

Narrating Places - Blurring Boundaries: Co-creating Digital Histories of Place

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Open-access digital history and heritage websites are changing the way urban histories are formed, narrated, circulated, and applied. They exhibit tensions between authorised and ‘unauthorised’ heritage discourse. This chapter is concerned with the challenges encountered by the historians of the Survey of London as we have sought new ways to access the diverse histories of Whitechapel, East London. It will contextualise our own use of experimental digital research and dissemination methods, considering how a new online platform designed for the making of history blurs boundaries between the sorts of people engaged in place-based research initiatives. I suggest that projects like the Survey’s ‘Histories of Whitechapel’ allow ‘professional’ historians to pay especial attention to the voices of people staking a claim in the future of urban areas currently experiencing large-scale change, positively unsettling assumed roles in the negotiation between official and unofficial histories. In bringing together a wide-range of contributions from people whose relationship to Whitechapel varies substantially, the Survey’s project therefore has the capacity to be read as a source for emotion, revealing the personal and communal value of local sites.

The Survey of London is a historical research project purposed to record London’s built environment and communicate this to a wide audience through accessibly written publications. As a long-running project of public history tracing its origins to 1894, the Survey’s recent incorporation of digital methods has been shaped by its own particular practices and passion for place. All of its work, spanning over a century, is grounded in the sensibilities of its founder, C. R. Ashbee, the Arts and Crafts designer, architect and social reformer. He pleaded that ‘the object of the work we have before us, is to make nobler and more humanly enjoyable the life of the great city whose record we seek to mark down; to preserve of it for her children and those yet to come whatever is best in her

past or fairest in her present ... and to stimulate amongst her citizens that historic and social conscience which to all great communities is their most sacred possession' (Ashbee, 1900, pp. xxv).

Survey traditions have evolved over time and continue to do so, with the adoption of digital methods for the construction and communication of research enabling far greater public access to the making of its histories than before. The potential for this history to at once reveal and strengthen present-day attachments to place have increased. Although 'capturing' emotion is not within the formal remit of our task, affects and emotions are always present in the work we do. Aiming to be geographically balanced in its treatment of London, the Survey has been engaged in writing discrete building histories of East London parishes or individual sites, now in the borough Tower Hamlets, seven times in its history prior to the Whitechapel project, which began in 2016, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council for three years. Each of the East London volumes represents a subtle shift in the historians' relationship to citizens experiencing substantial, imminent change in their immediate built environment. From closely observed illustrations of everyday street scenes, to veiled hints of the responses of locals to change, and emotive quotations from observers, the publications are diverse in the ways and extent to which they convey the lived experiences in, and emotional attachments to, place. The Whitechapel project marks a departure however, for it obliquely brings out into the open complex meaning-making processes which previously happened 'behind the scenes'.

The 'fire-fighting' tradition in the Survey is a strong one, and the selection of which areas to address, in what order, has been heavily influenced by the degree to which change, architectural or social, was impending. Begun at a time when many historically significant buildings in East London were under urgent threat of demolition, the Survey published its first monograph, a record of the Trinity Almshouses in Mile End Road, in 1896. The Survey has produced full volumes on Spitalfields and Mile End New Town in 1957 and two volumes on Poplar, Blackwall and the Isle of

Dogs in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Sheppard, 1957; Porter, 1994) when eighteenth and nineteenth century building fabric in these areas was increasingly endangered or actually disappearing before the eyes of historians. In 2019, Whitechapel is in the throes of an unprecedented transformation of its built environment, with new skyscrapers obliterating historic street patterns and building scales. In the midst of this change, in the wider public realm and media, the perspectives of residents, in all their variety, tend to have been muffled by vast quantities of unrepresentative tales of place circulated by outsiders, an unfairness only accentuated by online conversations and clickbait revolving around Jack the Ripper, ‘no-go’ areas of Sharia law and the Whitechapel fatberg. Drawing on a narrow range of historical narratives and stereotypes, many have spoken *into* Whitechapel. *Histories of Whitechapel* seeks to enable those of Whitechapel to speak *out* about their experience on the ground and their relation to the multifarious pasts of the area, in order that the expertise and place attachments of local stakeholders in Whitechapel is recognised and given value. The role of the public historian has therefore expanded beyond simply the production and communication of history, to include a participatory approach at the research stage, factoring the development of new methods of outreach, such as the creation of publicly accessible digital spaces.

