

Re-imagining Islington: work, memory, place and emotion in a community oral history project

by John Gabriel and Jenny Harding

Abstract: This article reflects on a community oral history project, The Lost Trades of Islington. The project was led and coordinated by Age UK Islington in partnership with Islington Local History Centre and London Metropolitan University. The project aimed to promote wellbeing, social interaction and learning through recalling work and life in the London Borough of Islington from the mid-twentieth century. The article is concerned with how the project framed the narratives of those interviewed and how the narratives re-imagined Islington. It examines the significance of loss and place in the project.

Keywords: working lives; Islington; emotion; nostalgia; community

Introduction

The Lost Trades of Islington project originated in a series of reminiscence groups organised by Age UK Islington at a local community centre. The group leader, also a freelance artist, quickly decided that people had ‘amazing’ stories to tell about the work they did and that these should be recorded. Her interest in developing an oral history project was influenced by her own observations of changes in the physical and social landscapes of Islington and the sense that oral history interviewing could engender feelings of self-worth and respect among older residents. She was also interested in reducing social isolation, making connections between different generations of people in Islington and encouraging older people to learn new skills.

The broad aims of the project then were to: improve wellbeing among older residents; record older peoples’ memories of working and living in Islington; enable other older Islington residents to develop skills in oral history interviewing and interpretation; facilitate inter-generational exchange; and foster community connec-

tions within the London Borough of Islington.

To these ends, project partners trained older Islington residents and London Metropolitan University students to conduct oral history interviews, interviewed older residents about their experiences of working and living in Islington from the mid-twentieth century, developed photography and poetry workshops, and produced a series of public exhibitions. Project partners hoped that the interpretation and display of the oral narratives would draw more people into an engagement with the project, the past and community in Islington. In this way, the project sought to both recall and create a sense of community.

This article examines the discourses and assumptions framing the project and the narratives it produced. It explores the sense of loss motivating the project. It investigates the assumed significance of place (of work and neighbourhood) and the past as sources of value and identity for individual contributors. It considers how emotion figures in reflections on the past and place and also how individual and cultural narratives inter-weave.

Project background and participants

The Lost Trades project was led and coordinated by Age UK Islington, in partnership with Islington Local History Centre and London Metropolitan University, and funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The authors both work at London Metropolitan University and provided a series of workshops in oral history methods for older volunteers and students.

The idea of loss at a collective and an individual level framed the project. The funding bid made the case that, although traces of the past are still evident in the industrial architecture of repurposed buildings, only living memory can tell us what it was like to work in particular old factories and workshops. The project leader, Andrea, interviewed by the authors at the end of the project,¹ explained that the idea for the project had emerged from a regular weekly reminiscence group, where it 'quickly became clear that people had fantastic stories'. She was interested in people's working lives, how work roles differed from work today and how the built environment of Islington had changed:

[T]here used to be a small workshop or factory or some kind of workplace on every corner you could just physically see that those old printing works, those old foundries had been turned into flats and so it's just become so much more residential ... it doesn't have that same working mix ... that's where it came from ... the idea that wonderful stories to capture ... something about the way Islington had changed ... I just wanted to record that as well.²

She went on to say that the reminiscence groups had been of great value to individuals because the groups gave them 'pride in their stories and in their lives' and also involved 'giving respect to people and giving respect across cultures' in a culturally diverse setting. The project was then conceived as a series of activities that would further engender feelings of pride and respect through recalling work. As the project developed, partners decided to ask participants about past living as well as working in Islington.

To be clear, this article is not a case study in urban change or about work in itself. Nevertheless, Islington's changing industrial landscape and urban development over the last seventy years provided an important reference point, informing both the project and public memory of the borough. A sense of collective loss – of employment, population and affordable accommodation – is readily inferred from economic data and social indicators for Islington in the second half of the twentieth century.³

Social and economic change in Islington from the mid-1940s onwards can be seen in the context of post-war planning policies and in particular the Greater London Plan of 1944 and the New Town Development Act of 1952, both of which engineered an outward migration from inner London to the suburbs and new towns. The working-class residents who remained were employed in light industry and small-scale manufactur-

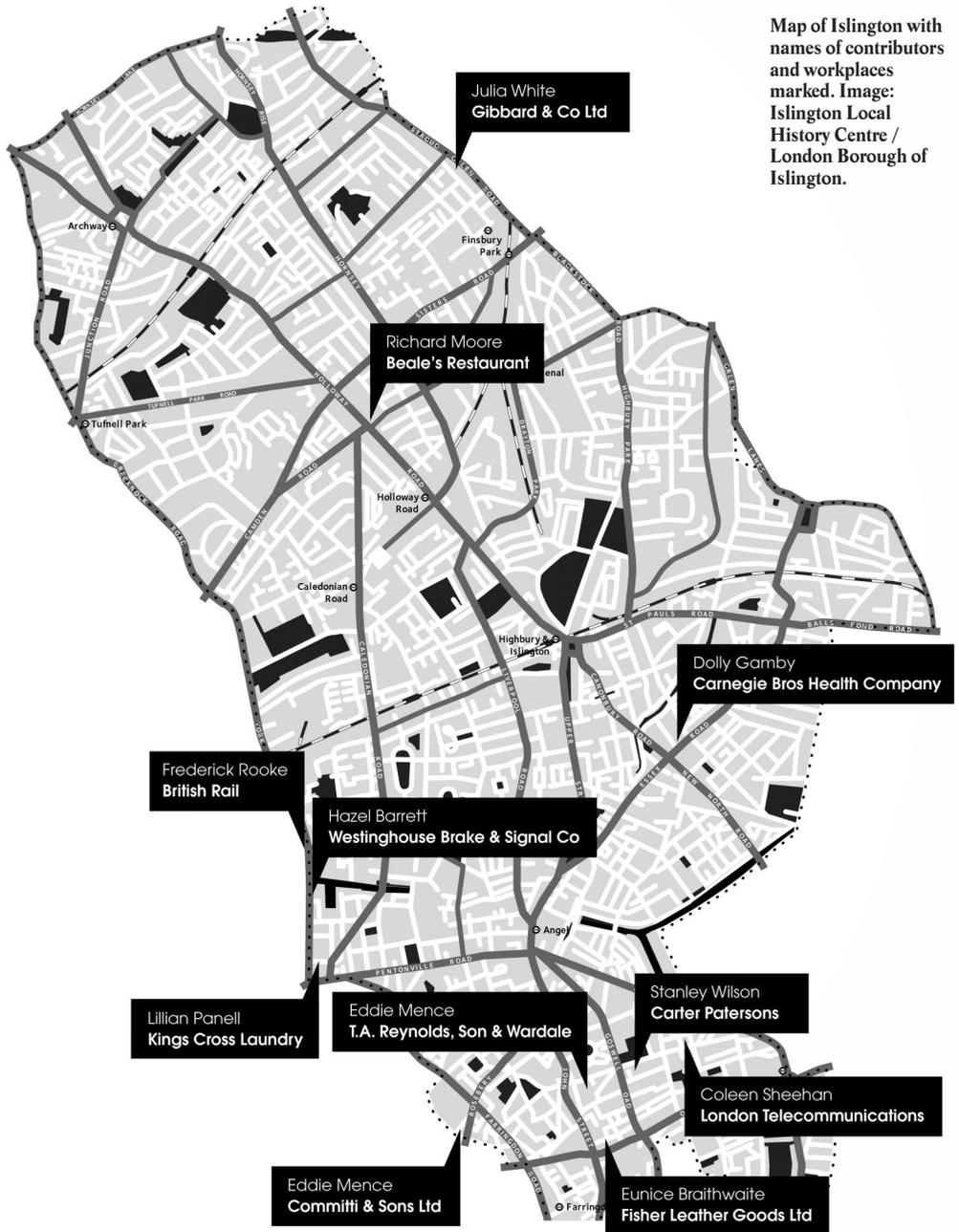
ing. Forty-one per cent of Islington's workforce was employed in manufacturing industries such as engineering, clothing, printing and brewing in 1961,⁴ but this dropped to thirty-two per cent by 1971.⁵ In contrast, finance, insurance and banking created 5,800 jobs in Islington between 1966 and 1971.⁶ The fall-out from such restructuring led to an increase in unemployment in the borough at a time when unemployment levels elsewhere were stable or declining.

