

Upgrade: Research Proposal

Working Title:

Memory, Resistance, and Regeneration: A Merseyside Town in the Age of De-industrialisation, St. Helens 1968-2018

Introduction to Field of Study and Research Aims

My PhD research concerns ordinary people's memories of the period commonly referred to as de-industrialisation. Combining oral history and documentary evidence, my project examines, via a case study of the former industrial town of St. Helens, Britain's industrial decline and its impact on those most directly affected by it, i.e., the workers and the residents of former industrial towns. In particular, my project explores the links between people's memories of the time period, attempts to resist de-industrialisation, and moves towards (urban) regeneration. My project will, to paraphrase Charles Forman, make the masses the subjects rather than the objects of historical inquiry. In concentrating its geographical scope on a particular town, it follows Leif Jerram's call for the 'where' to be put back into history, a call born out of the notion that urban spaces, as well as the people in them, have agency.

In recent years, the decline of industrial communities has become an increasingly popular subject, for instance Alice Mah's exploration of industrial ruination and place attachment in her books *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place* and *Port Cities and Global Legacies*, or Jim Tomlinson's proposition that the impact of de-industrialisation on the shape of Britain's labour market is the key 'meta-narrative' for British post-war history. Older works on socio-economic decline, meanwhile, such as Ray Pahl's seminal ethnographic study of the Isle of Sheppey, *Divisions of Labour*, have been re-edited and re-released. Widening social inequalities and the unskilled, unstable, and often uninspiring nature of many service sector jobs have contributed to a vogue for inquiries into Britain's growing social inequality, with certain works – perhaps most notably Owen Jones' *Chavs* and Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level* – capturing the imagination of the wider public. Yet, the *British Social Attitudes* survey of 2016 found that as many people now as in 1983 identify with the label 'working class'.

This apparently consistent popularity of the term 'working class' in an era of declining industrial jobs appears contradictory. Certainly, it implies that both the concept of de-industrialisation and the reasons for class attachment are more complex than they initially seem. It raises the question of why the term 'working class' persists and who are the people identifying with it. Is it simply a reflection of the evolution of the labour market? The recent *Great British Class*

Survey successfully proposed more modern alternatives to the label 'working class' (such as 'precariat' and 'emergent service class'), whilst Jonathan Gershuny talked as early as 1993 of the emergence of a service sector proletariat. Or does it lead us to question the extent to which ordinary people, particularly those from former industrial areas, have accepted de-industrialisation? Is the continued popularity of the term 'working class' a reflection of a desire to preserve something of the industrial past, such as a sense of identity or a sense of community? Could it be tantamount to a continued resistance to the ravages and perceived injustices of de-industrialisation?

Methodology

I believe that an effective way of addressing these questions is to examine how residents of former industrial towns remember the period associated with de-industrialisation. As already mentioned, I will pursue my inquiry through the study of the town of St. Helens, focusing on the period from 1968 to 2018 (between the town's 100th and 150th anniversaries). St. Helens' former industrial diversity (primarily coal mining and glass manufacturing, but also pharmaceuticals, railways, brewing, and chemicals), its relatively large population, and its geographical location in a former industrial heartland make it a suitable choice. Located between Liverpool and Manchester, home to Britain's first canal, and with abundant natural resources such as coal, sand, and fireclay, St. Helens' development was almost entirely due to its role in the industrial revolution. In addition, very little has been written about St. Helens, particularly about its period of industrial decline; the two main studies of its industrial past (Barker & Harris, 1959; Forman, 1979) deal with the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The sheer range of industries formerly present in St. Helens makes the question of its decline all the more interesting. It was not the closure of one pit or one factory that hit the town's workforce – it would be reasonable to assume that the effects of one closure could have been absorbed by other mines or factories in St. Helens and the surrounding towns – but a fairly rapid loss of the vast majority of its industries.

The best way to access the point-of-view of ordinary people is through their own voice. As such, this project will make use of oral sources, including face-to-face interviews, a variety of participatory activities, and existing oral recordings, alongside the available documentary evidence and secondary literature (see below section 'Sources and Fieldwork' and attached Bibliography). The oral sources will hopefully reveal not only *what* people remember, but *how* they remember these things and *why* they remember them in a particular way. As Alessandro Portelli explains, oral history tells us both about the facts of events and about their meaning: 'not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did'. I hope that by focusing on the peoples' voices, the final written product will be something the interviewees (and others who have experienced de-industrialisation) can relate to.

