Save Our Shipyards: Revisiting a Forgotten History Through Film Elicitation Oral History

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Oral historians regularly use photographs, personal artefacts, or the landscape to access a fuller range of personal feelings and meanings of the past. Yet while archival films are regularly used to stimulate community reminiscence, little has been written about the potentialities of audio-visual elicitation as part of oral history methodology. This paper explores the value of film elicitation methods to revisit a largely forgotten public campaign aimed at halting the closure of shipyards in North East England. We used two short documentary videos as memory prompts for union activists and film producers. The films elicited strong emotional responses, prompting participants to reflect on the gaps between their memories and the ways events were portrayed at the time. In a region where the loss of the shipbuilding industry has significant ongoing social, cultural and economic impacts, the closures are often remembered as a historical inevitability. In contrast, revisiting the films with those who participated in their production offered an opportunity to visit a moment of possibility. We argue that film elicitation is a powerful tool for oral historians who want to explore marginalised histories while avoiding some of the pitfalls of 'recovery' oral history.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the twentieth century, North East England was arguably the world's leading shipbuilding region. However, the industry relied on British traders buying ships that were built in Britain, and the break up of the British Empire and increasing globalisation shifted this balance.[1] The period following World War Two, known as the 'long boom', saw consistent overall demand for ships but at the same time Britain's share of the international market underwent a period of rapid decline. In response to a series of inquiries, and in particular the Geddes Report of 1966, the Labour government decided to take national control of the industry.[2] On 1 July 1977 some 27 companies involved in shipbuilding and marine engineering were nationalised. Unfortunately, the timing of this major structural change coincided with a major slump: in 1978, 75 per cent of all the world's shipbuilding berths were empty.[3] By the early 1980s the future of the industry was in doubt, and by 2006 ship production on the main rivers – the Tyne and the Wear – had completely ceased.

The end of shipbuilding and its associated industries had a devastating impact on the working-class communities clustered along the rivers of North East England. However, this history has been largely untold. Popular representations of deindustrialisation in the region have been dominated by memory of coal mining, and in particular the National Union of Miners' strike, which ran from 1983 to 1984. Films such as *Brassed Off* (1996) and *Billy Elliot* (2000) are set in inland mining villages, telling heart-warming stories of personal triumph within the brutal social context of the strikes. Along the major river areas, mining communities sat alongside shipbuilding communities, with many similar features of intergenerational workforces and close friendships. However, in contrast to coal mining, shipbuilding was a boom-and-bust industry characterised by insecure work and intense internal competition

1 Hugh Murphy, '"No longer competitive with continental shipbuilders": British Shipbuilding and International Competition, 1930–1960', *International Journal of Maritime History* 25, no. 2 (2013): 35–60.

2 R.M. Geddes, 'Shipbuilding Inquiry Committee 1965–1966 Report' (Shipbuilding Inquiry Committee, London: HM Stationery Office, 1966), resulted in the *1967 Shipbuilding Act*.

3 John Spence, 'Industrial Relations in Wearside Shipbuilding 1945 to 1981', in Archie Potts (ed.), *Shipbuilders and Engineers – Essays in the Shipbuilding Industries of the North East* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: North East Labour History Society, 1987).

over pay and conditions. When the shipyards closed, there was no heroic 'last stand' for popular culture to represent.[4]

The Newcastle University (UK) Oral History Unit & Collective (OHUC) was formed in 2017, under the leadership of Graham Smith, and developed the 'Work and After' research strand to explore legacies of heavy industrial work in the North East England region. This article presents the findings from a small OHUC pilot study that focused on shipbuilding memory. The project aimed to respond to both the lack of existing oral history work in this area and to the emotional pull shipbuilding retained at a local level.[5] As part of the fight to save the shipbuilding industry in the 1980s, the Tyne & Wear County Council had launched the Save Our Shipyards (SOS) campaign that ran from 1983 to 1985. While exploring existing archival materials, archivists at North East Film Archives drew our attention to two surviving campaign videos, known collectively as the 'Shipyard Tapes'. The films prominently feature the voices of shipyard workers and outline the choices that faced shipbuilding families. In January 2019, we invited a small number of people who had been involved in the SOS campaign to a re-screening of the films. The screenings acted as a memory prompt for participants, and were followed up with oral history interviews. This article explores film as an elicitation method for oral historians, and a way to open up histories that seem settled or closed. We offer a brief overview of the historical and social context of the SOS campaign, and the importance of the shipbuilding industry to the region. The video elicitation methodology used for this project is then outlined. We discuss insights generated for understanding first the campaign itself, and then the ways participants remember and understand this history.

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4 Sting's musical *The Last Ship* draws from the cultural memory of the 1972 Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' work-in in Scotland to reimagine the story of what happened on the Tyne through a heroic 'last stand' narrative.

5 The only published oral history account of shipyard closure is Anthony Slaven and Hugh Murphy (eds), *Crossing the Bar: An Oral History of the British Shipbuilding, Ship Repairing and Marine Engine-Building Industries in the Age of Decline, 1956–1990* (St John's, Newfoundland: International Maritime Economic History Association, 2013). Other smaller oral history collections are currently accessible through the OHUC 'We Made Ships' educational website, www.wemadeships.co.uk.