The 1960s proved a significant turning point in the history of the borough. Sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term gentrification to capture the creeping colonisation of boroughs like Islington by the middle classes.⁷ This trend was encouraged by the local council's⁸ planning policies, which prompted radical changes in the utilisation of land, including the expansion of housing for an increasingly affluent middle class, and offices to accommodate expanding sectors such as banking, insurance and finance.⁹ The deregulation of the stock exchange in the mid-1980s in turn, brought an influx of what Tim Butler and Loretta Lees¹⁰ calls the 'super gentrified' to the borough, not the professionals (teachers, architects, etc.) who had initially moved to Islington in the 1960s and 1970s, but the high-income earners working in the corporate sector, including finance. This was reflected in the decline in skilled manual jobs, which more than halved over the decade from 29.6 per cent of the workforce in 1981 to 12.8 per cent in 1991.¹¹

These changes were reflected in population trends. By 1971, Islington's population had fallen to 206,000, less than half what it was in 1901. This long-term trend was thus accelerated with outward migration and industrial decline, and by 1981 it had fallen again by a further twenty per cent to 166,100.¹² Of those who left, the majority gave housing (both in terms of cost and quality) as the main reason for moving.¹³ Of the 101,000 workers who lived in the borough in 1971, only 43,000 worked in Islington. Likewise, of a total of 142,000 workers in the borough, 99,000 came from outside.¹⁴

Those willing to be interviewed for the project (six women and four men, born between 1924 and 1948) either used a local Age UK community centre, were known to service providers or replied to advertisements in local newsletters and on organisation websites. They were long-term Islington residents (unlike the majority of workers who travelled into the borough from outside): seven had been born in Islington; one had been born in Hertfordshire following the wartime evacuation of her mother from Islington; and the other two had moved to Islington in the 1950s. Interviewees had worked in a mix of occupations, the majority of which subsequently suffered a sharp decline. The period of work discussed spanned the period 1936-1994, but for most contributors (eight out of ten) the period of their working lives discussed mainly focused on the 1950s and 1960s.

Ten older volunteers were recruited from existing groups at the community centre and six students were recruited from undergraduate courses in health and



Map of Islington with names of contributors and workplaces marked. Image: Islington Local History Centre / London Borough of Islington.

social care, media and communications, and film and television studies to conduct the interviews. Together, older volunteers and students attended oral history workshop sessions at London Metropolitan University and an introduction to archiving methods at the local history centre. Subsequently, they interviewed in pairs (one volunteer and one student). Where there were gaps in the pairings, staff from Age UK Islington and the University joined older volunteers and students to complete the interviews. Inter-generational dialogue and understanding – between interviewees and interviewers, and

between older and younger interviewers – was an important feature of the project.¹⁵ The fact that older volunteers (insiders) and younger students (outsiders) interviewed together facilitated open and critical lines of enquiry. Overall, participants formed a diverse group: all six students, two of the ten interviewees and one of the older volunteers were non-UK and/or from a black or minority ethnic background; the rest were white British.

Age UK Islington ran a photography workshop for older volunteers, which produced a series of portraits of the interviewees as well as photographs taken outside

their old places of work. Summaries of the interview transcripts formed the basis of a poetry workshop for Age UK Islington volunteers. The sound recordings, photographs, poems and a selection of artefacts relating to the various occupations formed the basis of a series of exhibitions held at London Metropolitan University (November 2018), Islington Local History Centre (November 2018-February 2019) and the Drivers Community Centre (May-July 2019).

The project started from a sense of loss, as its title, *Lost Trades of Islington*, indicates. It was based on the premise that the physical and social landscape of Islington had been transformed through a shift away from manufacturing to newer non-manual sectors of production and through gentrification. It sought to recover a sense of older (working-class) ways of working and living through recalling spaces and skills embodied in factories, workshops and warehouses that had since been cleared or refurbished for new commercial or residential use, as well as through the atmosphere of the locality. Through enquiring about loss of craftsmanship in light industries and familiar neighbourhoods, the project appeared to invite participants to inhabit a nostalgic relationship to the past and to place.