The *Histories of Whitechapel* project is centred on a map-based website - an experiment for the Survey. The publication of ‘traditional’ Survey volumes will follow, shaped by the material gathered via the website, which is of especial concern here, for it represents a significant innovation in our methodology. Every building in the parish of Whitechapel as of 2016 has been represented in plan form on a map, with the capacity for draft texts, notes, photographs, videos, quotations, oral-history transcripts and drawings all to be fixed to these sites. Notably however, the website collects and disseminates documents submitted not only by the Survey’s historians, who are the website editors, but also by the public. The range of submission options allows for different tenors of emotion and lived experience to be registered, giving agency to contributors and respecting their

preferred means of communication. The content of each site has been intended to develop over the three-year lifespan of the project; contributions from the public on any aspect of Whitechapel's history have been welcomed. Now, after three years, the website has officially closed, and the process of editing the full range of its content down into a couple of 'standard' format Survey volumes has begun.

The Survey has always been careful to avoid the rhetoric and tone of ivory-tower history (Guillery, 2018) and has been doing what we now regard to be 'public history' effectively since its inception. Previously associated to the London municipal authorities and English Heritage, since 2013 it has found a home in a public university, University College London, with a UK government Arts and Humanities Research Council research grant expanding the Survey's capacity to include a broader range of voices in its histories. Experimentation with digital methods has been made more possible because of its new institutional home, allowing for the website to be developed in partnership with the College's Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis. The Survey seeks to produce histories that can be accessed and read by the broadest possible audience, with the caveat that it is a sort of 'official' history given its lineages, reputation and affiliations. At a time when parts of London are experiencing 'super-gentrification', the combination of voices and authors brought together in the Histories of Whitechapel project reflects a desire to wrestle with and acknowledge change in the built environment, marking down individual and collective responses (Butler, Lees, 2006).

This chapter begins by looking back at the Survey's historiography in relation to urban regeneration in East London. Recognising that Histories of Whitechapel is one of a number of recent online projects that invite participation in relation to the built environment, it sets out the particularities of the present project within the Survey's trajectory of iterative change, positioning it as the most significant shift in our methodology to date. The second part of the chapter critically reflects on the digital methods we have used as public historians and their ability to reveal individuals'

attachments to historic places. The website is considered here as an archive, invoking the practical and theoretical complexities of that endeavour. The chapter posits that digital history, heritage research and dissemination methods have the power to reveal place attachments and specifically emotional relations to place, while also subverting traditional hierarchies of historical knowledge.

Locating Protest

Beginning as a personal project of conviction, the Survey's first publication was authored principally by C. R. Ashbee and was strongly inflected with his Romantic socialism. In support of his cause, he mobilized a group of volunteers to document the architecture and social life of the Trinity Almshouses, located just outside of the parish of Whitechapel and then under threat of demolition. The tone and character of the resulting publication reflected Ashbee's sensitivity to the communal value of buildings and his strength of feeling towards the unique qualities of the Almshouses themselves. He admitted, 'There is a peculiar, and, in many cases, a personal interest in the variety of objects that at present form this little living museum on the Waste' (Ashbee, 1896, p. 18). Ashbee saw embodied within the Trinity Almshouses expressions of charity and sociability of national importance, a view that brought him into conflict with the commercial and financial forces he saw as dominating his time. He was also a citizen-historian and active campaigner. Although the core of the publication was presented as an 'objective' record of Whitechapel, a sense of protest was woven throughout the short volume, exemplified most clearly in the emotive language used by Ashbee and his circle. Yet the voices of those actually living in and alongside the Almshouses were absent, even if many local people were thoughtfully rendered through illustrations (see Figure 1). The conservation campaign proved a success: the Trinity Almshouses still stand today. In 2018, however, a 28-storey tower was proposed for the area which would visually dominate and physically overshadow the historic Almshouses if approved.

The Trinity Almshouses study focused on one individual building, but the mainstay of what was to become known as the Survey of London lay in its assessments of the built fabric of whole parishes. The first of these, Bromley-by-Bow, was published soon after the Almshouses had been saved from the wrecking ball. The volume re-asserted the Survey's affection for 'the great East End', with the issue of housing conditions for the urban poor a top priority (Ashbee, 1900, p. xiii). It also suggested that although 'the public should be first consulted when any question arose that affected the history or dignity of London', decisions for the future of the parish should ultimately rest with the London County Council (Ashbee, 1900, p. xxv). A focus on the mechanisms of municipal governance was not the intention of Survey, and even when association to the LCC was codified in 1910, its formal connection to the structure of local government did little to draw those involved into a directly campaigning role. This institutional context placed the Survey more conclusively within the realm of 'official' history, positioning it in closer proximity to decision-makers with power over planning, but informing rather than directing them. The Survey's early endeavours reflected how a select group of specialists sought to respect the history of the areas on which they were working.

