



© National Museums Liverpool

Editors:  
Kerry Massheder-Rigby & Dominic Walker



[www.arqueologiapublica.es](http://www.arqueologiapublica.es)

*Online Journal in Public Archaeology*

*Emerging Approaches  
to Public Archaeology*

**Digging up memories:  
Collaborations between archaeology and oral history to  
investigate the industrial housing experience**

Kerry MASSHEDER-RIGBY  
*University of Liverpool*

**Abstract**

*This paper forms part of a wider PhD project exploring whether there can be an informative research relationship between archaeology and oral history. Its focus is on the working class housing experience in the North of England during the Industrial Revolution period. Oral history as a discipline applied within archaeological investigation is growing in popularity and in application in the UK as a form of 'community archaeology'. Evidence suggests that there is potential for combining the memories of oral history testimonies and the physical archaeological evidence from excavation to enhance our understanding of an event, person, time and place. However, establishing what evidence of the housing experience survives in an archaeological context and what survives in memory is crucial to the success of a combined investigative approach. This paper will use the example of The Public Archaeology Programme of the site Dixon's Blazes as a relevant example in which to explore this, with evidence of sanitation, overcrowding and architecture surviving in both.*

**Keywords**

*Oral History, Memory, Public Archaeology, Housing Experience, Glasgow*

**Introduction**

Over recent years archaeology has developed into an increasingly scientific and specialised/professionalised method of collecting the material evidence of the past. Therefore personal memories, local myths and community traditions often go unresearched and unrecorded by archaeologists. However with the recent economic downturn affecting developer-financed, commercial archaeological projects, and the growth in funded heritage themed investigations there is now greater room than ever for oral history to be included as part of the archaeological process. This has resulted in an

increased community involvement in archaeology in the form of oral history, and particularly memories related to place (Moshenska 2007). The memories of oral history participants provide a more personal and private interpretation of the archaeology uncovered during excavation. This has been particularly relevant to the exploration, remembrance and memorialisation of traumatic events in individuals' lives (Andrews *et al.* 2006).

The fields of archaeology, anthropology, history and geography are becoming increasingly aware of the value of place-based memories to interpret, confirm and provide an alternative account of the physical evidence collected during excavation. Whilst combining oral history and archaeology has been relatively slow to develop in the United Kingdom, elsewhere, particularly with regards to Indigenous communities, it is a more prevalent approach. Oral history is a unique way in which we can further involve the past and current community and the wider public in archaeological practice and interpretation. In this paper I argue that place-based memories of a site can enhance our understanding of the archaeology uncovered during excavation and that there should be a provision within archaeological investigations to include an oral history project.

## **Background**

The combined investigative approach of using oral history and archaeology to explore place-based communities is an accepted interdisciplinary practice in Indigenous archaeology. Indigenous communities have enthusiastically set the research agenda and taken control of investigating their heritage. One such project involved the Inuit Elders of Hudson Bay, Canada, working in collaboration with non-Indigenous archaeologists to investigate Inuit memories of community, place and traditions. The project found that the combined yet equal investigative approach of archaeology and oral history increased awareness of how place defined identities and community values (Lyons *et al.* 2010). Another promising investigation involved a research partnership between the Yarrawarra Aboriginal Corporation and the University of New England in Australia to investigate the conversations that can occur

within interdisciplinary interpretation of place-based archaeological evidence and memories (Beck and Somerville 2005).

The interdisciplinary approach to investigate place has been applied within UK archaeology to a lesser extent. One such investigation used landscape archaeology and oral history to investigate farming practices in Devon (Riley and Harvey 2005). The importance of this investigation lies in the fact that the oral history provided the farming community with a voice, and evidence in the form of memories were recorded when otherwise they would be lost.

Although oral history can enable communities to contribute to and collaborate with archaeological practice, there are recognised concerns regarding its validity as a source. Subjectivity, memory, authenticity, bias, nostalgia, the subject's agenda and the subject's ability to communicate must all be considered. The importance of oral history, and its ability to collect information about the past, is not necessarily a tool for the collection of facts alone, but is equally concerned with recording emotional responses and personal experiences. The successful use of oral history is dependent upon our acknowledgement and acceptance that the information collected may not be an account of what actually happened, or what an area was actually like, but what people thought happened or what people thought an area was like. If we are prepared to minimise and accept the risks of receiving and applying evidence from memories to archaeological investigations then, potentially, a fuller picture of the past emerges.