As is discussed later in this article, SOS was primarily a public relations campaign aimed at generating public support for the shipbuilding industry and for shipyard workers. The campaign approach, avoiding as it did any all-out industrial action, means SOS has not been considered within the UK or international history of protest for workers' rights and against deindustrialisation. Nonetheless, the campaign did achieve widespread support at the time. Member of Parliament for Jarrow, Don Dixon, mentioned Save Our Shipyards in the House of Commons, saying in March 1983 that:

> Since the campaign 'Save Our Shipyards' began in Tyne and Wear I have had letters from shopkeepers, tailors and various organisations that are worried about the effect that further unemployment will have on their businesses.[6]

Dixon, himself a former shipyard worker, also made the point that shipyard workers were intensely concentrated around their areas of work, so the yard closures would have a severe impact on those particular communities. This proved to be the case. While Gateshead Quayside on the Tyne 'stands as one of the clearest examples in Europe, and perhaps the world, of urban regeneration led by arts and cultural investment',[7] such regeneration has been patchy at best, and many former shipbuilding areas along both the Tyne and Wear rivers are now areas of deprivation.[8]

Deindustrialisation is described by Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison in their now seminal work as 'a widespread, systematic disinvestment in the nation's basic productive capacity'.[9] In North East England, deindustrialisation was experienced in the 1970s and 1980s as a major economic, social and cultural shift away from

6 Don Dixon, 'Shipbuilding (Tyne And Wear)', *Hansard: House of Commons Debates*, UK Parliament (31 March 1983). Available at https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1983-03-31/debates/487e1b50-38ed-4c08-b401-a138f056fb34/Shipbuilding(TyneAndWear).

7 Christopher Bailey, Steven Miles and Peter Stark, 'Culture-led Urban Regeneration and the Revitalisation of Identities in Newcastle, Gateshead and the North East of England', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 10, no. 1 (2004): 47–65.

8 Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 69–97.

9 Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialisation of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 6.

heavy engineering, with its well-organised workforce, to a service industry economy dominated by insecure work. The ongoing impact of this history on the ground echoes Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott's insight that deindustrialisation is not an event,[10] but a 'a social, political, cultural, as well as an economic process' that represents a fundamental social shift.[11] In the last decade, a range of scholars have sought to respond to this insight, moving beyond the early focus on single-industry studies of factory closures, dominated by white, male workers. Deindustrialisation studies is now a mature field of scholarship, deploying a range of methodologies to explore what is left behind when capital moves.[12]

A core area of focus within this expanding field is the legacy of protest and worker solidarity movements. The emotionally charged nature of such history means scholars have also embraced the 'turn to emotion', particularly drawing on oral history methods. One of oral history's key methodological benefits is that researchers are able to collaborate with participants to explore not just what happened, but the ways those involved reflect on the meaning of the past in the present. However, writing about women's factory occupations in 1980s Scotland, Andy Clark notes that media portrayal and public commemoration of campaigns against deindustrialisation shape how interview participants remember their own involvement in these events. Practical impacts of this included the self-marginalisation of their role and complete forgetting of certain events that are otherwise recorded in historical documents.[13] Clark draws on the work of Paula Hamilton, who long ago pointed out that in her own research:

10 Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

11 Tim Strangleman and James Rhodes, 'The "New" Sociology of Deindustrialisation? Understanding Industrial Change', *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 4 (2014): 416.

12 See, for example, Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon and Andrew Perchard (eds), *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Postindustrial Places* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017); Mark Alan Rhodes II, William R. Price and Amy Walker, *Geographies of Post-Industrial Place, Memory, and Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2020).

13 Andy Clark, '"Successful sit-ins seem a particularly Scottish phenomenon": Gender, Memory and Deindustrialization', *International Labor and Working-Class History* 105 (2023): 66–84.

> What people remembered depended on who they had talked with, what television or film they'd seen of the event, and I began to understand better how remembering was a constant ongoing revision, a dynamic process, and to see that there was no organic memory of an event.[14]

Similarly, in the oral history interviews considered in this article, participants drew on a mix of their own memories and narratives connected to the better-known history of the miners' strike, which overlapped with the timing of this campaign. Their memories were also shaped by the context in which the interviews took place, including public conversations about Brexit, the impact of UK austerity policy on the region, and the extreme casualisation of 'zero-hours' contracts.

But while stories of shipbuilding have not entered public consciousness in the same ways as mining history, neither is this a 'hidden' history. In the centre of Sunderland, once 'the biggest shipbuilding town in the world', Keel Square has been developed as a cultural hub for the city.[15] It hosts two interlinked memorials, with the 'Keel Line' cutting diagonally through the space, running the length of the keel of the largest ship to launch on the Wear *(Naess Crusader)*. A black strip embedded in the pavement is engraved with names of over 8,000 ships built on the river and overspills onto accompanying vertical signage. Ships are listed by the year built, paying subtle homage to the boom-and-bust nature of the industry. At the start of the line is *Propellors of the City,* a kinetic sculpture by Stephen Broadbent featuring the names and faces of shipyard workers. Also on the Wear, near the site of the former Thompson yard (now the National Glass Museum), is a walking trail that includes maps and information about shipyards that previously dominated the river. The Sunderland Maritime Heritage centre operates as a specialised kind of men's shed of former workers and a new generation interested in learning old skills. On the Tyne, shipbuilding heritage is not formally recognised in the built environment except through naming, such as Armstrong Business Park which occupies the former site of

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14 Paula Hamilton, 'The Oral Historian as Memorist', *The Oral History Review* 32, no. 1 (2005): 11–18.