By the middle of the twentieth century, when it returned to East London to examine Spitalfields and Mile End New Town, the Survey had shifted significantly in how it articulated large-scale urban change. Writing in 1984, architectural historian, John Summerson (1965, p. 4) looked back to his discovery of the Survey of London some sixty years earlier, considering that 'since those early days there has been a profound movement, both intellectual and emotional, in the relationship of Londoners to their city'. Summerson understood that conceptual developments in architectural history as well as physical changes in the post-war post-Blitz city were substantial, and he identified the Survey as an active participant in the negotiation of these shifts. His comments support the view that urban historians began to move away from a near exclusive focus on the rational to embrace the power of emotional responses to place. Influenced by historian H. J. Dyos (1961) and his work on

nineteenth-century built fabric, the Survey busied itself with buildings of a more everyday nature and the 'ordinary' agents of change aligned to this. Although this was an important innovation, the sense of radical urgency in Ashbee's opinionated writing was left behind. The objective reporting tone of Survey publications may have led readers to assume that historians stood personally aloof to the significant developments they were observing, even though greater numbers of sites, increasingly recent in build date, were being examined more comprehensively than before.

The tendency to privilege a rational and dispassionate analysis and communication of sources was in keeping with wider disciplinary traditions of the 'academic historian', generally uncomfortable with the idea of emotion as a legitimate theme. In spite of this, it was evident that Survey staff were in fact closely engaged with the circumstances of residents and other stakeholders on the ground; the preface of Volume 27 gratefully acknowledged the kindness of 'all those other persons, too numerous to mention individually, who have placed their time, their papers or their property at the disposal of the Survey' (Sheppard, 1957, preface). But only the faintest implication of any emotional attachment to place entered the published text, the focus being on observation and description of the material facts of destruction and rebuilding, as well as surveying historic documents produced or held by local authorities and building owners. The everyday interactions between people and the built environment were depicted in accompanying sketched illustrations rather than in the Survey text itself (Sheppard, 1957, p. 266).

Volumes 43 and 44, which addressed a vast swathe of the industrial docklands ear-marked for significant commercial redevelopment in 1982, maintained a similar restraint to that of thirty years earlier. A sense of the experience of the historian as a living, breathing person was however intertwined with some more objective descriptions. That said, in a sort of revival of Ashbee's practice, emotive quotations of the distant and more recent past were once more integrated within the text, allowing for a greater range of voices to be worked into the historical record (Porter, 1994,

pp. 518-528). Indications of the angry protest of residents were acknowledged, but the constraints of volume length resulted in the voices of those living there being grouped together and summarized, so that their potency and pointed critique was less pronounced.

Since the Spitalfields and Poplar volumes, the number of buildings recorded by the Survey has continued to increase, but alternative perspectives on those buildings have been given minimal attention. The Survey's recent approach to Whitechapel has been led by the ambition to write about every existing building in the area, no matter how cursorily. It has sought to partner with as many organisations and people as possible in describing Whitechapel's built environment and giving it meaning. The online platform is critical to this endeavour. Our research and public engagement activity have been centred on the specially developed map-based website, reflecting hundreds of sites in the area as they stood in 2016. *Surveyoflondon.org* does not prioritise one building over another in presentation, and in pursuit of a more active agenda of co-creating urban history, it aims to give voice to many rather than to a singular authority, and so generate a multi-vocal record of Whitechapel's streets and buildings.

Due to its contested histories, Whitechapel is an especially appropriate place to invite this sort of participation and to think about emotional responses. We have often found sites to have been redeveloped between three to five times over the centuries, and that is not to mention the adaptations and extensions made to these constructions. The shift in scale of buildings adds to the density of potential stories relating to any one site, and difficulty in their recovery and placement. On the western extremities of the parish, for example, monolithic office blocks and, increasingly, residential towers have replaced a multitude of three-and-four-storey houses and businesses, frequently obliterating whole streets. Not only is the new landscape somewhat disorientating to historians attempting to thread hundreds of years of history together on sites that no longer bear any resemblance to what came before, the change is almost inevitably more disorientating for residents

and stakeholders with memories of what came before. Opening out the historical project to invite the contributions of a wider group of researchers, contributors and users presents fresh opportunities in fairly portraying Whitechapel's diverse past in the context of its present. In different forums, many local people are seeking to make sense of their experience of this rapidly transforming place, often speaking through an emotional register. In sharing such observations in the context of our project, historians and participants work out their emotional responses to past and present Whitechapel through dynamic digital and 'in-real-life' relationships.