Thinking about loss: the past, place and emotion

Loss associated with the past is a powerful trope in contemporary Western cultures. Nostalgia, commonly signalling a sense of loss and longing for the past, has been seen as a bi-product of modernity.¹⁶ Here, longing attaches to imagined simpler times, before capitalism, globalisation and colonisation,¹⁷ and nostalgia tends to encapsulate the sense that things were better in the past.¹⁸ For critics, nostalgia is inherently reactionary, irrational and backward looking: a futile attempt to capture what cannot be captured.¹⁹ From this particular standpoint, nostalgia is memory distorted by sentiment. Public nostalgia, understood as an attempt to restore the past, has animated various right-wing political agendas.²⁰

However, nostalgia need not mean maintaining that the past was better, and it may provide a valuable vehicle for remembering and interpreting in research.²¹ A number of theorists have argued that nostalgia is worth taking seriously because it involves critical thinking, meaning making and articulations of feeling.²² That is, nostalgia can offer a critical take on the past and the present and serve as a way of negotiating 'between continuity and discontinuity'.²³ Nostalgia does this by making a link between the past and the present and charging it with meaning,²⁴ so evoking 'the possibility of meaningful events, relationships or things' and 'new standpoints from which to observe the world'.²⁵ Following this line of thinking, nostalgia can be seen as a process and 'a force that does something'.²⁶ And, we argue, nostalgia shows how thought, meaning and emotion are integral to each other.

While nostalgia has come to be seen primarily in temporal terms, it was originally conceived as a longing for the place called home.²⁷ Mobility, migration and

environmental change highlight spatial aspects of a nostalgic imagination. Place, in turn, is a complex term. It has been conceptualised as a space that has been made meaningful, in particular ways by particular individuals and groups.²⁸ Agnew identified three aspects of place defined as 'meaningful location': location, locale and sense of place. 'Sense of place', which particularly interests us here, refers to the emotional attachments, connections, meanings and experiences people associate with place.²⁹ Attachment to place may take on new significance in a shifting and uncertain world,³⁰ as global changes (such as patterns of urbanisation, deindustrialisation) reverberate locally and disrupt our sense of belonging.³¹

In this article, we explore emotion associated with place. We differentiate between emotion and feeling, which are often conflated though not identical.³² Emotion can be understood as sensible experience or feeling 'recognised, organised and expressed'.³³ That is, emotions are feelings put into words using 'emotional vocabularies',³⁴ which reflect rules and prescriptions for what can and cannot be felt in a given cultural historical context.³⁵ Feeling may exceed emotion: sometimes we know we feel something but struggle to put that feeling into words.³⁶ Beyond words, feeling may be discernible through expressive intonation.³⁷

In the next section, we analyse the co-production of a nostalgic imagination and its articulations of critical thinking, meaning making and feeling in narratives of living and working in Islington with reference to three interviews. Here, we view thinking and feeling as entangled rather than separate processes. We examine how the project positioned participants – interviewees and interviewers – and the relations between them and how it shaped the narratives produced. We consider how dominant cultural narratives explaining changes in the borough (deindustrialisation, gentrification) are reflected in individual stories and how individual narratives resist or work against the grain of dominant narratives. In this regard, we are mindful of debate about the extent to which individual stories are culturally scripted or determined and how memory is not only individual but also collective. Following Anna Green, it is possible to both acknowledge the significance of cultural contexts and discourses and assert the value of individual remembering together with individuals' capacity to critically assess and contest these.³⁸

Eddie

Eddie (born in 1948) has lived all his life in Islington.³⁹ He was interviewed about his experience of working in a small workshop restoring barometers (1963-1983). He readily took up the speaking position shaped by the project and interview questions, describing his work and positive feelings associated with work and neighbourhood in the past.

Eddie described the ways in which his work was meaningful for him, focusing on the processes and skills embodied in restoring the appearance and function of a barometer following years of neglect and disrepair.

Eddie Mence, 2018.
Photo: Drovers
Photography Group.





Eddie Mence outside 51-53, Mount Pleasant, EC1, former premises of Committi and Sons, where he worked from 1968-1973.

He said that he loved his job because he gained a sense of satisfaction, derived from the exercise of technical know-how in the methodical and pain-staking processes of taking a barometer apart and repairing and re-assembling its individual parts.

What I loved about my job was ... I mean ... the pay wasn't terrific ... it wasn't very good at all ... but there was a lot of job satisfaction in it. I mean these barometers had been in someone's attic or basement for years and years and someone decided 'aw, I'll try and get it restored' you know and would bring it in to us. And, when it would come in it would be in a very poor state. The brass work would be green – that's verdigris – that's brass rust and the casework would be in a terrible state, veneer might be peeling off. So, it would come to me first of all. I would strip it all down and then it would go down to the wood mill and the wood mill would repair any parts of the frame that were missing. Then it would go to the French polishers and the French polishers would obviously restore its case. Then it would come back to me again. Now, I'd already stripped it down and so I had all the brass parts there and so I'd restore all the brass work and reseal all the dials. Also, I had to replace missing parts as well if necessary. And so, it was a pretty hands-on job really in a way.⁴⁰

The fact that Eddie's job was a source of meaning, satisfaction and fulfilment was enough to keep him at that workplace despite low pay. He verbalises 'love' and 'satisfaction', but feelings of pleasure and pride are palpable in his intonation: he felt pride in skills learned

and performed well, making good something that had fallen into disrepair, and he took pleasure in and enjoyed the objects he worked on. Eddie mentions here and elsewhere that he learned his skills on the job in a hands-on way. Without actually putting it into words, he communicates through the timbre of his voice a sense of pride in learning quickly and being adept at practical tasks.

Eddie's narrative gives a flavour of the working environment made of 'lots of small workshops dotted around' and barometer restoration as a collective practice involving a number of different craftsmen, skills and practices. He also describes more negative and dangerous aspects of this workplace: the building was a 'completely wooden structure' and a potential 'fire hazard', with a very dusty atmosphere created by a wood mill located in the basement. Further, employees were working with mercury in a way that was 'a bit lax' and potentially hazardous to health: 'Well ... you see ... working with mercury was a bit more free and easy in those days ... there weren't so much health and safety like it is now ... we should have been more careful'. Here, Eddie's critical reflection on working conditions in the past draws on more contemporary narratives about health and safety at work to indicate a discontinuity between the past and present. Eddie was also asked 'what sort of place' Islington was when he started work and how the past compared with the present.

Eddie: When I first left school I worked as a radio technician in a television shop. Upper Street was a great street to work in in a way ... a nice area not like it is now. Now it's all coffee bars and bistros and that. But then it was a working-class area very much really. Quite nice really ... Upper Street was a good street really, you know.