15 A phrase often repeated by older residents of the town, and the title of a popular history book: Alan Brett and Andrew Clark, *Sunderland: The Biggest Shipbuilding Town in the World* (Sunderland: Black Cat Publications, 2009).

the Armstrong-Vickers yard north of the city centre. It is, however, represented in a range of ways within heritage sites owned by Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums, including the city centre Discovery Museum and (perhaps surprisingly) Segedunum Roman Fort.

Memories of the shipyards also survive in homes, among souvenirs of working lives and proudly displayed photographs or paintings of ships. A former worker interviewed for a related 'Work and After' project shared a treasured photo album containing each ship he had worked on. In the interview 'rushes' for the SOS films, recorded in 1984, Sandra Cuskin describes her desire to buy a painting of shipyards in the Newcastle Quayside Markets as a memento of an industry she already felt was at risk.[16] A painting called *The Last Ships* was presented to Alison's parents as a leaving gift in 1989, and still hangs in their home in Perth, Australia. Alison approached these interviews from an insider-outsider perspective, having spent her childhood in Sunderland. Growing up in the 1980s, the fight to save this industry, and the threat of its loss, was something she understood as a risk not only to the livelihoods of family friends but to the area as a whole. This personal experience echoes Alice Mah's place-based research in Walker, a former shipbuilding area on the northern bank of the Tyne, which demonstrates that a strong and persistent sense of loss extends beyond those directly employed in the industry.[17]

The legacies of deindustrialisation extend beyond either public or private emotional attachments to the past. A 2019 report on English Indices of Deprivation found high concentration of deprivation in 'areas that have historically had large heavy industry manufacturing and/or mining sectors'.[18] While this pattern of socioeconomic inequality has also been demonstrated in international studies of deindustrialisation,[19]

16 Sandra Cuskin and Lesley Parker, interviewed by Trade Films, Heaton, 1984, interview held by North East Film Archive.

17 Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place.*

18 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, English Indices of Deprivation 2019 (26 September 2019): 5. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d8e26f6ed915d5570c6cc55/IoD2019_Statistical_Release.pdf. Accessed 23 June 2020.

19 Steven High, *One Job Town: Work, Belonging, and Betrayal in Northern Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Sherry Lee Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialisation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

the impact of a decade of austerity policy since the financial crisis of 2009 seems to have compounded British inequalities. At the time of our interviews, conducted late 2018 and early 2019, Newcastle and Gateshead had recently been visited by the UN Special Rapporteur for Extreme Poverty.[20] The 'structures of feeling' of the industrial past are also no longer easily associated with traditional political and social identities.[21] The North East region as a whole famously voted in favour of Brexit in 2016, and the December 2019 general election marked a further shift away from traditional Labour voting patterns,[22] although that story also varies across the region.[23] Because of dramatic economic, social and political shifts over recent decades, this is an area where people are most often talked about, rather than listened to. In contrast, this research project offered an opportunity to explore the past using a 'sharing authority' approach of collaborative meaning making.[24]

METHODOLOGY

One principal way oral historians transcend conventional life narrative or structured interviews is through elicitation methods. Photographs, personal artefacts, or walking around the physical landscape can prompt more emotional or vivid memories.[25] Indeed, as early as the 1980s, reminiscence-group oral history used smell, touch and taste elicitation.[26] Also probing memory's embodied complexity, John

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20 Robert Booth, '"I'm scared to eat sometimes": UN Envoy Meets UK Food Bank Users', *Guardian*, 8 November 2018. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/nov/08/life-on-the-poverty-frontline-un-turns-its-gaze-on-uk. Accessed 23 June 2024.

21 David Byrne, 'Industrial Culture in a Post-Industrial World: The Case of the North East of England', *City* 6, no. 3 (2002): 279–289.

22 John Clarke, 'Building the "Boris" Bloc: Angry Politics in Turbulent Times', *Soundings* 74 (2020): 118–135.

23 Edward Fieldhouse, Geoffrey Evans, Jane Green, Jonathan Mellon, Christopher Prosser and Jack Bailey, 'Volatility, Realignment, and Electoral Shocks: Brexit and the UK General Election of 2019', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 56, no. 4 (2023): 537–545.

24 Steven High, 'Sharing Authority: An Introduction', *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, no. 1 (2009): 12–34.

25 Penny Tinkler, *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research* (London: Sage, 2013); Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson (eds), *Oral History and Photography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Steven High, 'Mapping Memories of Displacement: Oral History, Memoryscapes and Mobile Methodologies', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2015), 556–568.

26 Bob Mitchell, 'Using the Five Senses to Trigger Memory – from Reminiscence to Oral History', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* 29 (2007): 60–63.

Ellis's 'hands on' approach has interviewees grappling with now obsolete technology from their working lives to access embodied memories and meanings of the past.[27] Considerable scope exists for elicitation methodology to become more diverse and sophisticated through a multidisciplinary dialogue regarding the interview. One elicitation approach that needs to be further explored by oral historians is the use of audio-visual sources.

Oral historians were early adopters of the use of video within the interview itself from the 1970s, yet explorations of the impact of audio-visual sources on oral history methodology are scarce. Writing as early as 1991 (before Web 2.0), Dan Sipe argues that 'moving images combined with oral history have a special power to encourage and support a comparative, reflexive approach to history itself'.[28] If elicitation allows new ways of structuring interviews, its effectiveness depends on the sensory and affective response to prompting objects. While psychologists have used film in emotion elicitation studies, few oral historians have used film to frame testimony or have evaluated the methodological and theoretical implications of film upon memory.[29] Peter B. Kaufman has written about the emotional impact of audio-visual oral histories in an educational context,[30] and re-watching old films with interview participants has become a relatively common practice in historical documentary work. Nonetheless, little academic attention has been paid to how such emotional connections might impact on the way the past is remembered.[31] This has particular relevance for deindustrialisation studies, given the recent emphasis on understanding the emotional

27 Nick Hall and John Ellis (eds), *Hands on Media History: A New Methodology in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

28 Dan Sipe, 'Media and Public History: The Future of Oral History and Moving Images', *The Oral History Review* 19, no. 1 (1991): 75–87.