Collaborate or Perish

Responding to the challenge of attending to 'history from below', some historians have felt unsettled as they have sought to engage with new outward-looking research methods. Writing in 1989, Peter Burke claimed that 'Remembering the past and writing about it no longer seem the innocent activities they were once taken to be...Neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer' (Burke, 1989, p. 98). Considering public participation in 2011, Jorma Kalela was doubtful whether historians could 'cope' at all with what she termed 'social history-making' (Kalela, 2011, p. 2). Others have characterised history as a house with many rooms, where some academic historians claimed rights to either the whole house, or at least the principal room, ever fearful of squatters (citizen historians) breaking and entering (Ashton & Hamilton, 2010, p. 8). More optimistically, Raphael Samuel suggested that re-framing historical research as an activity, rather than a profession, would legitimise the work of a legion of practitioners (Samuel, 1994, p. 17). In the twenty-first century, the potential for democratisation of history through participatory digital methods is widely recognised by scholars and heritage organisations, reflecting a broad-ranging disciplinary re-alignment which seeks to give a platform to a larger range of writers of history. One university-based scholar recently observed history in the digital age is no longer shaped by the traditional mantra of 'publish or perish' but instead 'collaborate or perish' (Foster, 2014, p. 12).

Critical to this endeavour is flexibility in means of expression, for the norms and codes of the academic world can prove a barrier to those unfamiliar with them. In terms of emotional attachment, different voices will only be drawn out and brought together if there are multiple means of expressing the value of embodied pasts for historic places. Participatory methods which initiate and support new relational connections allow for a positive premium to be placed on diversity, creating potential for better understandings of place attachments.

The Survey of London's move into the digital is not quite as divergent as it might seem for it has always collaborated with the public, even if not foregrounded in the final volumes. For decades, members of the public have contacted us by phone, letter and email with corrections, enquiries, research tips, and shared their own databases, photographs and such. Further, borough and estate archivists have been critical to our orientation within the documentary terrain of particular areas. The Whitechapel website brings into the open what often happened (and happens) in the Survey office, in archives, or out on site. But the Whitechapel project positively extends the invitation to participate in the making of history beyond these 'usual suspects'. The collected body of material reflects the complexity of emotional attachments to place, for every one of the stories, memories and entries of historical research is unique, in either the what or the why of its emotional register. As public submissions are published online, the order of research undertaken by Survey historians can be led by the timing of contributions from the public, dialogic exchanges serving to bind both historian and contributor together in discussion and attachment to place. The breadth of sources which will underpin our final publication is given new value and recognition. The gradual development of the website's content represents a gentle unsettling of our default practices for it allows for a visualisation of these sorts of expected soft-collaborations, as well as establishing new links with people who might not otherwise have encountered the Survey, or imagined we were interested in their stories.

The addition of research from the Survey and from contributors ‘in real time’, uploaded as it has been produced or submitted, has meant that the website has grown in a piece-meal way, representing a partial, uneven history of Whitechapel for the duration of the project. Over the course of the three years of its operation, the orange colour which indicates that information for a building is available has spread as more content has been added. With over 60 000 users, the project has garnered over 500 discrete ‘born-digital’ submissions from the public to date, with outputs stemming from the oral history programme, which has run alongside our digital engagement, an important addition to this number. But even as the website closes to contributions in 2019, some buildings on the map are defined only by an orange boundary line, the interior fill remains a white void to signal effective silence on that site (see Figure 2). Contributors too can remain shadowy, choosing their moniker or electing to appear anonymously if they wish, submitting their site-specific contributions online for review by Survey historians/website-editors. Once approved, submissions are not ordered on the basis of the role or expertise of the contributor but by information type, placed under tabs such as research, notes, memories and images. Survey contributions therefore sit alongside or even underneath the research and writing of other contributors, enabling the website to be ‘read’ as flatly as possible.

