

Tobacco Memories in Bristol

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Note: This version of the paper is still a working draft.

How does a city remember its past? And in particular, how does a city deal with the not-so-glamorous episodes in its history? While scholars such as Sharon Macdonald and her work on Nuremberg offer a stunning and detailed example of how a city might deal with an aberration in its history, my overall research seeks to investigate how a city understands and represents episodes in its history which may be less of an *aberration*, but are perhaps more of an overall trend which fits into a more complex national pattern.

I am currently in the second year of my PhD, and therefore, I'm right in the middle of my fieldwork year in Bristol. Therefore everything I'm sharing with you today is all part of an ongoing project rather than a final analysis, and I enthusiastically welcome any questions or feedback you have to offer at the end.

My broad research interest pertains to how we know, understand, and talk about imperialism in England today, and to focus this at a more ethnographic level, I'm focusing my fieldwork specifically on the city of Bristol, just an hour or so up the road from here in Exeter. What I've found in the course of my fieldwork to date is an interesting parallel with how it seems empire and tobacco—both historically significant to England, and specifically here, to Bristol—are publicly 'dealt with' in terms of memory. There is of course, arguably a strong link between the two, but for my research, I'm interested in the sort of visibility/invisibility dynamic in heritage and memory practices.

To provide some historical context: Bristol, a rather wealthy city of over 430,000 has long had an intimate link with Britain and the Empire. Indeed, not only did John Cabot

depart from Bristol to discover Newfoundland in 1497 during the ‘age of exploration’—which is arguably a precursor to empire—but Bristol itself accumulated vast wealth from the trade of slaves and industries such as sugar, chocolate, and most prominently, tobacco.

Indeed, Bristol-based Imperial Tobacco is still the world’s 4th largest tobacco company, and in 1909, its then chairman, Henry Overton Wills III founded the University of Bristol. Although tobacco manufacturing has ceased entirely in Bristol since the early 1990s, as recently as the 1960s, Imperial Tobacco (with its flagship brand Wills) employed as many as 10,000 workers, primarily in their factories in the South Bristol neighbourhoods of Bedminster, Ashton, and Southville.

A few material vestiges of tobacco in Bristol remain: the remnants of the Wills factory which are now mostly a 24 hour ASDA, the Old Tobacco Factory (redeveloped as a café, bar, and theatre), the bonded warehouses at the end of the Cumberland Basin (one of which houses the city archives), Imperial’s subtle current headquarters, their defunct headquarters from a failed utopian development in the 1970s, and a prominent monument to the city’s most prominent tobacco baron, Wills Memorial Building at the University of Bristol, dedicated to its founder, Henry Overton Wills III. However, the significance of the industry in the city is, largely remarkably invisible. For what remains of the industry is rarely, if ever, explicitly labelled or recognised for its connection to the tobacco industry or the empire in which the industry found its roots (pun intended since the tobacco came from the American South and Southern Africa). Indeed, the massive, 9 storey tobacco bonds wouldn’t easily be recognised for their purpose without some external knowledge of their history.

However, the key to this paper is my two key interlocutors and their respective organisations. My key informant and collaborative partner for this project has been Simon

Birch, current Chairman of the Bristol Civic Society. The Civic Society is a citizens' organisation of over 400 members spread throughout the city. In particular, some of its main interests pertain to heritage, conservation and preservation, urban planning, and sustainability—especially in light of Bristol being named European Green Capital 2015. Demographically, the society's members are spread throughout the city, and they are politically varied, and as such, the society rarely puts forth statements of a political nature. I am told that many members tend to be middle-aged to recently retired and largely middle class. The society puts on monthly events and lectures, selected by an Events Committee, and due to its decentralised nature, demographic diversity, and fairly large size, many members do not personally interact regularly. Most of these events draw crowds between 40 and 100, and one this past March (which drew around 50 people) which focused on tobacco is discussed here.

Informants

Simon Birch, my main informant, is the current Chairman of the Bristol Civic Society who recently completed an MA in Historical Archaeology at Bristol University, where his dissertation focussed on the tobacco industry and its memory in Bristol through a focus on materiality and built environment. Not a native Bristolian, he has been in the city for almost 30 years, working as an urban planner. His interest in Bristol and tobacco was largely sparked by his studies in historical archaeology and a knowledge of tobacco's importance to Bristol.

We have met regularly since my arrival in Bristol in August 2014 to discuss our research, and in particular, what possibilities and opportunities may be available to investigate how the city remembers one of its most prominent and significant industries.

