



Economic
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Research Council



Set in stone?: tracing changing cultural & natural landscapes on the Isle of Portland

ESRC DTP Strategic Joint Studentship

Nottingham Trent University and University of Birmingham

The Midlands Graduate School is an accredited Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP). One of 15 such partnerships in the UK, the Midlands Graduate School is a collaboration between the Universities of Warwick, Birmingham, Nottingham, Aston Leicester, Loughborough, De Montfort and Nottingham Trent.

We are now inviting applications for an ESRC Strategic Joint Studentship between Nottingham Trent University (where the student will be registered) and the University of Birmingham to commence in October 2024.

This PhD is a unique interdisciplinary project working at the intersection of the fields of economic and social history, memory studies, and geomorphology. The research will examine the way cultural and social memories are linked to the landscape and the way the landscape preserves “memories” of its natural evolution and human influence in its topography.

The Person: We are looking for someone with intellectual curiosity who is open to working with different fields and methodologies, with a background in social science, geography, geology or ecology. Some experience with quantitative and qualitative methods is desirable. Must be comfortable conducting interviews and undertaking public engagement activities.

Study Area: The primary case study will be the Isle of Portland (Dorset), which has a long history of stone quarrying/mining. The built and natural environment and its communities reflect distinctive traces of extracting and building, with changing physical and social landscapes inextricably linked with the stone industry. Portland has been a witness to key geopolitical shifts due to its strategic position and has recently experienced a drastic socio-economic transformation, including a move from open quarrying to mining. This has meant the creation of vast underground spaces, alongside the historic quarry sites – some utilised as public spaces and artistic venues, some sitting idle. The changes have brought considerable social deprivation and demographic challenges. The unique island environment with high biodiversity and (post)industrial spaces, the economic and social heritage of the stone industry, and Portland’s relatively marginal status make it an ideal case study, but its insights will be applicable to other former industrial sites, where rich histories of landscapes and societies shape each other.

Key research questions:

1. How do local communities and individuals understand post-industrial/mining environments and how does this relate to the physical form of the landscape?
2. What narratives about landscapes are passed across generations and socio-economic/cultural boundaries, how does this occur, and what influence do they have?
3. Where are there overlaps/disconnects between knowledge and memories preserved in communities and the landscape itself, and how might these be blended and harnessed to positively impact communities?

This project will offer unparalleled insight into how cultural memory is intertwined with the development of industry and transformation of the natural world. The project will innovate by asking how scientific knowledge of landscapes interacts with cultural knowledge, and generate deeper understanding by layering these together.

Methodology and techniques: The PhD student will employ archival research to trace the historical record of natural and human engagement with stone on Portland and conduct oral history interviews with stakeholders and community members. They will use terrain mapping data and techniques along with geographical information systems (training will be provided) to create 3D digital terrain models of former industrial and community spaces. Insights from archival and interview research can then be linked to specific places within these 3D maps layering cultural knowledge onto the physical landscape. Insights and outputs from these methods will feed into community engagement and relational data collection events (potentially including 3D printing models of the landscapes) with the goal of developing a novel understanding of historical and contemporary spatial relationships. Crucially, this research's output will provide scalable theoretical and methodological approaches, as it will help recognise the ecological, economic, social, and cultural value of such post-industrial spaces.

The supervision team brings a wealth of experience in interdisciplinary research and has a strong track-record of successful PhD students. First supervisor Jenny Wüstenberg is a political scientist and memory scholar, who has strong connections on the Isle of Portland. Simon Dixon is an interdisciplinary geographer with a background in geomorphology and a range of innovative interdisciplinary research collaborations looking at the feedbacks between people and landscapes. Natalie Braber is a sociolinguist with extensive expertise in mining language, intangible heritage and oral history interviewing.

Application Process

To be considered for this PhD, please complete the strategic Joint Studentship application form [available online here](#). Please upload an anonymised CV and cover letter as part of the online application process. Shortlisted applicants will also be required to provide transcripts and two references.

Application deadline: 26th February

Midlands Graduate School ESRC DTP

Our ESRC studentships cover fees at the home rate, a maintenance stipend, and extensive support for research training, as well as research activity support grants. Support is available to both home and international applicants. For further details, visit: www.mgsdtp.ac.uk/studentships/eligibility/.

Informal enquiries about the research or the Department of History prior to application can be directed to jenny.wustenberg@ntu.ac.uk.