Ivy May: So, the Islington then compared with the Islington now?

Eddie: ... today it's a bit more upper-class sort of thing ... there's no atmosphere any more. There used to be nice shops in Upper Street ... cos in the sixties I was interested in clothes and there were some great clothes shops in Upper Street in those days.⁴¹

Eddie recalls that he liked to dress as a Mod⁴² and greatly enjoyed pop music, buying music papers (*Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express*) every week to follow the charts. Here, and at other points in the interview, he draws attention to the 1960s as a distinctive period in the past, which he describes in very positive terms. It was easy to find work: 'The sixties was a very easy time to get jobs, very easy ... Employers were crying out for you ... to be employed'.⁴³ He was young and relished being part of a lively city youth culture. Islington in the 1960s was a place to be enjoyed and where he felt at home as a young working-class man: a place made meaningful through attachments, connections, feelings, which together created a particular 'atmosphere', which he feels is lacking today.



Frederick Rooke in Granary Square, Kings Cross N1 in 2018 where British Rail, Kings Cross Goods Yard was located and where he worked from 1950 to 1975.

To some extent Eddie's individual narrative resonates with public representations of 1960s Britain in contemporary political and academic discourse as a time of optimism and growing prosperity, evident in increased production and consumption, of which the expansion of popular music and youth cultures was an example.⁴⁴ In talking about 1960s Islington as a working-class area and of his youth (when he was pre-occupied with clothes and music and had disposable income to spend on himself) as gone and lost, Eddie is emphasising a sharp contrast and discontinuity with the present. He is speaking critically and regretfully about the loss of a meaningful place – through gentrification – and with it a sense of class-based belonging. This critical perspective is juxtaposed with his pleasure in remembering being young, aspects of contemporary youth culture, and craftsmanship, evident in what he says and emphasised through the animated way in which he speaks. Eddie views these aspects of the past as gone, without wanting to revive them. Rather, they form a positive part of a biographical narrative, shaping identity and linking past and present.

Eddie appears to have taken up the speaking positions created by the project and interview questions, describing his craftsmanship with pride and regretting the loss of a working-class neighbourhood. Yet, his nostalgic remembering also includes taking pleasure in remembering his participation in a vibrant youth culture and critically reflecting on working conditions.

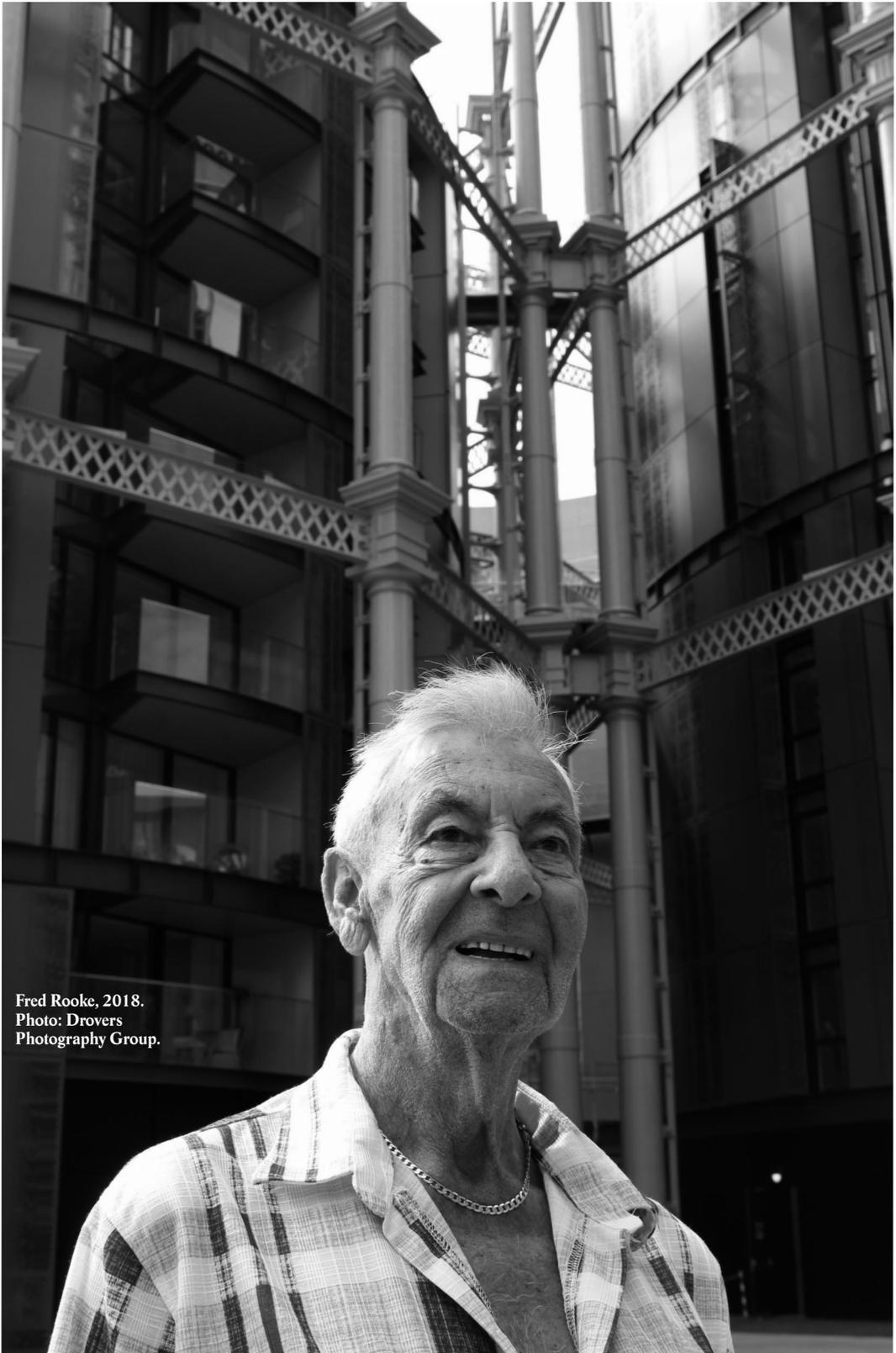
Fred

Fred was interviewed about his job as a crane driver (1950-1975) for British Rail at King's Cross station goods yard. He strongly resisted the invitation to attribute

any sense of pride or self-worth to the skills he exercised in this employment. Rather, he viewed this work as a means to an end: providing for his family, 'because that was what it was all about'. He conveyed a deep-felt antipathy to all aspects of the work environment. His account is peppered with expletives that convey a strong sense of loathing for the physical condition of the workplace, for example he described it as 'a dirty, filthy, horrible place'.⁴⁵ In addition, Fred was highly critical of the dangerous working conditions, and of management's lack of care and failure to acknowledge loyalty, hard work and the risks taken by the workers. He highlights the strength of his negative feelings towards the yard through repetition and emphatic intonation:

