of research became better known, and technologies to make recordings became cheaper. Recording voices provided the opportunity for research in itself, by prompting relatives to reveal and remember their stories, but recording also provided a way of capturing something of an individual before they died.[58] John Hague had

[57] Sue Child, interview with Jessica Hammett, 8 December 2017.

[58] Oral history projects have tapped into this, such as that led by Michelle Winslow at Sheffield: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/health-sciences/our-research/qualitative-group/oral-history-group [accessed 19 May 2023].

recorded his father's memories, over at least ten short interviews, a way of learning more about his family's past and creating a record of his father before he died, in 2012. John was pleased he'd captured his dad's stories in this way and was working out how to preserve the recordings long-term. His dad had suffered from Alzheimer's, and John described, 'I'd got difficulty keeping him on track [yeah] because his mind wandered from thing to thing'. Yet at the same time, his dad's condition had advantages: 'One of the good things about Alzheimer's', he told us in an interview, 'is that you get the same story over and over again, and while it gets a bit wearing, sometimes you think, well, that must be true because he's telling the same thing over and over and over again.'[59] John wished he had recorded other relatives' stories while he had had the chance, and especially the humour involved in those stories, as much as the facts contained within them.[60]

Community oral history projects provide a further example of such practice, bringing together the desires of younger generations to capture their relatives' memories and stories, and those of other older community members too. From the 1960s onwards, particularly, organized oral history projects have expanded and grown in number. This impetus to record older generations' experiences before they died reflected the growing public discussion about the value of 'ordinary' people's lives, and to find sources which reveal these in ways that formal and institutional archives do not. Such projects often intersected with activism and political advocacy.[61] One example of such a project, bringing together family and community histories, was the Roots Family History Project conducted in the 1980s. Based around the Moss Side area of Manchester, this project, led by Maria Noble and Elouise Edwards, involved interviews with those from African and Caribbean descent who had lived in the area between the 1940s and the 1980s.[62] The project originated in 'the need felt among Manchester's Black communities to record for posterity the experiences and life histories of Manchester's ongoing African and Caribbean diaspora'.[63] As such, the idea of many such projects was to chart all aspects of these communities' histories. Yet they had a strong familial element too, as the title of the Roots project suggested, creating a record for families of their older members' experiences, often as the first generation of migrants to settle in the area. Organizations like the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Centre, where the

[59] John Hague, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 November 2017.
[60] Family historians' group discussion on the impact of the project, 7 June 2018.
[61] Alistair Thomson, 'Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies', *Oral History* 27, no. 1 (1999), 30.
[62] Collection held by Manchester Libraries as part of the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Centre collections, MAN/HI.3/NOB. See https://manchester.spydus.co.uk/cgi-bin/spydus.exe/ENQ/WPAC/BIBENQ?SETLVL=&BRN=1996505 for more information.
[63] Jo Manby, '"I Was Coming Out of Brilliant Sunshine": Women's Stories from the Roots Family History Project', AIU Centre Blog, 24 June 2015, https://aiucentre.wordpress.com/2015/06/24/roots-family-history-project-1/.

Roots project materials are now held, have become fundamental in continuing to chart these histories and make available such resources.[64]

In all this work, the telling of stories between people, whether within a family, community, both or beyond, and the attempts to preserve those stories for the long term, are various goals. This work, in families and communities, is about two key things: the aim to remember the lives of specific people, and the aim to put together something a little bigger, a sense of a more collective heritage. Within these practices of remembrance and history-making is the connecting of all these levels—individual, family, community, nation. These are processes of shifting stories, of the moulding of the past into something usable for the present and the future.

Within families, stories are distilled. They are slippery and hard to pin down in their detail. They become ciphers for a bigger meaning—the tale of a man being chased from a shipyard workplace or a woman being dragged by her hair as a broader way of telling of a family's Irish heritage but also their migration, their experiences of conflict and violence because of their religion, but also their persistence and resilience. The story of an ancestor is a way of connecting a family with a broader national, religious, and colonial story of the persecution of a minority. It is also another form of connection, a way of connecting a grandmother and a granddaughter—Katie and Dorothy, say, as stories became a key dynamic in their relationship through Katie's childhood and into adulthood. Or my Nanny King and me, even though we didn't never really knew each other, because of her Alzheimer's and death when I was aged 6. But stories here were a way of relatives connecting, through the process of storytelling itself, or through a relative being the subject of a story. Whether they were known or not, stories could make relatives and ancestors real, and knowledge of them could be passed on through stories.