29 James J. Gross and Robert W. Levenson, 'Emotion Elicitation Using Films', *Cognition & Emotion* 9, no. 1 (1995): 87–108.

30 Peter B. Kaufman, 'Oral History in the Video Age', *The Oral History Review* 40, no. 1 (2013): 1–7.

31 This approach is used in the BBC documentary series *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon* presented by Dan Cruickshank, but is not discussed in the publication by Vanessa Toulmin, Simon Popple and Patrick Russell (eds), T*he Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film* (BFI Publishing, 2004).

and social connections of deindustrialised ‘culture’ beyond the loss of industrial work and in places that have often been radically altered over time.[32]

Sebastian Thalheim’s recent work has explored film elicitation using silent home movies, building on the photo-elicitation approach discussed by Alexander Freund and Angela Thiessen,[33] with a focus on gaining additional information about the home movie makers and the context in which these films were produced.[34] However, as Thalheim points out, audio-visual sources extend the range of senses involved. Indeed, while increased knowledge about the SOS campaign was one outcome of this project, our primary aim was to consider whether using a multisensory memory prompt might activate vivid memory responses in participants, in terms of sense-memories and emotions.

The SOS campaign generated a range of artefacts, including an information pack included in the Sunderland shipbuilding collection held by Tyne & Wear Archives, and campaign material recorded by Trade Films and held by the North East Film Archive. This study used two short films (approximately 18 minutes each), *Down the Road Again* and *The Price of Ships* as a mnemonic prompt with a small group of people who had been involved in the campaign. Created in 1984, the films prominently feature the voice of shipyard workers and outline the choices that faced shipbuilding families: redundancy money; a campaign against closure involving workplace occupation; or self-managed worker buy-out. Deindustrialisation scholar Jackie Clarke says the denial of choice associated with closure engenders a sense of injustice because in ‘neo-liberal time’ there is – and was – no alternative, silencing opposition to free market forces and deeming opponents ‘out of time’.[35] In contrast, the Shipyard Tapes offer *choices* to the viewer. Produced by a local leftist film collective,

32 Tim Strangleman, ‘Deindustrialisation and the Historical Sociological Imagination: Making Sense of Work and Industrial Change’, *Sociology* 51, no. 2 (2017): 466–482.

33 Alexander Freund and Angela Thiessen, ‘Mary Brockmeyer’s Wedding Picture: Exploring the Intersection of Photographs and Oral History Interviews’, in Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson (eds), *Oral History and Photography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 27–44.

34 Sebastian Thalheim, ‘Memories in Motion: Film Elicitation and Home Movies from East Germany’, *Oral History* 49, no. 1 (2021): 115–124.

35 Jackie Clarke, ‘Closing Time: Deindustrialization and Nostalgia in Contemporary France’, *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (2015): 107–125.

Trade Films, they demonstrate an interventionist ethos that was later developed into Northern Newsreels, an attempt to share alternative news via video distribution.[36] The films appeared during Channel 4's early years, produced while the Trade Films co-operative was funded through the television 'workshop' project. They therefore constitute a distinctive moment in the morphologies of broadcasting, documentary filmmaking and industrial relations.

The Shipyard Tapes' opposition to closure means that they avoid the nostalgia, inevitability and mourning associated – wrongly or rightly – with oral historians of deindustrialisation.[37] Interviews with union representatives occurred in union offices after a joint stewards' committee. The control that the shop stewards exercised over access created a situational candour and worker agency. With agency at their centre, just as they did between filmmakers and shop stewards, these films therefore offer the 'possibility of dialogue' through shared or sharing authority between researchers and interviewees in former shipbuilding communities.[38]

OHUC hosted two small screenings of the films, one with a group of people involved in the campaign and another with members of Trade Films as part of a pilot project aimed at exploring the benefits of film elicitation using audio-visual sources that participants had direct involvement in creating.[39] This article focuses on the interviews with SOS campaign participants: four men and one woman who had all been identified through their ongoing involvement in shipbuilding memory activism. All five had a long history of trade union involvement. Three of the male participants (Tony, Peter and Ted) were former shipyard workers and shop stewards, and Tony

36 Bob Davis, 'Thirty Years On: A Footnote on the History of the Regional Film Archive', *North East History* 14 (2014): 29–42.

37 Steven High, '"The wounds of class": A Historiographical Reflection on the Study of Deindustrialization, 1973–2013', *History Compass* 11, no. 11 (2013): 994–1007; Tim Strangleman, '"Smokestack Nostalgia," "Ruin Porn" or Working-Class Obituary: The Role and Meaning of Deindustrial Representation', *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (2013): 23–37; Cowie and Heathcott, *Beyond the Ruins*.

38 High, 'Sharing Authority'; Michael Frisch, 'Commentary – Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process', *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 111–113.