Additionally, Helen Thomas, a retired civil servant with a speciality in oral history among the working class in South Wales, has recently undertaken a project with two colleagues focussing on the lives of the women who worked in Bristol's tobacco factories in the mid 20th century. Her interest on tobacco heritage has been sparked by her childhood growing up in Bristol and having a holiday job at one of the Wills factories, whilst also noting that many of the 'yummy mummies at the café in the Old Tobacco Factory' seemed to wonder why the place was called the 'Tobacco Factory.'

These two informants and interviews with them form the core of this paper, and have worked them because of their specific interest in tobacco heritage, and I am grateful in particular for their willingness and accessibility in sharing data.

Helen and Simon have conducted the majority of their respective research on tobacco heritage in years previous, and I have come into contact with them as they decide what, if anything to do with their respective projects. Their primary outputs for their research have so far been textual: Simon submitted his MA Thesis in 2011, and Helen and her colleagues have locally published a booklet on the Bedminster Tobacco Women, combining a sociological and historical approach to investigate the women's experiences and their lives, selling two hundred copies. Their presentations to the Bristol Civic Society this past March have been another key output, disseminating and discussing their work with the attendees of the forum. Simon also has a couple of tobacco heritage walks scheduled for this coming May which I plan to participate in and attend as part of my wider doctoral research. He uses a route he devised as part of his MA thesis in 2011, starting at one of the original sites of production in the city, and moving along to the Wills factories through the course of the walk, whilst providing a spoken explanation along the walk. In the course of our conversations, he says that his walks have been attended by approximately 50 people,

including some of his informants from interviews during his thesis, many of whom have a personal affiliation with tobacco in Bristol as ex-Wills employees. He notes that much of the response and feedback he's had from these walks has been positive and enthusiastic, with many participants feeling that they've either learned something new, or been taken down memory lane to a different time in Bristol's history. Similarly, Helen has a forthcoming project in cooperation with the Bedminster Community Partnership to design a heritage map of Bedminster, with the intended output being a two sided document with a numbered map on one side and a description of the numbered points on the reverse. Although tobacco sites (many of which are no longer remnant) are indicated on the map, they are not the sole focus of that particular project.

However, both Simon and Helen have also noted what seems to be a prominent gap in the city's memory. As Simon paraphrased from one of his own informants during our first meeting, 'It seems as though tobacco has been airbrushed from the city's history.' Despite tobacco's material and economic prominence throughout the city's history, there's not only a lack of awareness among many of the city's residents—especially young generations and 'incomers' in the city—but also what seems to be a lack of acknowledgement in public memory and commemoration. In our meetings, Simon continuously notes the absence of more than a token display at the local museum, a display which doesn't seem to do justice to the scale and importance in the city's history and its social and built landscapes. He began his presentation this past March with a photograph of the solitary display case about tobacco in the city, and the accompanying caption of less than 80 words. Helen too noted the lack of material on display, whilst also noting the extensive but yet uncatalogued archive of thousands of photographs pertaining to tobacco in the council's possession. However,

due to manpower and funding constraints in a climate of fiscal austerity, this project seems to be one of the council's lesser concerns.

Indeed, it seems that whether due to changing attitudes towards smoking the in recent decades, the industry's decline, or a general lack of interest in changing the status quo, the industry's role in the city's history is left invisible, or at most, implicit as opposed to explicit. In a sense then, this memory is often exclusive to those already aware of it, as opposed to it being drawn to attention to incomers and visitors to the city.

Reflections

Working with Simon and Helen draws attention to the opportunities that smaller groups with heritage concerns like Helen's study or Simon and the Civic Society can engage in; indeed, they often serve a purpose in discussing historical episodes or concerns which larger groups such as museums and city councils may find more challenging to display and may possibly omit or leave invisible. Indeed, despite the economic role of tobacco in Bristol, its negative stigma has provided significant complications: is tobacco something which the city really wants to be remembered for? Surely, this is and has been debated by many parties throughout the city; and groups such as these demonstrate both potential in bringing stories and episodes to light which would otherwise be left invisible. Their interactions with their audiences at talks and walks also serves a dual purpose: they invite more informants to contribute their narrative, whilst also providing information which makes certain aspects of the city's history visible to others; aspects which listeners often share and communicate with others, thereby perpetuating the visibility of these heritage sites through informal channels. Yet, due to their small size and limited reach, they lack the ability to compose any sort of unified narrative which takes hold in the city's public memory.

Needless to say, groups like these have been incredibly helpful informants in my research as they, as heritage actors who have compiled their own information and are in the midst of wider processes of constructing and negotiating the city's historical narratives. Additionally, they serve as useful informants for an anthropologist, providing alternate perspectives to dominant and/or official narratives. Indeed, where anthropologists of memory and heritage often focus much of their energy and attention on museums and official narratives, there remains much untapped potential in investigating local history projects such as these, especially when exploring some of the more difficult or contentious aspects of history.