### **Oral history and the housing experience**

Using oral history in conjunction with archaeology to construct a place-based history is a particularly intriguing concept. Memories can be located in an attachment to one's home and community. Using oral history to provide insight into the changing use of space in a place, how events changed a place and its inhabitants, and place attachment and identity, could contribute a great deal to the conclusions of archaeological site reports. This could be particularly beneficial to Post Industrial Revolution era domestic sites. However,

the question of when oral history becomes oral tradition is relevant. It may be that memories beyond one's lifetime are no longer oral histories but ought to be categorised as oral tradition. This affects my research as archaeological evidence may pre-date oral histories. Focusing oral histories on place rather than time period means full use can be made of the evidence from both archaeology and oral history.

There are a number of examples where oral history has been used with great success as a source of evidence in archaeological excavations of Post Industrial Revolution housing within the United Kingdom.

1. The Coalbrookdale Historical Archaeology Research and Training Programme excavation and oral history project at the Upper Forge, Coalbrookdale used oral history as part of a programme to investigate Nineteenth Century domestic properties on an industrial site in 2001 and 2002 (Belford 2003, Belford and Ross 2004).
2. In 2003, the Alderley Sandhills project run by the School of Art History and Archaeology of the University of Manchester and the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund used an oral history project as a complementary means to understand the role of industrialisation on working class life in the rural North alongside the excavations of the Hagg Cottages (Casella and Croucher 2010).
3. From 2006, the York Archaeological Trust excavation at Hungate, York instigated an oral history project to provide an opportunity to collect further memories of those who lived within the Hungate community (Wilson 2007), and to follow up on an earlier oral history project that collected place-based memories of Hungate, a neighbourhood historically labelled as a slum (Mayne 2011).
4. In 2009, community archaeologists from Nottingham County Council led a community excavation at Wharf Green in the Village of Jacksdale in Nottinghamshire. The project excavated a row of Ironworkers cottages and conducted an oral history project (Gillott 2010).

All the above-mentioned studies provide examples of excavations and oral history projects being used together to investigate Post Industrial Revolution era housing. They identify the potential in the combined investigative approach to explore place-based memories of the housing experience, that is, how the physical features of a domestic property impacted the experience of its residents. One example of the combined investigative approach being particularly successful in increasing our understanding of the Post Industrial Revolution era housing experience is that of the M74 Road Completion Project in Glasgow, particularly with regards to the Lower English Buildings site.

### **The M74 Road Completion Project and Public Archaeology Programme**

The M74 Road Completion Project in Glasgow was undertaken between 2007 and 2008. It involved a number of ex-industrial sites being excavated by Headland Archaeology and Pre-construct Archaeology (HAPCA) on behalf of Transport Scotland. The sites were a group of former dwellings and workshops in South Laurieston, Gorbals referred to within the project as the 'tenement site'; Govan Iron Works and its associated workers' housing; and Caledonian Pottery in Rutherglen. An extensive public archaeology programme ran alongside excavations and involved museum exhibitions, open days, a website, a volunteer programme, a community archaeology conference and an oral history programme (Atkinson *et al.* 2008, Dalglish 2004, Drew 2011).

The Public Archaeology Programme aimed to actively engage the public in shaping the project in a number of ways. The programme intended to promote an interest in and understanding of archaeology and archaeological methods to the 'general public', whilst the Oral History Project aimed to engage the 'community' with connections to the cultural heritage along the M74 route.

The Oral History Project was conducted by Culture and Sport Glasgow between December 2007 and April 2009 and was designed "...to record the memories of those who had a connection with former buildings identified as being worthy of archaeological examination



along the route of the M74 completion" (Morton *et al.* 2008: 26). The Oral History Project was recognised as an opportunity to draw on the knowledge of the local community and "...to use oral history as a source in combination with the historical archaeology" (Morton *et al.* 2008: 26). The report provides a full disclosure of the methods used to recruit participants, the number of participants, the interview methods, the recording methods, the preservation methods, the interview lengths and reflections on the success of the programme and potential improvements for future projects. This report is independent of the excavation report produced by site archaeologists although both reports make reference to one another's findings.

The Govan Ironworks site is known to the local community as 'Dixons Blazes'. Built in the 1830's, there were two main elements to the site: The Iron Foundry to the South-East (which remained in use until the 1950s), and adjacent to the foundry, the Lower English Buildings, which housed some of the workers and their families. The Lower English Buildings consisted of two rows of almost identical miners cottage style buildings aligned East-West. The Lower English Buildings site can be divided into five phases of occupation:

1. Pre-1830: pre-domestic use of the site.
2. 1830–1865: initial period of construction.
3. 1866–1930: domestic use of the site.
4. 1930–1960: abandonment and military use of the site.
5. Post-1960: abandoned houses were demolished.