39 Careful captioning on screen meant that the names of all those who participated in the films were available, making it relatively easy to find those who continue to be involved in shipbuilding memory work. However, the collectivist ethos of Trade Films meant it was not possible to identify all members of the production crew.

went on to paid work as a union official. The female participant, Sandra, had been interviewed for the films as a representative 'shipyard wife'. The fifth participant, Martin, was a long-term resident of shipbuilding area Southwick, and a member of the same union (GMB). Also present at the screening were a small group of academic and community historians from the North East England region.

The Shipyard Tapes screening was held in Sunderland, one of the major cities in the region, in a venue owned by Sunderland University. The screening of the short films was followed by 30-minute individual interviews with each participant, conducted by five OHUC oral historians using a shared interview script.[40] What was planned as a brief group conversation in between screening the two films became an outpouring of emotion (mostly anger) in response to *Down the Road Again*. At the same time, participants expressed humour, jokingly commenting on the strangeness of seeing younger versions of their past selves, complete with '80s hair. They also tried to 'place' former colleagues who were only half-remembered, and mourned well-remembered friends. Post-screening interview questions focused on emotional responses and memories connected directly to the films and the SOS campaign. While two of the post-film interviews generated memories that were strongly grounded in senses (sound, smell, touch), this area of questioning needed further development. The interviewers tried to open up reflective space by asking participants if there were things they had believed or thought at the time that they now saw differently. These post-screening interviews were followed up with individual second interviews a few weeks later, this time using a life history approach. All of the life history interviews were conducted by the first author (Alison) in a place chosen by the participant.

40 OHUC interviewers were Andy Clark, Jack Hepworth, Graham Smith and the authors.

COLLABORATIVE RECOVERY

In the interviews conducted immediately following the film screening, all participants were asked about their memory of the campaign and of the films in particular. Peter claimed not to remember the films at all,[41] while Sandra – whose involvement was as a voice for 'shipyard wives' – had a vague memory of going to someone's home for the interview.[42] Tony said he remembered the films, and that they would have been shown in working men's clubs as a way of raising awareness, but this seemed to be a memory of what should have happened, rather than a memory of what happened in practice.[43] Interestingly Martin, whose involvement was more peripheral, had the strongest memories of the SOS campaign. As someone with an interest in media and technology, Martin not only remembered the films being made, but reflected on the challenges of distribution: 'Technology was harder then, because you had to have a screen, a projector, whereas Alison came in [to show the films] with a memory stick, it's so much easier to get the technology out now'.[44] For Tony and Peter, who continued to be involved in the fight to save the yards right to the end, this campaign blurred into others, and initially the films as an elicitation device or memory prompt seemed to do little to disrupt their long-established narratives. However, this initial lack of memory in terms of the films themselves demonstrates the value of the follow-up interview, where all participants commented on the impact the films had on recovering memories long forgotten.

In the follow-up interviews, Alison asked each person if there were things they had remembered after watching the films. Peter noted that his memory of this campaign had been taken over by subsequent events, reflecting that this may be because he had been interviewed a number of times about the events surrounding the final closures.

41 Peter Callaghan, interviewed by Jack Hepworth, Sunderland, January 2019, recording and transcript held by Newcastle University Oral History Unit.

42 Sandra Cuskin, interviewed by Alison Atkinson-Phillips, Sunderland, January 2019, recording and transcript held by Newcastle University Oral History Unit.

43 Tony Carty, interviewed by Matt Perry, Sunderland, January 2019, recording and transcript held by Newcastle University Oral History Unit.

44 Martin Dent, interviewed by Graham Smith, Sunderland, January 2019, recording and transcript held by Newcastle University Oral History Unit.

> Alison: Were they things you just hadn't thought about for a while, or had it completely gone out of your mind?
>
> Peter: Probably it had completely gone out of my mind, because [of the later 1980s] Sunderland Save Our Shipyards campaign, and when I do interviews now, that's what it's normally about. It begins with the announcement of Govan and the closure of North East Shipbuilding. So you tend to get entrenched in that, and maybe forgot what's gone before. Which is wrong because you should always remember your lessons once you've learnt them.[45]

This speaks to the importance of carrying out oral history interviews over multiple sessions, allowing both interviewer and participant time for reflection. Such a multi-session process seems to be especially valuable when interviewing people who have told their story many times before, especially if this has been in a formal setting such as a journalistic interview.

Despite initial claims of forgetting, therefore, the interviews did uncover new information about the SOS campaign. While official documents point to it being an initiative of the Tyne & Wear County Council, launched in 1983, participants all remembered the initial impetus coming from the local Trade Union Council (TUC). Tony had been a boilermakers' shop steward at the Austin & Pickersgill (Wear) yard from 1968 and became convenor of the 'Confed' (Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions) in 1982, just before the campaign began. He claimed that the unions had been building towards this campaign from the election of the Thatcher government in 1979, as a response to the well-known anti-nationalisation stance of the Conservative Party.[46] Peter similarly remembered approaching Sir Alan Milbourn, who later became part of the Blair 'New Labour' government, to run the campaign on behalf of the Council.[47]

45 Peter Callaghan, interviewed by Alison Atkinson-Phillips, Sunderland, February 2019, recording and transcript held by Newcastle University Oral History Unit.

46 Tony Carty interview, January 2019; Tony Carty, interviewed by Alison Atkinson-Phillips, Sunderland, February 2019. Recording and transcript held by Newcastle University Oral History Unit.