Living with the Dead: Memories, Histories, and the Stories Families Tell in Modern Britain. Laura King, Oxford University Press. © Laura King 2025. DOI: 10.1093/9780191915697.003.0008

[64] A list of their oral history collections and records is available here: http://www.racearchive.manchester.ac.uk/collections/oral-histories/ [accessed 17 August 2021].

9
An Ending

This is a partial story.

Any story is partial, but now is a good time to talk about the omissions. These are just fifteen families, and by nature, these are mostly the perspectives of one member from each family. Their histories span many generations and branches of a family—these are more than fifteen families, in reality. But these stories are just a few. Those family members, the fifteen people—including myself—who chose to take part in this project are, quite obviously, interested in their family and their family history. This book excludes: those for whom family history isn't interesting, those for whom family itself isn't a welcome or happy place; those who have experienced trauma or ruptures and don't have contact with older relatives. History might not matter to many; family doesn't matter to some. Fifteen people are, of course, not representative, and a very different book would emerge if I had chosen to focus on families of choice or care-experienced people, say, rather than families built on biology.

What's also partial is what I've chosen to keep out of this book. What, ethically, I can't include, or those families featured have kept to themselves, or shared with me in confidence whilst asking me not to write about it. Families are often places of violence, sadness, anger, or abuse. Families hold secrets for good reasons, and remain silent, often as the best route available to them.[1]

There are suicides here. There is sexual abuse. There is domestic violence. There is prejudice and discrimination. There are many happy stories, histories, memories, families too, but we must also acknowledge the darker aspects of studying families, of digging into families' pasts, and that stories idealize.

This is a story of fictions and mistruths.

Any story contains exaggerations. Any story contains mistakes. In these fifteen families, many of those contributing wanted to be as truthful as possible, to get to the bottom of what happened. To get to the facts. But families are places where myths and legends are made. Any family history, story, or memory is seen and remembered differently by different people. By telling it, passing it on, it changes; details get lost, misrememberings happen (I'm sure I have misremembered, too). Families are places of idealization, of an accentuation of the positive in the telling

[1] For example, see Lisa Wynne Smith, 'Resisting Silences: Gender and Family Trauma in Eighteenth-Century England', *Gender & History* 32, no. 1 (2020), 30–53, doi:10.1111/1468-0424.12473.

of their histories, even if the difficult memories and counterfactual come through too. Secrets and lies, in Alison Light's words, are 'a staple ingredient of family history'.[2]

This is a story of positives.

These are the pasts that families and individuals want, the histories that we create in our personal, intimate, and family worlds to suit the needs of the present and the future. This book is a story full of the stories and memories that people chose to preserve and wanted their family to be about. That's not to say the difficult memories weren't recognized, the difficult emotions weren't remembered. Family histories are layered with many feelings. But in focusing on what these family historians chose to remember, chose to talk about, chose to pass on, this book tried to get at the very processes of history-making, the very sense that whether at an individual, family, local, national, or global level, history and the past are two different things. History is the process by which we edit, select, and pass on some things and not others, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

This is a story of the familiar.

Much of what is here is familiar to many families, to many of us; the photos of weddings kept and passed down, the story of a family's journey to a new country, the love of a particular recipe or food remembered and passed on, the piece of jewellery or a medal inherited from an older relative. But in investigating the familiar, I hope this book has also found ways inside the threads of family life and family memory, the ways those threads are woven together to create an uneven and patchy history, of a family, a community, a nation. This is the inside story of family history, looking—as far as possible—from the inside out to think about the mechanisms that work to keep alive the dead, to construct the past into a meaningful narrative of sorts, whether that narrative is oral, written, visual, or material.

This is a reductive story, too.

In reducing the complex ways in which multiple generations of a family connect with many relatives and ancestors to seven themes across these chapters, things have slipped through the gaps. There are the other memories and practices that went beyond these themes. There are mentions of music, of food, of smells, and the senses throughout, but there were other stories of these too. And of the uncanny, the sense of the dead just being there. Of John Hague, who told me of his daughter buying a car, and realizing a CD had been left in it. She played it, and the track that came on was Debussy's Clair de Lune. She had bought the car just a month or so after John's mother had died, and this track was meaningful: 'it was a bit weird, a weird thing', John said. Clair de Lune was the song playing at the end of a dance at the end of the Second World War, at a moment in which, it was said, John's father spotted his mother dancing in a red dress, and—well, that

[2] Alison Light, *Common People: The History of an English Family* (Penguin, 2015), 128.

was that.[3] A sign, in Vinciane Despret's words, a multiplicity of possibilities of the presence of the dead.[4]

There are sayings. To go back to where I first began with my own family, in this book, the dead are called back with a mention of being 'scundered', a sympathetic 'that'll come sharp', or a reassuring 'steady the buffs'. Amongst some of Carolyn Huston's family, someone might be called 'peely wally' if they were looking ill, a Scottish phrase she had continued to use through her life. These sayings merged rememberings of people and places past, a harking back to places a family once lived—the mixing of Scottish, Yorkshire, and even Afrikaans in Carolyn's family, and Irish, Scottish, and Black Country in my own. These tiny pieces of everyday life are the places in which remembrance, heritage, and history meet.