During a period of just over twelve months twenty-four participants with a personal connection to the M74 sites were interviewed as part of the Oral History Project. Seven of the participants provided memories concerning the Govan Iron Works and the Lower English Buildings. Given the time limitations of the project success was measured by the sample of participants involved, taking into account factors such as gender, age, religion and their proximity to the site, rather than the number of people involved. Although only one of these participants resided in the Lower English Buildings

themselves, other Dixon's tenants, a relative of the participant who resided in the Lower English Buildings and workers from the Govan Iron Works provided a valuable alternative perspective of the landscape.

### **Results of the Lower English Buildings project**

The objectives of the Oral History Project within the Public Archaeology Programme support the archaeological objectives which focused on the housing experience investigating issues such as sanitation, social and cultural domestic behaviour and activities occurring on the site. The Oral History Project aimed to contribute to the interpretation of the archaeology whilst the excavation was 'live' and recorded memories of those who had a connection with the site in order to draw on the knowledge of the local community. Therefore the questions asked within the Oral History Project interviews sought to elicit information that would contribute to the archaeological objectives.

An especially innovative method to provoke site specific memories was to invite site-based archaeologists to pose questions prior to the oral history interviews taking place, in order to identify or confirm archaeological features uncovered by excavation that required clarification. Archaeologists on the Lower English Buildings site used this opportunity to interpret unknown features such as 'box beds', which were originally interpreted as staircases, or to clarify suspected features such as the wash-houses. This proved to be a successful method of interpretation as one Oral History Project participant was able to accurately confirm physical features of the Lower English Buildings site.

Several testimonies provide information on the housing experience, such as memories on sanitation, drainage, the use and location of fireplaces, availability and use of space, social behaviour, sleeping arrangements, and the function of outbuildings. Testimony from the Oral History Project of the Lower English Buildings site provides place-based memories where the physical archaeological evidence can be challenged and supported.



## The oral testimony of Mrs Wilson



Figure 1. Mrs Wilson outside the Lower English Buildings (reproduced with permission of Scottish Oral History Centre Archives).

Mrs Wilson was born at 24 Lower English Buildings in 1918 and lived there until the 1930s when the family was forced to move by the landlord, Dixon's, who considered the houses to be no longer fit for purpose. Mrs Wilson's memories proved valuable in identifying features uncovered during excavation and by providing a narrative account of life at the site. Mrs Wilson was able to answer specific questions regarding the housing experience of the Lower English Buildings inhabitants. When asked to describe her house she replied:

"Ours was two made into one because we were the biggest family roundabout. They were white-washed windows outside, comfortable beds... big beds. There were beds that came off the kitchen and beds that came off the rooms. We had two rooms... we were lucky because our house was two knocked into one. It was all just one room and one kitchen but it was a big room, coal fires... they were just plain, like a block. They were square and big and there was spacing behind the door there was a bed". (SOHCA, 023/23)

Mrs Wilson also recalled that the floors were stone covered with carpets and linoleum, that the houses had outdoor coal cellars, that the wash house doors were locked and that her father, 'Jigger' McNair, had a vegetable garden and kept chickens and pigeons so the family were never short of eggs! This insight provides a depth of character to the Lower English Buildings that archaeology is unable to.



Figure 2. The McNair family outside the Lower English Buildings (reproduced with permission of Scottish Oral History Centre Archives).



Figure 3. Mrs Wilson, front right, and the McNair family outside the Lower English Buildings (reproduced with permission of Scottish Oral History Centre Archives).

Archaeologists uncovered three circular brick structures in the central area between the northern and southern range and identified them as wash houses. Mrs Wilson's memories confirmed these features were wash houses. Further evidence of sanitation and drainage facilities were found in the form of three water hand pumps in the central area between the ranges which Mrs Wilson advised were used until at least the 1930s and blocks of brick-built and paved outhouses located to the north and south of each wash house identified by site based archaeologists as toilet blocks, which was confirmed by Mrs Wilson.

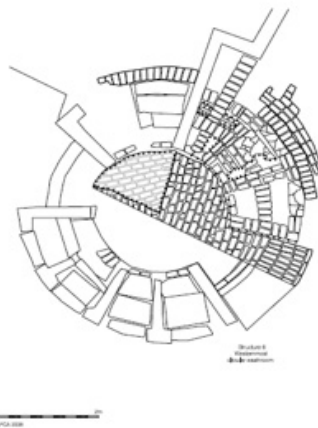


Figure 4. Wash house (structure 6) (reproduced with permission of HAPCA).