47 Peter Callaghan interview, January 2019 and February 2019.

Working at Sunderland College as a technician, Martin was a member of the local TUC at the time. He remembered union members coming to the college to use the Gestetner machine, doing print runs of 2,000 A4 sheets which needed to be cut into A5 flyers to be distributed around local suburbs.[48] As Tony described it, 'we leafleted the town, we got bulletins out in the town, a national petition, lobbied our MPs and we got great help from Bob Clay, who was our [Sunderland North] MP at the time'.[49] Peter, also a former shop steward, said:

> We did everything that's normal in those situations, and we did lots of things that were new and different. We lobbied obviously the government, we spoke to the Labour Party, we went to Brussels on a number of occasions. We had a march throughout London, which was very productive, people stopping us and saying that they didn't understand and realise what was going on in the North East because they were totally detached from it, and they felt it was wrong.[50]

While participants had positive memories of the campaign, they also expressed frustration, particularly around the issue of redundancy money. In April 1983, not long after the SOS campaign was launched, 9,000 redundancies were announced by British Shipbuilders. Ian Roberts mentions this in his book *Craft, Class and Control*, which came out of his PhD thesis on the Wear shipyards, comparing experiences of the industry in the 1930s and 1980s. He states that, 'the move towards "voluntary" acceptance of this number of redundancies sank any prospect of a unified struggle against job losses'. He also claims that the willingness of workers to accept redundancy made a mockery of any claims that the SOS campaign was a success, saying that, 'It seemed that the "avalanche of support" was forthcoming from everyone apart from the workforce in the industry'.[51] While the films themselves seem to hint that unified industrial action was a possibility, in these interviews, participants

48 Martin Dent interview, January 2019.

49 Tony Carty interview, January 2019.

50 Peter Callaghan interview, January 2019.

51 Ian Roberts, *Craft, Class and Control* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993).

claimed that the SOS campaign approach was intended to circumvent the need for all-out industrial action in the context of redundancy cash offers.

ENDURING EMOTIONS

After screening the first film, *Down the Road Again*, we invited the group to respond while the second film was cued. Graham Smith, who has extensive expertise in group oral history, had been invited to facilitate the discussion.[52] In the event, however, an invitation to speak was all that was needed to generate a vibrant group discussion lasting about 20 minutes. During this discussion, a tangible sense of anger was present in the room. Indeed, it seemed to the interviewers that the films not only generated emotions in the present, but took participants back to their feelings at the time of the campaign.

One source of this anger was the unequal power relations in what participants expressed as a war of attrition:

> Tony: I mean, in the film, the lads are saying, me myself among them, we've got to fight, we've got to stand. We've got to stand. We had a beacon, if you like, the Clydeside shipbuilders' work-in, to protect their industry. But it became – the Tories saw that fightback and saw the [miners'] fightback in '84, '85, so cleverly increased the redundancy pay. Up the money!
>
> So we, if you wanted to take industrial action and stay to protect your industry – that's why we went on the campaign route. The first thing the employers said to us was, 'you break your contract and there's no redundancy money mind. You broke your contract'. So we were expected to go to the lads and say, 'take industrial action, we cannot guarantee you would win, but we're fighting for our jobs – but mind, your redundancy pay is at risk. And where you were getting 22,000 [pounds], you're not getting nothing'.

52 Graham Smith, 'Remembering in Groups: Negotiating Between "Individual" and "Collective" Memories', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2015): 193–211.

> So they knew. They clever, they know what they're doing. Undermining all the time.
>
> Ted: That was the situation I remember very well at Clelands, you know. We tried to get some, the shop stewards tried to get some fightback, some stand you know, but because of what Tony said, oh no, redundancy… [unclear] Couldn't organise anything.
>
> Peter: But that's why they made the attack and made our focus on denationalisation, because the think tank had done their homework, they'd realised that the public support wasn't great if you had a shipbuilding industry that was fighting under the ideology while they chipped away at the real agenda which was to close the yards. And in a sense, we fell for it.[53]

What Peter is expressing as having 'fallen for it' is the feeling that they were fighting the wrong fight. The two campaign films focus on the issue of privatisation, and the need for government to subsidise the industry so that yards could compete with other countries with either lower costs or higher subsidies. The SOS focus, therefore, was on convincing the public of the value of government intervention to maintain the standards of the industry, and negative impacts of a casualised workforce. Participants said they now believe that the aim of the Thatcher government was always closure of the yards as a whole. They also all made connections between local belief that the European Union was involved in the final closure decision and the strong Brexit vote in Sunderland.

REFLECTIONS ON PRECARITY, THEN AND NOW

The film *Down the Road Again* takes its name from the casualised nature of shipbuilding pre-nationalisation, and the precarity that privatisation inflicted on the workforce within the boom-and-bust cycle of shipbuilding. This film triggered critical reflections on the negative impacts of casualisation and historical comparisons

53 Peter Callaghan, Martin Dent, Sandra Cuskin, Ted Cuskin and Tony Carty, interviewed by Newcastle University Oral History Unit, Sunderland, January 2019, recording and transcript held by Newcastle University Oral History Unit.

both back in time and with contemporary experiences of neoliberalism. Oral history interviewers must always be aware of the social context in which the interview takes place, alongside the time that is being remembered. In these interviews, participants made numerous comparisons between issues affecting workers in the present, and the period of relative stability they experienced in the unionised shipyards of the 1970s and early 1980s. They also reached back in time as far back as the 1930s, drawing on stories told to them by older workers.

The eldest participant, Tony Carty, did his apprenticeship in the 1950s, when shipyard workers were still paid at piecework rates – that is, for work completed, rather than for hours worked.