[A]nd I wish I'd never seen the place. And may I say when I was pushing the barrow⁴⁶ a man used to work in the eastern section and after fifty years he retired. Fifty years. No pension, no gold watch, no letter of thanks, nothing. He just completely walked off the station without one penny. And when they closed that goods yard (in 1975) we all, including me, all walked off – no pension, no nothing. We was treated terribly. I wish I'd never seen the place.⁴⁷

Fred's recollections of the goods yard were not simply rehearsing public depictions of working conditions in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. This was evident when he compared his time at the goods yard with his later experience of working as a driver for Islington Council. Despite the connotations associated with refuse collection, he was at pains to make direct comparisons with the goods yard, emphasising the clean state of the restrooms, the shower facilities, the provision of



Fred Rooke, 2018.
Photo: Drovers
Photography Group.

uniforms and the local union representatives, who were supportive if you got into trouble.

Fred's working life was not a source of pride for him and he felt no sense of loss associated with working or workplace. Rather, he experienced fulfilment beyond work. He articulated pride in his daughters' achievements and social mobility: 'I was so proud and so pleased I got them into a grammar school'. He explained that one now works as a deputy principal of a large comprehensive school, the other as finance manager in a local authority. Swimming was also very important to him and he was proud of his achievements as a swimmer and swimming coach for Stoke Newington Swimming Club.

Fred's narrative conveyed a very strong sense of place and associated negative emotions. However, his loathing of the King's Cross goods yard is sharply contrasted with his enthusiasm and optimism for what, thanks to regeneration, replaced it:

[King's Cross is] so wonderful now, it's unbelievable, I'm so glad for the youngsters now ... you look and there's all brand new buildings, all lovely bright colours ... they've got gardens, they got activities going on there, it's a perfect place now ... the difference between that and what I saw and I'm glad youngsters didn't have to see what I saw. Now ... it is absolutely beautiful ... they've got everything, it's beautiful ... everything now is so clean to look at but in my day all I saw was dirt and filth.⁴⁸

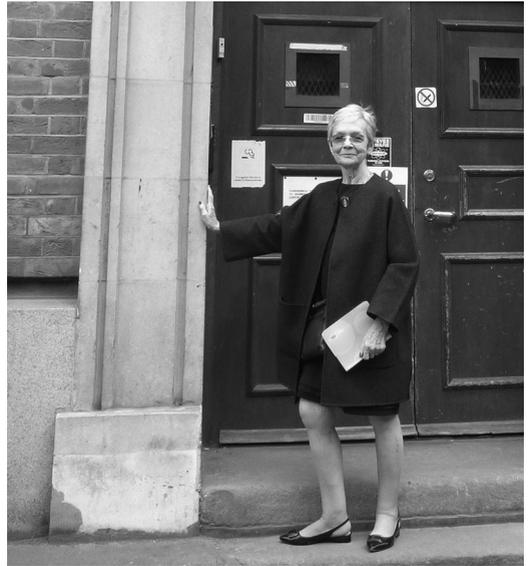
The present, discontinuous with the past, is lauded and understood (much less critically) in terms of a cultural narrative of progress and opportunity. This parallels his emphasis on the social mobility achieved by his daughters. Clearly, Fred has no sense of yearning for aspects of his past embodied in the King's Cross goods yard.

However, he felt very positively about living in Islington, saying:

I never want to move out, I'm eighty-nine and lived here all my life. My family have lived in Islington since 1700.

He then goes on to reflect on the particular ways in which Islington – and a specific street in Islington – as a meaningful location has changed:

In Caledonian Road everybody knew everybody, you knew exactly who you were and all that sort of business, and they used to have trams up and down Cally and stalls in middle of the Caledonian Road ... it was totally different ... in them days nobody had any money, I mean now a lot of people got the money but it's not the same. We were so friendly, and you must have heard people say you could leave your doors open and not worry about it and women could walk about in the street at night, no fear whatsoever ... it was totally, totally different.⁴⁹



Colleen Sheehan outside former premises of London Telecommunications (Clerkenwell Exchange) Ironmonger Row EC1 where she worked from 1951 to 1954. Photo: Drovers Photography Group.

Fred acknowledged the presence of a well-worn cultural narrative ('you must have heard people say you could leave your doors open and not worry about it' and 'we were so friendly') in his own. He used this, and the more contentious claim about women's safety at night, to articulate broader meanings and feelings – familiarity, friendliness, security – constituting a sense of community and class-based identity in the middle of the twentieth century. His emphatic (repeated) claim that Caledonian Road in the past was 'totally, totally different' is tinged with palpable regret.

For Fred, a clear sense of identity and belonging – consisting of knowing everybody and knowing 'who you were' – is associated with place as meaningful location, located in the past and discontinued, transformed by the influx of money and wealth into the area. To this extent, his narrative appears in accord with the project's assumptions that a sense of community and working-class identity have been diluted, if not lost. Yet the nostalgic imagination shaped in Fred's narrative is one of contrasts, juxtaposing a sense of regret at the loss of some features of the past with a loathing of and delight at the passing of others, and an emotional attachment to changes that have benefitted his family and young people in general.

Colleen

Colleen was born 1933 in Islington in the street where she still lives. She was asked whether the area has changed much.