Mrs Wilson was asked for her memories regarding sanitation at the Lower English Buildings. She was asked if there was a wash house and what it looked like and answered:

"Aye there was and you lit the fire on a Tuesday morning. The fire was going and the sheets were put in (the hot water) and you crossed the whole lot of the yards with your rope to get your washing out. It had a big stone boiler and an iron wall instead of stone and a fireplace and you lit the fire first thing in the morning to heat the water". (SOHCA, 023/23)

Mrs Wilson was also able to provide memories regarding toilets at the Lower English Buildings.

"We had our own. I showed you where the middens joined in the middle at each side. Well, at the back end of that a door opens onto it and that's each persons toilet... there were three houses at the top and there was the coal cellar and you could leave it and cross over to the middle and the toilets were built there. There was a door on each of them and only persons that used double ones (had to share) were the people in the middle. Ours was our own". (SOHCA, 023/23)

Outbuildings were uncovered next to the northern and southern range, but archaeologists were unable to suggest a function for these buildings due to a lack of material finds across the site and the structures not being identified on maps. Mrs Wilson provided memories which interpreted the outbuildings and without her testimony the identity of these buildings would have remained hidden. When asked about the outdoor space on the site Mrs Wilson advised the area between the houses was open, that at the top of the main road there was a stable and shelters for horses, a kippering store and a blacksmiths.



Figure 5. Box beds (reproduced with permission of HAPCA).

Within the housing units excavators uncovered internal brick walls surrounding brick surfaces and support stones. Suggestions made by site-based archaeologists were that the features were door jambs for cupboard doors or staircase supports. The question of the unidentified feature was put to Mrs Wilson who explained the features were box beds or recess beds. Box beds were small cupboard-like rooms containing a mattress on a raised platform. The identification of the features is confirmed by the variation in floor surface from tiles to brick as the box bed surface would not have been seen or walked on and therefore could afford to be of a reduced quality. The confirmation from Mrs Wilson also cleared up the confusion that the features were staircases as maps and Mrs Wilson's oral history testimony confirmed that the units were single storeys.

Drew (2011: 49) comments that although Mrs Wilson's testimony proved very useful "...we have seriously to consider whether the passing of the years might perhaps have softened Mrs Wilson's memories of her upbringing". This comment was made as a result of testimony from Mrs Wilson's niece, Jane Sutherland. Jane Sutherland's testimony falls into the category of oral tradition as the memories she shares are 'second-hand'. Whereas Mrs Wilson's comments were overwhelmingly positive with regards to life within the Lower English Buildings, Jane Sutherland recalled Mrs Wilson commenting negatively on the hardships at the Lower English Buildings particularly with regard to overcrowding. Clearly the manner in which memories are recalled and presented vary depending upon the purpose and social situation. Nevertheless, Mrs Wilson's memories confirmed specific features of the site which archaeology was unable to successfully identify. No archive material for the Lower English Buildings was located and so Mrs Wilson's memories provide an invaluable source of evidence about how life was lived in the 1920s and 1930s within company housing.

## **Conclusions**

Oral history has the potential to provide a voice for communities that may usually go unheard, such as the historic working-class, and has the potential to recognise the social value of a 'community'

of people. It can also add to archaeological evidence in constructing landscapes, events, people, communities and times by contributing varied narratives and opinions. While archaeology can provide evidence for 'what', oral history can aid our understanding of 'why'.

However, oral history cannot be measured in terms of accuracy as narratives by their nature provide personal accounts of what people thought happened rather than an overarching account based on a range of sources. Therefore oral history as a source cannot be used in isolation but can be an effective complementary source. Oral history as a source is not currently being used to its full potential in both research and commercial archaeology in the UK. A clear structure of research aims, data collection, data interpretation and publication needs to be established in order for the discipline to be widely accepted and applied.

Oral history can make an informative contribution to archaeological investigations as essentially both disciplines are recovering evidence. However there are concerns that need to be addressed prior to the interdisciplinary method being applied universally. Determining who has the right to set the research agenda; who has the potential to contribute memories; how will the evidence be recorded used and published; how can we minimise the risks regarding the fragility of memory; and, who is the owner of memory?

In the current economic climate one question remains: can the archaeological profession afford to run oral history projects in conjunction with excavations? Given the evidence from the case studies cited above showing that oral history contributes towards our archaeological knowledge, can we afford to allow this evidence to go unrecorded? I suggest that with the recent shift from developer led commercial projects to funded community projects in the United Kingdom we must take advantage of the increased community interest and involvement in archaeology and develop the combined investigative approach with a focus on place-based investigations.