And there are dreams. My own vivid one of my aunt Sylvia, a few weeks after she died, which felt so significant at the time. And dreams which persist long after the dead have gone, such as Sue Child's dreams of her grandmother Maud's house. Cherril Cliff, too, told us 'I still dream about Nana Duffield being abandoned.'[5] This dream reflected Cherril's sadness at the family moving house, away from Nana Duffield, a sense that Cherril's parents had abandoned her, when Nana Duffield had done so much for them. This dream continued fifty or so years later; Nana Duffield had died when Cherril was 16, in the mid-1960s.

There are various ways to draw some conclusions here. That the way and whether an individual is remembered after their death is deeply affected by their age and the kind of death they experienced. That whether families take part in these practices of remembrance depends on factors like affluence and class as well as the broader shifting social context which has at different points valued some lives and histories over others. That having a secure origin story, a sense of one's own family history, being able to remember the dead, and to be remembered oneself is a right and privilege not afforded to everyone, varying in different periods by class, race, religion, gender, migration experience, and sexuality.[6] That here is a story of deep continuity; whilst the elaborate mourning practices of the (middle-class) Victorians have largely disappeared, families have always found verbal and non-verbal ways to communicate about their dead. Most of all, that the dead were and can be a deeply influential force and a part of any family long beyond their death. The dead as actors are far from a taboo subject, even if there was a growing sense of dying as a subject being taboo through the

[3] John Hague, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 13 November 2017.

[4] Vinciane Despret, *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind*, translated by Stephen Muecke (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 87–9.

[5] Cherril Cliff, interview with Jessica Hammett and Laura King, 26 October 2017.

[6] Kendra T. Field, 'The Privilege of Family History', *The American Historical Review* 127, no. 2 (2022), 600–33, doi:10.1093/ahr/rhac151; Richard Shaw, 'A Tale of Two Stories: Unsettling a Settler Family's History in Aotearoa New Zealand', *Genealogy* 5, no. 1 (2021), 26, doi:10.3390/genealogy5010026.

twentieth century. But summarizing has its risks; each and every family has its own practices, quirks, secrets, and histories which defy generalization.

This book is an attempt to reckon with the dead, to think through the ways in which they continue to matter in the lives of the living, and the ways the living want to remember and connect with the dead long after they are gone. Families are one of the most important spaces for these practices, a place in which we are introduced to our older relatives and ancestors from an early age, even if they are no longer living. The dead provide a way to make sense of a family's heritage—built on class, place, religion, race, and ethnicity. Through music, food, or visits to a place called 'home', the dead help the living build a sense of identity, as part of a family, and through that family, as part of bigger groups too. Through cultivating practices of remembrance of the dead—telling stories, passing on photos and objects, noting down information to pass on—a family creates its own history. The material collections that families have, the cache of stories they tell, the way they present those histories comprise a space in which there can be found alternatives to those discourses that dominate public recollections of the past. These spaces can refashion and refute public and national histories which leave out so many types of people. These can be spaces of resistance. But they are places of idealization too; of selecting and preserving and celebrating those parts of a family's history that are seen as most important or worth saving. Connecting with the dead is infused with a politics of remembrance both within and outside a family.

This is not an ending, either.

In each of these families, these practices and histories were as much about the future as the past and are still happening. Those Christmas puddings are still being made, tales of a grandmother's dislike for ham sandwiches get told again and again, research goes on. In my own family, such practices continue, from the storytelling about great-grandparents and grandparents, to the things, tangible and intangible, we have inherited from aunts and uncles. There are those who never were, too, the babies who never came to be, including two miscarriages of my own. Perhaps most importantly, there are the rowan trees that stand in the gardens of my parents, cousins, friends, and the three little trees in the small south London garden of my brother and sister-in-law, Charlie and Anna. The rowan trees were planted to remember Charlie and Anna's daughter, called Rowan. She was born too early, at twenty-two weeks, in October 2022. She continues as a presence in the lives of her family, even if she never met us. She counts, she existed, and she is remembered.

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