Well, I suppose really, I live in a block of flats. They're a quite small block and at one time when we lived in the old house, we knew all our neighbours and now

we don't. And in a block of flats where you live so many of us have bought our flats and the older people that got to buy those flats have died on so we have strangers, most of them students. But what I do like when I come out in the street you don't ... you don't know what nationality you're passing. You say 'good morning' ... nine times out of ten they say 'good morning' and I think it's a lovely atmosphere still. I think er I think if you spoke to my parents they would say umm 'it's progressed'. The standard of living has progressed ... everything has changed totally ... absolutely ... and now you see all different nationalities ... I think that as far as my family is concerned there has been ... we've had progress but we still love where we live.⁵⁰

Colleen's reflections on neighbourhood trace both continuities and discontinuities between the past and the present. She lives in the street where she was born, but in a block of flats rather than the small terrace house where she had lived with her parents, seven siblings and grandparents. She says emphatically that everything has changed ('totally ... absolutely') and, as an example, highlights the contrast between knowing all her neighbours in the past and living among strangers in the present. In speaking of 'all different nationalities' living in her immediate neighbourhood she indicates another discontinuity between a remembered homogeneous community in the past and a heterogeneous community in the present. However, she also creates a link, and continuity, between past and present by highlighting the frequency ('nine times out of ten') with which everyday greetings (saying 'good morning') are exchanged, implying that this is an indicator of neighbourliness in the present. She follows this up with the claim that 'a lovely atmosphere' persists in her neighbourhood and 'we've had progress but we still love where we live'. The term 'progress' is used here to refer to change that is associated with both unarticulated ambivalent (indicated by 'but') and positive feelings. The positive aspects of progress involve improved living standards and home ownership. Here, Colleen's personal narrative interweaves with a public narrative of change as progress. Her narrative involves valuing aspects of the past and the present, rather than a sense of longing to revive what was gone. She asserts the continuing meaningfulness of her neighbourhood as a good place to live – even though the source of meaning may have shifted from the familiar to the cosmopolitan – and her emotional attachment to it.

Colleen also worked on making sense of another major disruption and discontinuity in her life: wartime evacuation. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Colleen (aged six) and her sisters were evacuated to the countryside where they were looked after by a local landowner and his estate manager. She spent 'very very happy days' there, so much so that after the war finished she stayed on for some years with her younger sister. She worked on balancing feelings of loss and opportunity in her narrative:

But the Second World War gave us an awful lot of opportunities ... from where we were evacuated, when we came back we were different people. We wanted something a little bit different.⁵¹

Asked how she and her younger sister had changed as people, Colleen said:

Independence for one thing [...] When we came back my mother couldn't really understand the two young women facing her and saying what they wanted and what they didn't want because we were so different ... and my mum she couldn't understand her children talking to her as practically an equal ... as much as you respect them. You wouldn't have answered my mum back at all.⁵²

Colleen's pride in her own transformation is discernible in how she speaks of her exposure to a different way of life – rural and more aspirational compared with inner-city working-class existence. At the same time, she created a sense of continuity by emphasising how happy life had been both as a young child in London and as an evacuee, and how warmly her parents were welcomed when they visited their children in the countryside. She expresses regret that she did not live much of her early life with her parents, but seeks to make sense of this and establish continuity through describing their ongoing closeness despite separation:

I find it quite extraordinary and yet when Molly and I came back we were very close to my mum and dad ... We led a totally different life and we adjusted to both our lives.⁵³

A sense of personal transformation, embodying a degree of social mobility, was evident in how Colleen narrated her experience as a telephonist at Clerkenwell telephone exchange. She also emphasised connectedness of work, neighbourhood and family. Many people lived and worked near one another; her parents and older sister were very active in finding jobs for her and her younger sister and her father had encouraged her to go for a job with a good pension. Clerkenwell exchange was right next door to where she lived and so 'my mum was very pleased about that'.

Colleen described training to be a telephonist with great enthusiasm. She said about her job, 'I loved it. I loved it very much'. What she loved was receiving training, becoming skilled, developing self-confidence and enjoying the company of other women:

'cause I was with lots of girls, you know, my age ... and your confidence grew tremendously 'cause you were taught certain ways even working on a telephone ... it brought out and taught you a little bit of confidence.⁵⁴

Colleen marvelled at how efficiently the telephone exchange was run and how well disciplined the

Colleen Sheehan,
2018. Photo: Drovers
Photography Group.



telephonists were. She describes the panoptical layout of the workplace, which was ‘like a factory’, and the watchful exercise of power:

[There were] about sixty girls all around very large room, ... and the supervisor would sit in the middle and she would keep an eye, she was very good ... it was so efficiently run and when you look back on it, how clever how they trained you and how disciplined you were.⁵⁵

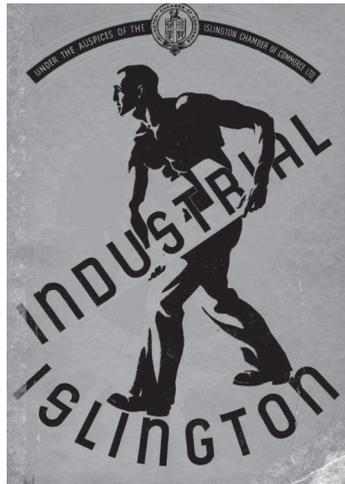
Colleen’s narrative shows how the telephone exchange at Clerkenwell was a meaningful place for her because of the emotional associations that were part of her remembering: submission to a strict discipline as a part of coming to know what to do and embodying new skills, which in turn engendered a growing sense of self-confidence, fulfilment, satisfaction and pride. Her sense of personal and social transformation was also entangled with particular social and affective ties with co-workers. What she especially enjoyed about the job was female companionship, despite having six sisters: ‘it was the different companionship and the conversations you had ... and because you mixed with older women, married women and single women, it was very nice people to work with’.⁵⁶

Colleen, in common with all the other women interviewed, commented on a gendered division of work and described the conviviality of all-female workplaces with associated feelings of solidarity, comradeship and enjoyment. That is, interviewees spontaneously described relational and emotional aspects of connection to place. It is worth noting that the context in which they reflected on experiences at work were shaped by post-war social and economic transformations, which saw a substantial increase in female labour during the 1950s and 1960s and an increase in women as a proportion of the total working population.⁵⁷

Colleen also appears to have taken up the speaking positions offered by the project: describing her pride in work and the skills she learned. However, she resists a static understanding of community, indicating instead how meanings of community are in flux. That is, the neighbourhood has changed in terms of who lives there and how well they know each other (discontinuity), but she still loves it (continuity). Her standard of living has improved, which is discontinuous with the past of her early childhood and more continuous with the aspirations stimulated through evacuation.