> Tony: On the casualisation. You see on there, the casualisation. The shipbuilding industry prior to 1969 was a casual industry on this river. You got it, every time a ship went down a berth, you got paid off, you went somewhere else, and you were a casual worker.
>
> Now casual work, being a casual worker, doesn't breed loyalty to the company or loyalty to your industry. Yea're in there for a few month, and you want as much money as you can before you get out and you're paid off. So up to 1969 of course there was trade disputes. There was demarcation disputes because everybody was looking for his own, his own pay, his own job. And you've got to remember every ship, we're all on piecework. Every ship had a different aspect of piecework and that all had to be negotiated every ship, and every group were looking for their own betterment before they were up the road again.
>
> Now, then in 1969, when we had agreements covering interchangeability and guarantees of employment. I remember our first guarantees of employment in the shipbuilding industry in this town, was three year. You were guaranteed three years' work. And then after that it was two years' work and then a year's work.[54]

54 Peter Callaghan, Martin Dent, Sandra Cuskin, Ted Cuskin and Tony Carty interview, January 2019.

In the individual post-film interview, Tony returned to the topic of casualisation, this time making connections with the claims made by a Conservative MP featured in the film about the need for flexible working, and the contemporary issues of zero-hours contracts, where workers are made to commit to being available for work without any guarantee of minimum hours: 'Coz driving industry back, to either, what they term as flexible is just casualisation. And it's happening all over'.[55] Clearly this was an important point, because Tony returned to it again in the life story interview. Whereas he had originally emphasised that all of his children and grandchildren had achieved university qualifications and 'good jobs', in the later interview he lamented the challenges faced by one grandchild, a university graduate who was still forced to work on a zero-hours contract.[56]

Peter also made this connection with contemporary zero-hours contracts, making a link with a case study introduced in *Down the Road Again*, Wigan Richardsons, which represented a failed attempt at a worker buyout that had led to extreme casualisation of the workforce:

> I mean, [Wigan] Richardsons in particular, which was a horror story I believe. And I think the MD at the time explained, without realising it was a horror story, they turned it back to Victorian times, and thought they owned people body and soul. I mean, they introduced zero hours before it was ever thought of.[57]

This issue was also important for Ted, who talked about a nephew who was 'frightened to take a day off', as an example of the conditions for workers which he saw as a direct result of deindustrialisation in the North East.[58] Ted, who had already been made redundant from one yard (Clelands) at the time of the SOS campaign, was included in *Down the Road Again* as a spokesperson for casual workers. He contrasted

55 Tony Carty interview, January 2019.

56 Tony Carty interview, February 2019.

57 Peter Callaghan interview, January 2019.

58 Ted Cuskin, interviewed by Andy Clark, Sunderland, January 2019, recording and transcript held by Newcastle University Oral History Unit.

his experience of casual work – where he knew he would not get paid for taking a sick day but did not feel frighted about loss of future work – with experiences of both contemporary workers and older colleagues who had told him stories about the interwar years:

> We used to call it the market. You used to come and stand in the market years ago and the gaffa would come in and say, 'oh haway, you can come in', or 'na, na, you're not getting a job'. The old timers used to, well, when I was younger in the shipyards, the old timers used to tell us about that, them days, you know? And it's more or less come back.[59]

In making these links between current poor working conditions in the local service economy, and the arguments against casualisation in *Down the Road Again*, participants drew attention to the rightness of their cause. The fight to save the shipyards was not understood only as a fight to save a particular industry, but a fight for a whole community and way of life. Sandra, who is married to Ted, expanded on this connection between the past and the present by making a direct connection between the arguments used in the campaign films and the ongoing impact of deindustrialisation on her 'dead' local high street.[60]

SHARED NARRATIVES OF RESISTANCE

Ian Roberts has claimed that the lack of a final, dramatic industrial dispute aimed at halting the end of the shipbuilding industry is a source of communal shame.[61] The group involved in this study are well aware that they didn't 'win', in the sense that they saved people's jobs. Nonetheless, they all had a sense of pride in having participated in the SOS campaign, and in the shipbuilding industry as a whole. This particular cohort is comprised of union activists who participated in a range of ways in the struggle against shipyard closure. Their lives after closure each demonstrate a continuing commitment to worker solidarity and to community service.

59 Ted Cuskin interview, January 2019.

60 Sandra Cuskin interview, January 2019.

61 Ian Roberts, 'Collective Representations, Divided Memory and Patterns of Paradox: Mining and Shipbuilding', *Sociological Research Online* 12, no. 6 (2008): 1–19.

For example, Martin has been a local government Councillor and at the time of the interviews was a trustee for Sunderland Maritime Heritage. Sandra and Ted both retrained as social workers, employed by Gateshead Council, and in retirement Ted formed a folk group called 'Men of the Tyne', keeping the stories of shipbuilding and river workers alive through song. After the closure of the Sunderland yards, Peter formed a company called Pallion Engineering, continuing to offer skilled work on the Wear inside the shell of the only former shipyard not to be demolished. All of these personal narratives allowed participants a sense of composure, bringing the SOS campaign into a longer personal narrative that they have a sense of pride in.[62]

Beyond this sense of personal composure, however, the responses to the films represent a surprisingly coherent sense of communal pride. At no point did the interviewees suggest any divide between those who had been active in the fight to save the shipyards and those who took the redundancy money or even the wider community. Peter expressed it like this:

> And I mean, let's be honest, there wasn't a street in this town that didn't have shipyard workers, or a number of shipyard workers, or a miner. And I think, credit to them, that throughout the whole process and procedure, they didn't break ranks. They carried on being supportive – and that wasn't just the guys that worked in the shipyards, because they were being supported by their wives and their families, otherwise they couldn't have done it.
>
> So I think, if anything, it brought together a very close knit society, a community, um, and made us all the stronger for it. Even though we didn't get what we wanted at the end of the day, we did it with dignity and integrity, and I think that's something to be commended on behalf of the ex-workforce.[63]

62 Penny Summerfield, 'Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice', *Miranda* 12 (2016), DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.8714.