An individual's memories reveal much more than just their personal experience. Memories

are influenced, for instance, by the recollections and experiences of friends, family and colleagues, and the public opinion shaped by the media, politicians etc. My project will not only reveal individual narratives of the events of the period – enabling comparison of these individual accounts with the existing documentary evidence and secondary literature, and potentially challenging these – but will grapple with the psychological, emotional, and subjective aspects of people's recollections, bridging oral history's original purpose of gathering new stories of the past and its more recent turn towards emotions. It will bring in scholarship such as Daniel Kahneman's work on the 'experiencing self' versus the 'remembering self' and Gillian Cohen's writing on 'everyday' memory. The influence of others on people's memories, meanwhile, will lead towards concepts such as Maurice Halbwachs' 'collective memory', an area scholars of industrial decline have engaged with actively; Mah, for example, prefers the term 'living memory'. Conceivably, this could be extended to encompass ideas on the impact of others on an individual's behaviour such as Thaler and Sunstein's nudge theory (particularly its social proof heuristic), as well as research into peer effect, social networks, and the influence of habit.

In studying an ongoing process – post-industrial transformation – the project is necessarily as rooted in the present as in the past. Hence it must also study the physical and human regeneration of industrial towns as they enter the post-industrial world. The physical regeneration, i.e. aspects of urban policy such as housing developments, re-purposing industrial sites etc., will bring in aspects of environmental and urban policy history, taking us towards the works of scholars such as John Sheail, Andrew Tallon, and BW Clapp. Literature about specific elements of physical regeneration, such as the greenfield versus brownfield debate or the evolution of land reclamation policies, will be explored alongside case studies to do with St. Helens and the surrounding area.

Attitudes towards regeneration have been shown by scholars such as Mah and Valerie Walkerdine to be linked to another key theme of de-industrialisation: resistance. Before the industrial jobs disappeared, resistance manifested itself in the form of strikes, protests, sit-ins, support groups, and Trade Unions. As de-industrialisation gave way to post-industrial transition, memories of the industrial past and the resistance to its decline have been projected onto attitudes towards urban regeneration projects, a key policy area since the 1980s. The attitudes of residents towards regeneration projects, explored in the oral interviews, through the local press, and the activities of local campaign groups, will reveal much about the desire to preserve a sense of community spirit, local identity, and a sense of the 'purpose' of the town.

Human regeneration is not just the participation of people in physical regeneration. It is 'regeneration' in a more literal sense, affecting not just former industrial workers, but the new generations growing up in former industrial towns (and newer residents who have moved in following the industrial decline, sometimes as a consequence of regeneration projects). In examining regeneration, I must look not only at transformations of place for the benefit of people but also at transformations undergone by the people in that place. One element of these

transformations is the adaptation of former industrial workers to the decline and post-industrial world, for instance their attempts to retrain and re-find employment. Changes in the nature of the economy, such as the increased presence of the service sector, of female employment, of part-time jobs etc., will also be considered.

I will then extend the analysis beyond those workers and residents of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in order to examine the continued relevance of St. Helens' industrial legacy and of concepts such as working class amongst the town's new generation. In doing so, my project will bridge the work of scholars such as Mah and Walkerdine (focused on former industrial workers) with the attempts of Pahl to include in his analysis an insight into new generations' attitudes towards their present and future prospects. What is the relationship of young people to St. Helens' industrial past? What are their attitudes towards social class? Do these concepts retain relevance for them? After all, in St. Helens, today's schoolchildren have grown up in an era without coal mines (the last two collieries closed in the early 1990s), without Beecham's pharmaceuticals factory (closed 1994), without Vulcan foundry (closed 2002), and with a much reduced glass sector: United Glass closed two plants in 1998 and 2001, whilst Pilkingtons have massively reduced their presence, e.g. the closure of their Triplex safety glass plant in 2006. A key consideration arising from this is that the continued resistance to de-industrialisation visible in current attitudes towards regeneration projects will lessen as memories of the industrial past become more distant and indirect; as they become, in Halbwachs terms, historical rather than autobiographical memories; pieces of history as opposed to true memory, as Pierre Nora would say.