Re-imagining Islington

The Lost Trades project invited participants to re-Imagine Islington in relation to work and neighbourhood in



From the cover of *Islington Chamber of Commerce* magazine, 1937. Image: Islington Local History Centre / London Borough of Islington.

the past through the lens of the present. The project drew on cultural narratives of loss – of trades, buildings, familiar and cohesive neighbourhoods – also supported by economic and social data for Islington. The idea that participants would feel respected and valued through talking about experiences and being listened to underscored the idea that the past might be a source of value and identity for this group of older residents.

The project invited both interviewees and interviewees to adopt a nostalgic relationship with the past. It appeared to encourage what Linda Shopes calls ‘a celebratory impulse’, which infects many community interviews and ‘which views the past as a benign refuge from the unsettling present’.⁵⁸

Indeed, nostalgia as a contemporary cultural trope often signals an attempt to recapture what has gone. However, the Lost Trades narratives show how nostalgic imagining was always reflective and critical, even though this might vary (between narrators and within individual stories) in degree, tone and intensity. Moreover, speaking positions anticipated by interview questions were both taken up and resisted. Individual narratives drew on wider cultural scripts, but often with differing emphases, interpretations and associated emotions.

Fred was vehement in his criticism of dirty and dangerous working conditions and management’s failure to demonstrate care for and appreciation of workers. Eddie and Colleen talked about specific work as a source of meaning, enjoyment and fulfilment, but also identified aspects of working conditions (poor health and safety standards, strict discipline) which demonstrated a critical awareness of present listeners’ differing expectations and experiences at work. For all, the past associated with working life was gone and they felt no personal sense of loss or desire to restore it. It was just one element in an interesting biographical narrative.

When it came to neighbourhood, those interviewed expressed different and sometimes ambivalent feelings. There was broad agreement that Islington as a place had changed ‘totally’, but differences in how change was perceived and interpreted. All described a strong emotional attachment to particular neighbourhoods in the past. All interviewees articulated meanings associated with familiarity and with belonging based on class identity, knowing people and knowing how you fitted in. However, Eddie regretted discontinuity between the past and the present, whereas Colleen worked at formulating continuity between the past and the present, identified through indicators of friendliness. Fred enthused about the results of regeneration. In this way, those

interviewed both took up and resisted a speaking position – aligned with a sense of loss of community – offered by the project.

Lost Trades narratives demonstrated how nostalgia is ‘a force that does something’:⁵⁹ it makes links between the past and the present and charges them with meaning, critical understanding and emotion. They also show how a nostalgic imagination is necessarily relational and based on difference, involving interaction between the past and present, interviewees and interviewers and, in this case, younger and older generations. Nostalgic imagining is also co-produced through the construction of biographical narratives in interview, interpretation and representation. The narratives show too that nostalgia is not simply a uniform and generic entity. Rather, it brings together a range of different, sometimes contradictory, emotions of varying intensities and degrees of expression. Moreover, in the examples of nostalgic imagining discussed here it becomes apparent that thought and emotion are not separate but rather integral (to each other) components in critical reflexivity.⁶⁰

Some emotions were verbalised – love and pride – and others were strongly implied through words chosen to describe places or experiences – ‘a dirty, filthy, horrible place’ and ‘I wish I’d never seen the place’ – sometimes repeated. Feelings – enthusiasm, pleasure, a sense of achievement – not put directly into words were communicated through expressive intonation. Fred’s narrative centring on the site of King’s Cross goods yard also illustrated the complexity of relations between emotion, place, memory and change: it was a site of loathing and disgust in the past, and of pleasure and celebration in the present. Oral history interviewing, alive to emotion and feeling, is especially well placed to capture the potential of what can be learned about the past and present through nostalgic imagining.

The value of nostalgic imagining also lies in participants’ experience of the process of narrating their lives. One of the aims of the project was to promote wellbeing among older working-class residents through recalling

working and living in Islington. After the public exhibitions had concluded, we asked the project leader how the project may have benefitted participants.

I ask them how they felt about it and they told me that it made them feel very proud seeing their stories up on the wall ... seeing the photos and actually and yes just that idea that some people’s stories were never told before. And also some people just hadn’t had that much attention ... so it was actually just even the attention apart from actually the finished product and everything. So just actually having someone taking an individual interest for an hour! And so to have someone, two people, listening with great interest for an hour was significant as well for some people.⁶¹

In talking about the project, its purpose and success, pride was frequently mentioned as a positive emotion to be encouraged and was often conflated with wellbeing. Pride was understood as connoting feelings of satisfaction and pleasure in achievements associated with working lives. It was experienced and named when actions and feelings, recalled and articulated, were recognised by both self and others. In this way, the project involved an understanding of pride as contextual, relational and performative. Pride was also entangled with power relations. It was encouraged where it had not previously been experienced or expected among interviewees by virtue of belonging to non-hegemonic groups (based on class, gender and ethnicity). In telling others about their lives – via interview and exhibition – individuals gained recognition, respect and value. Pride as an emotion *did* something: it helped to constitute a sense of connection and belonging in the present articulated through memory.

The narratives produced through the Lost Trades project illustrate some of the ways in which work was ‘a deeply emotional experience’, whether positive or negative or somewhere in between.⁶² They also demonstrate some of the complexities of attachment to place and dynamics between memory, place and emotion.

NOTES

1. The authors interviewed other project partners, some interviewers and some interviewees about their participation in the project for another paper on community engagement and work-related learning in higher education.

2. Interview with Andrea Sinclair; recorded by John Gabriel and Jenny Harding, 2 August 2019.

3. David Stevenson Associates, ‘The Islington Jobs Audit’, 1987; Islington Council, ‘Islington’s Unitary Development Plan’, 1994; Islington Planning Department, ‘Islington Borough Community Plan Report of Studies Topic Paper 6 (Draft) Employment’, 1975.

4. Islington Planning Department, 1975, p 8. In Islington, as elsewhere across

London, a number of factors contributed to job losses in manufacturing, including poor parking and access, unsuitable accommodation with regard to layout and state of repair of buildings, and the quality of the environment, from Islington Planning Department, ‘Islington Development Plan: A District Plan for the London Borough of Islington’, written statement, 1979.

5. Islington Planning Department, 1975, Table 4. Tim Butler and Loretta Lees, ‘Super-gentrification in Barnsbury, London: globalization and gentrifying global elites at the neighbourhood level’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 2006, NS 31, pp 467-87.