63 Peter Callaghan interview, January 2019.

At only one point did this narrative of shared struggle slip – this was a moment in the follow-up interview with Sandra, where she made a gentle gibe to Alison about people who left and went to Australia.

Perhaps because the project involved this particular cohort of union activists, the films also opened up questions about why this part of the history of shipbuilding – the fight to save it – has not become part of the popular history of protest in the UK. Those who participated in the interviews were motivated to do so because they want this history to be known and passed on. In a range of ways, they have already been actively working towards this. Ted, in particular, formed the 'Men of the Tyne' folk group to share stories of the (male) workers on the river. He explained that their approach was influenced by the well-known musical tradition of colliery bands, and a sense that the shipyards needed their own folk tradition.

At a number of points in the interviews, participants make direct or indirect connections to the mining industry and the 1984–85 miners' strike. Aware of the contrast between the SOS campaign strategy and the miners' all-out strike, they returned to this issue at various times, to explain, justify and reflect. For example, Sandra reflected on the fact that shipbuilding communities were intimately connected with individual shipyards, and suggested that this meant there wasn't such a thing as a regional 'shipbuilding community', 'so it wasn't like with the miners where it's a big community fight'. In the absence of that, Sandra seemed to suggest that mining has come to stand in as the symbol of working-class culture and solidarity in the region. She emphasised that the Durham Miners' Gala is the place to go 'if you want to feel working class community':

> I think it's really important because, well you know Durham? It is absolutely full of people. You can't move, full of people…And all these, the people are moving through, and there's babies and grandmas and children, people in wheelchairs, mums and dads, dyed hair, grey hair whatever. You know? There's everything, and there's such a sense of community.[64]

64 Sandra Cuskin interview, January 2019.

Sandra emphasised that the Gala wasn't just for miners, that people come 'from all over' to experience this sense of working-class togetherness.

Connections made with the miners may be an example of what Michael Rothberg calls 'multidirectional memory' – the productive deployment of a better-known example of historical injustice to draw attention to shared experiences of deindustrialisation. [65] But this argument that the miners 'stand in' for other working-class struggles goes beyond rhetoric. As Peter noted in the quote above, in this region, mining families lived alongside other workers, and during the miners' strike they were supported by that wider community. If the miners' strike was a long, drawn-out battle, the wider war was one that involved the whole working-class community. It is remembered, by this particular group at least, as a lost war but not a lost cause.

CONCLUSIONS

Oral history continues to be a vital tool for recovering marginalised histories, including working-class histories of struggle and protest. In this paper we have focused attention on a campaign against deindustrialisation that has thus far been marginalised within the history of worker protest. Re-watching the SOS films with campaign participants allowed us all to better understand the SOS campaign within its historical context. This campaign can now be understood not as a diluted or timid alternative to industrial action, but a strategic choice made by workers involved in an unequal battle to save jobs in their community. The interviews also demonstrate the creative deployment of the better-known narrative of the miners' strike to make connections with their own lived experiences. When asked if they understood things differently now, participants demonstrated a strong sense of composure and a belief in the rightness of their cause. Far from being a source of shame, memory of the SOS campaign gave these participants a sense of individual and working-class community pride.

Centring this research on a public relations campaign offered an opportunity to explore new methodological approaches to understanding deindustrialisation as a

65 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

'process'. This research used film as an elicitation method and a way to open up histories that seem settled or closed. The films created opportunities for those involved in the campaign to reflect on their own involvement and the meaning this has for them in the present. Whereas previous studies have considered the use of still or moving images, the introduction of audio adds another sense-input. Watching and listening to a younger version of themselves on film was an uncomfortable experience for participants, but one that offered an opportunity for dialogue with both the interviewer *and* their past self. These particular films connected strongly with participants' overall life journey and sense of self. The strong emotional response the films generated suggested that film as an elicitation tool has a more immediate impact than photography, in terms of allowing participants to reconnect with their past.

These audio-visual prompts also generated further reflection and conversations in the days and weeks following. By following up with a subsequent interview with a life story framework, this research created a space for collaborative meaning-making about the past. Whereas some of the most vivid memories came from the immediate post-film interviews (demonstrated in the quotes used in this article), the follow-up interview opened up a space of reflexivity that put those memories into a broader context. This reflective and reflexive space needs to be explored further in future studies. One of the possible benefits of historical audio-visual sources as memory prompts is to disrupt dominant narratives that have been generated by re-told stories or received through more popular sources such as feature films.

The films' interventionist approach means they break open the inevitability of history and remind us that things could have turned out differently. In the 1980s, these videos were at the cutting edge of campaigning – perhaps ahead of their time, since there were severe limitations on the ability to distribute them. But Web 2.0 has changed that landscape, and increasingly audio-visual materials will be the records that are left behind – the digital traces of campaigns for change. This small research pilot demonstrates film's powerful potential as an elicitation tool, not only for contextualising existing material, but for generating rich, reflective responses from the people who were there at the time.