

History Postgraduate Conference

Proposed Title –
'Resisting De-industrialisation Through Memory:
A Case Study of St. Helens, Merseyside'

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The last forty years in Britain are commonly considered an age of de-industrialisation, a phenomenon which for some 'provides the best underpinning narrative' for Britain's recent past. Yet, despite the all-too-evident industrial decline, a recent *British Social Attitudes* study claims that as many people today as in 1983 self-identify as working class. How do we explain this contradiction? Why does the term 'working class' persist, who are the people who appropriate it, and is it the most appropriate term to describe them?

One way of answering such questions is to examine how residents of former industrial towns, such as St. Helens, have experienced de-industrialisation and the transition into the post-industrial world. This paper explores how this can be achieved through individual people's memories, gleaned via an oral history approach: *what* do they remember and, most importantly, *how* and *why*? In making ordinary people (the 'who') from a former industrial town (the 'where') the subjects of our inquiry, this approach focuses on the people and the places most directly affected by recent socio-economic changes. It enables comparison of people's memories – part lived experience of the period, part bias of the remembering self – with the “official” sources and attitudes towards Britain's recent past. Ultimately, this paper will argue that the memories and emotions linked to these experiences influence the continued popularity of the term 'working class', and that these memories, and the identities they construct and protect, represent a final form of resistance to the ravages of industrial decline.