6. Islington Planning Department, 1975, p 9.

7. Ruth Glass, *London: Aspects of Change*, London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1964.

8. A combination of Development Plans and Industrial Development Certificates were used to move industry to the Assisted Areas and New and Expanded Towns (Islington Planning Department, 1975, p 17, para A1.3).

9. Islington Planning Department, 1975, p 9.

10. Butler and Lees, 2006, p 474.

11. Butler and Lees, 2006, p 474.

12. Islington Council, 1994, p 34.

13. Islington Planning Department, 1979, p 5, para 2.3.4.

14. Islington Planning Department, 1975, p 5.

15. Intergenerational relations, differences and synergies are explored in

a separate paper currently being prepared by the authors.

16. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001; Alastair Bonnett, *The Geography of Nostalgia: Global and Local Perspectives on Modernity and Loss*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

17. Bonnett, 2016, p 5.

18. Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain since 1945*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p 79.

19. Bonnett, 2016.

20. For example, David Barnes, 'Going back somewhere: nostalgia and the radical right', openDemocracy, 6 August 2019. Accessed online at www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/going-back-somewhere-nostalgia-and-radical-right/, 26 November 2019.

21. Kirsi-Maria Hytönen, 'Hardworking women: nostalgia and women's memories of paid work in Finland in the 1940s', *Oral History*, vol 41, no 2, 2013, pp 87-99.

22. Bonnett 2016; Hytönen, 2013; Boym, 2001; Nadia Atia and Jeremy Davies, 'Nostalgia and the shapes of history: editorial', *Memory Studies*, vol 3, no 3, 2010, pp 181-86.

23. Atia and Davies, 2010, p 184.

24. Hytönen, 2013, p 89.

25. Bonnett, 2016, p 6.

26. Nicholas Dames, 'Nostalgia and its disciplines, a response', *Memory Studies*, vol 3, no 3, 2010, pp 269-75, pp 272, 273.

27. Bonnett, 2016, p 6.

28. Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, second edition, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015.

29. John A Agnew, *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society*, Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987. According to Agnew, 'location' refers to place located in geographical space; 'locale' refers to place as a setting for social interaction and relations; and 'sense of place' refers to attachments between people and place. See also Steven High and David W Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization*, Ithaca: ILR Press, 2007, p 32.

30. Tony Blackshaw, *Key Concepts in Community Studies*, London: Sage, 2010.

31. Cresswell, 2015.

32. Ian Burkitt, 'Complex emotions: relations, feelings and images in emotional experience', *Sociological Review*, vol 50, no S2, 2002, pp 151-67. Accessed online at

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2002.tb03596.x?>, 22 October 2019.

33. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002, p 28.

34. Burkitt, 2002, p 152; Rom Harré (ed), *The Social Construction of Emotions*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.

35. Burkitt, 2002, p 152. For discussion of feeling rules, see Arlie R Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

36. Burkitt, 2002, p 152. The distinction being made here between feeling and emotion is similar to that made between affect and emotion in cultural theory, where affect refers to sensible experience beyond signification and before individual experience.

For cultural theorists' discussion of the differences between affect and emotion, see Massumi, 2002; Lawrence Grossberg, 'Postmodernity and affect: all dressed up with no place to go', in Jennifer Harding and E Deidre Pribram (eds), *Emotions: A Cultural Studies Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, pp 69-83; Lawrence Grossberg, 'Affect's future: rediscovering the virtual in the actual', in Gregory J Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010, pp 309-38.

37. Burkitt, 2002, p 156.

38. See Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*. London: Routledge, 2003; Anna Green, 'Individual remembering and "collective memory": theoretical presuppositions and contemporary debates', *Oral History*, vol 32, no 2, Autumn 2004, pp 35-44.

39. We use interviewees' real names throughout this article because they were all very pleased to be part of the project and to be recognised for their contributions. Their names, photographs and excerpts from their interviews have already appeared in three exhibitions.

40. Interview with Eddie Mence; recorded by Michael Hotts and Ivy May Reynolds, 13 April 2018.

41. Interview with Eddie Mence, 13 April 2018.

42. Mods were members of a youth sub-culture focused around fashion and music which began in the late 1950s in London and spread throughout the UK. Mod culture had its heyday in the 1960s.

43. Interview with Eddie Mence, 13 April 2018.

44. See William Osgerby, *Youth in Britain Since 1945*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. A feeling of optimism was underpinned by the idea that post-war Britain was becoming an affluent society, fuelled by increased production in major industries (coal, steel, cars), low levels of unemployment, increased wages, shifting patterns of work and leisure, growth in mass consumption.

45. Interview with Frederick Rooke; recorded by John Gabriel and Kenneth Anakwue, 18 April 2018.

46. Fred's first job at the goods yard.

47. Interview with Frederick Rooke, 18 April 2018.

48. Interview with Frederick Rooke, 18 April 2018.

49. Interview with Frederick Rooke, 18 April 2018.

50. Interview with Colleen Sheehan; recorded by Barbara Griffin and John Gabriel, 18 April 2018.

51. Interview with Colleen Sheehan, 18 April 2018.

52. Interview with Colleen Sheehan, 18 April 2018.

53. Interview with Colleen Sheehan, 18 April 2018.

54. Interview with Colleen Sheehan, 18 April 2018.

55. Interview with Colleen Sheehan, 18 April 2018.

56. Interview with Colleen Sheehan, 18 April 2018.

57. Stephen Brooke, 'Gender and working class identity in Britain during the 1950s', *Journal of Social History*, vol 34, no 4, 2001, pp 773-95, p 778.

58. Linda Shopes, 'Oral history and the study of communities: problems, paradoxes, and possibilities' *Journal of American History*, vol 89, no 2, 2001, pp 588-98, p 591.

59. Dames, 2010, p 273.

60. For further discussion of emotion and reflexivity, see Mary Holmes, 'The emotionalization of reflexivity', *Sociology*, vol 44, no 1, 2010, pp 139-54; and Ian Burkitt, 'Emotional reflexivity: feeling, emotion and imagination in reflexive dialogues', *Sociology*, vol 46, no 3, 2012, pp 458-72.

61. Interview with Andrea Sinclair, 2 August 2019.

62. McIvor, 2013, p 76.

63. High and Lewis, 2007, p 32.

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