## References

- Andrews, G.J., Kearns, R.A., Kontos, P. and Wilson, V. 2006. 'Their finest hour': Older people, oral histories, and the historical geography of social life. *Social and Cultural Geography* 7(2), 153–177.
- Atkinson, D., Hurst, J., Nicol, S. and Turner, A. 2008. M74 Completion, Phase 2 Archaeological Mitigation Work Package 5: The Lower English Buildings, Govan Ironworks Foundry and Cathcart Road West Archaeological Excavations, Volume 1: Assessment Report. Unpublished report.
- Beck, W. and Somerville, M. 2005. Conversations between disciplines: Historical archaeology and oral history at Yarrowarra. *World Archaeology* 37(3), 468–483.
- Belford, P. 2003. Forging ahead in Coalbrookdale: Historical archaeology at the Upper Forge. *Industrial Archaeology Review* 25(1), 59–62.
- Belford, P. and Ross, R.A. 2004. Industry and domesticity: Exploring historical archaeology in the Ironbridge Gorge. *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 38(2), 215–225.
- Casella, E.C. and Croucher, S.K. 2010. *The Alderley Sandhills Project: An Archaeology of Community Life in (Post-) Industrial England*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- DalGLISH, C. 2004. M74 Completion: Cultural Heritage Evaluation, Phase II, Part 1, Research Context, GUARD. Unpublished report.
- Drew, D. 2011. *The Glasgow We Used to Know: The Archaeology of the M74 Motorway Completion Project in Glasgow and South Lanarkshire*. Edinburgh, HAPCA.
- Gillott, E. 2010. A cast iron legacy: Remembering the roots of an industrial village in Nottinghamshire. In Belford, P., Palmer, M. and White, R. (eds), *Footprints of Industry: Papers from the 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference at Coalbrookdale 3–7 June 2009*. BAR British Series 523. Oxford, Archaeopress, 107–114.

- Lyons, N., Dawson, P., Walls, M., Uluadluak, D., Angalik, L., Kalluak, M., Kigusiutuak, P., Kiniski, L., Keretak, J. and Suluk, L. 2010. Person, place, memory, thing: How Inuit Elders are informing archaeological practice in the Canadian North. *Canadian Journal of Archaeology* 34, 1–31.
- Mayne, A. 2011. Beyond metrics: Reappraising York's Hungate "slum". *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15(4), 553–562.
- Morton, D., Walker, D. and Gardner, L. 2008. M74 Public Archaeology Programme Evaluation Report. Unpublished report.
- Moshenska, G. 2007. Oral history in historical archaeology: Excavating sites of memory. *Oral History* (Spring 2007), 91–97.
- Riley, M. and Harvey, D. 2005. Landscape archaeology, heritage and the community in Devon: An oral history approach. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 11(4), 269–288.
- Scottish Oral History Centre Archives/023/23, M74 Oral History Project, interview with Marion Neil, Glasgow, 2008.
- Scottish Oral History Centre Archives/023/23, M74 Oral History Project, interview with Christina Wilson, 2008.
- Scottish Oral History Centre Archives/023/23, M74 Oral History Project, interview with Jane Sutherland, 2008.
- Wilson, V. 2007. *Rich in All But Money: Life in Hungate 1900–1938*. Oral History Series 1. York, York Archaeological Trust.

# *AP: Online Journal in Public Archaeology*

## Editors:

Jaime Almansa Sánchez  
Elena Papagiannopoulou

## Assistant Editors:

Dominic Walker  
Amanda Erickson Harvey  
Kaitlyn T. Goss

## Reviews Editor:

Alexandra Ion

## Assistant Production Editor:

Alejandra Galmés Alba

## Edited by:

JAS Arqueología S.L.U.  
Website: [www.jasarqueologia.es](http://www.jasarqueologia.es)  
Email: [jasarqueologia@gmail.com](mailto:jasarqueologia@gmail.com)  
Address: Plaza de Mondariz, 6, 28029 - Madrid (Spain)

--

Cover Image: *Rainford 155 working shot* (National Museums Liverpool)

Copyright © 2014 JAS Arqueología S.L.U. (edition) & Authors (content)

ISSN: 2171-6315

## Quotation:

Massheder-Rigby, K. 2014. Digging up memories: Collaborations between archaeology and oral history to investigate the industrial housing experiences. *AP Journal* SV 1, 61-75.

AP Journal is a peer-reviewed journal devoted exclusively to Public Archaeology. It is freely distributed online on the Website:

[www.arqueologiapublica.es](http://www.arqueologiapublica.es)

You can also follow us on:

## Blogger:



<http://arqueologiapublica.blogspot.com/>

## Twitter:



<http://twitter.com/APjournal>

## Facebook:



<http://www.facebook.com/APJournal>