Oral history does not lend itself to precise chapter outlines until such time as the interviews have been completed. To quote Lynn Abrams, 'in doing oral history, the historian sometimes has to restrain the impulse to be a historian at all times [...] move away from the approach that sees oral history merely as a means of answering our pre-prepared research questions'. If an oral interview is to truly fulfil its purpose of going beyond the documentary evidence, the interviewee must be allowed to lead it: their experiences, their narrative, their recollections dictate for them which topics are most important, which moments stand out, which emotions are triggered. The interviewer must guide the interview with a purpose in mind, but pushing the interviewee down pre-prescribed paths or asking leading questions serves only to straitjacket the interview back within the 'pre-existing historical framework' it was meant to overcome.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the themes of memory, resistance to de-industrialisation, and post-industrial physical and human regeneration will feature heavily against the backdrop of industrial decline – though the interviews could lead to a reassessment of their relative importances and/or to new themes being considered. As the study focuses on St. Helens, it will be necessary to provide background and context about the town. Concepts such as de-industrialisation, working class(es), oral history, and memory will require introduction. Areas such as people's relationship with the term working class, social inequalities, community, and place attachment will come up as

part of the analysis of the main themes. People's recounting of their memories of the period will doubtless include recollections of everyday life, such as aspects of the daily routine, socialising and leisure time, the role of family, friends, and colleagues in a person's life, and general evolutions in the make-up of the town, all of which will contribute to a fuller picture of people's understanding of the period. A suggested chapter outline is attached as a separate document.

Sources and Fieldwork

I will use a variety of primary sources in my case study. First and foremost will be the oral sources. As Abrams has commented, oral history has a certain uniqueness because it places the historian in the role of creator as well as analyst of their sources. For my project, I intend to use the following oral/participatory materials:

- Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with people who lived/worked in St. Helens between the 1970s and the turn of the millennium; I will also ask them about the current regeneration attempts in the town. These interviews will follow the guidelines recommended by the Oral History Society. Whilst finding sufficient suitable participants might be a case of trial and error, there are various ways of reaching out towards potential interviewees: local history societies, civic societies, sports and social clubs (including some associated with particular employers), the local paper's local history pages, contacting the interviewees (or descendants thereof) from the 1980s, parents/families of the schoolchildren participants, word of mouth, etc. I intend on commencing these this coming summer.
- 'Imagined futures' essays and quantitative questionnaires with groups of school leavers as part of the section on regeneration. Such essays were used to great effect by Pahl and his team on the Isle of Sheppey: the teenager's projections being based on present context and past experience, their writing about the future in fact reveals much about their current attitudes to the subject matter (in this case, their future prospects, the world of work, and the town they live in).
- Existing oral interviews held in St. Helens' archives (and other centres such as the British Library in London or the Working Class Movements Library in Salford). These will provide not only interesting background about the town, but will also hint at attitudes and perspectives from the time they were recorded – in most cases, 1985, i.e. shortly after the 1984-5 Miners' Strike, which had hit hard in a town so intimately linked to the coal industry and still boasting three working pits (Bold, Sutton Manor, and Parkside). I intend on using these to glean information about the events of the 1970s and 1980s, and then hope to compare them to my own interviews.
- I will also explore the use of qualitative and quantitative questionnaires and small-scale

group workshops. I may, as part of the interviews, use trigger exercises such as prompting people to react to keywords or archive photographs, a strategy used effectively in an oral history project about Liverpool's waterfront and docks area.

As well as these sources, I will use a range of documentary evidence; though works such as Forman's *Industrial Town* or Studs Terkel's *Working* are essentially verbatim reproduction of parts of interviews they conducted, my aim is to use the oral/participatory evidence to go beyond the existing secondary literature and documentary sources and – potentially – challenge them. My documentary evidence will include national sources such as Census reports, NOMIS labour reports, the online HANSARD parliament archive, collections of papers and publications from relevant public figures (e.g. the Margaret Thatcher Foundation), and existing quantitative data in surveys such as British Social Attitudes or the Great British Class Survey. National and, especially, local press will feature heavily, too, for instance publications such as The St. Helens Star, The St. Helens Reporter, The Liverpool Echo, The Liverpool Daily Post, the Wigan Observer, and the Wigan Evening Post.

I will also use resources more intimately linked with industry, such as the Lancashire Mining Museum at Astley, the Working Class Movements Library at Salford, and the Trade Union papers at Warwick's Modern Resource Centre. On top of these will be the local archives to do with St. Helens, many of which are still held in the town. These include an extensive press cuttings archive, business directories, parish registers, electoral rolls, and company archives (e.g. Pilkington Brothers), and more. There are two particularly special collections: a series of essays and theses about diverse aspects of the town (on subjects as wide-ranging as reclaiming despoiled industrial land, charting the chronology of public houses, and discussing the aptness of the town motto *ex terra lucem* ('out of the ground, light') in relation to the town's major industries), and a series of oral interviews conducted with town residents in the 1980s. A more detailed bibliography is attached as a separate document.

2,754 words.