Creating an Archive, Recording Lost Voices

Survey historians have routinely been involved in processes of acquiring, classifying, cataloguing, and preserving historical documentation, through the production of their own research notes and the collection of copies of primary source documents, though in ‘editing’ the website these apparently mundane acts have taken on new meaning. Each submission from the public is reviewed in relation to quality and type by the Survey’s historian-editors. While it is in its intent democratic and egalitarian, the Whitechapel website is ultimately formed by the choices made by the Survey, the gate-keepers of the website. On the other hand, the historian-editors can only be responsive to what

is received, limited by the degree to which the website is known about 'out there' and responded to. There may well be a legion of history-practitioners working on Whitechapel but only those who choose to engage in this communal project are 'agents of the archive' (Osborne, 1999, p. 52). Such a decision to submit to the website requires a certain humility and also trust in the Survey itself, for submissions can be developed, modified or nuanced when placed in combination with other narratives, producing a sort of historical assemblage, over which no one contributor can have control.

This rich body of sources, where multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations of place can overlap, challenges historians to step outside of their default categories of analysis, often allowing for unexpected connections between the past and present to emerge. The website has been structured in such a way as to allow for a delicately-balanced web of connections and inter-relationships to materialise, enabling individual contributors to vary how they talk about place and their relationship to it. Navigating the website, visitors do uncover individual voices, but they work together cumulatively to tell a collective, ever-changing story of place which allows for traditional boundaries are blurred. For example, those working in allied fields to history have given insight into their mindsets as they encountered Whitechapel's built environment, rather than factually reporting on their findings. Theatre historian John Earl, evocatively recalled his on-site experience of surveying the now demolished Whitechapel Pavilion Theatre (Earl, 2017), Clive Raymond detailed his conservation work at the Eastern Dispensary (Raymond, 2018) and photographer David Hoffman offered his reflections of living in Black Lion Yard, remembering that 'because we were young dope smoking, squatty types, lefty, long-haired, flares, the other jewellers hated us, pretty much all the other residents didn't like us at all' (Hoffman, 2017). In these contributions, modes of professional operation merge with the personal.

Our institutional context requires us to adhere to ethical codes and regulations that mean that any engagement with the public is carefully explained, assessed and logged – unlike open social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Regulated by different local people, threads on these sorts of sites often accommodate a range of emotive, mostly nostalgic, discussions of Whitechapel and its past, connecting individuals with shared memories of place, but these conversations are ephemeral, inaccessible to a wider public, and with no real potential to contribute to the longer-term historical record. Nostalgia in such forums frequently lapses into discontent with the present and scorn with regard to the future. Overlap between our own social media activity and our website has been minimal, with little of the righteous protest implicit in local voices on social media present on our website. As contributions go through a short editorial process before they are posted to our website, the immediacy of response, connection and relocation, found in spiralling Facebook threads is lost, disrupting the collective way in which history is socially discussed there. For better or worse, the building of momentum and the cumulative effect of heightened emotions in written outbursts is not possible on the Histories of Whitechapel website. Only an extremely small number of submissions have been rejected for inclusion. Perhaps the very prospect of being ‘edited’ by the Survey has served to filter out the sorts of discussion and protest unsuitable for replication due to a deliberate distortion of historical fact.

Contributors to our website tended to be self-censoring in their submissions, toning down their felt emotional intensity to more obviously match the tone set in Survey accounts. A perceived gravitas is seen to be appropriate when self-consciously setting down a story for posterity (Quadi, 2019). Whilst we by no means seek neutrality from our contributors, accounts submitted appear to have been affected by our own internal culture of history writing in which an authoritative and objective Survey ‘voice’ is adopted. This shared voice points to an earlier tradition of history writing which may have been affected by the belief that, according to Lowenthal, ‘to hear an author’s [personal] voice would taint an account’s veracity and erode its authority. To claim omniscience, history must

be anonymous' (Lowenthal, 2006, pp. 106-107). Yet the collective institutional 'voice' that emerged after Ashbee's early volumes allows for a diverse Survey team to flexibly work together, maintaining a consistency of approach and presentation that is rare for a group of researchers.

IRL

Reflecting on the effects of extending participatory culture into the digital realm, Foster argues that historians will find their position 'more fluid and hard to define' (Foster, 2014, p. 12). Certainly, Histories of Whitechapel has required of Survey historians a wider-range of modes of working. Specifically, the role of website-editor, of liaising with individuals, is key to drawing out submissions, whilst formulating and creating a sense of coherence and quality that is the ambition of the website. We have also proactively sought out those people who may feel their point of view or information is irrelevant to the Survey. Many potential contributors who we come into contact with have needed to be convinced that their voice is important and wanted in the context of our project. Often we have found that those with 'ordinary' stories of life in Whitechapel question the value of their testimonies. Working adaptably, and sometimes across communication mediums, we have partnered with such contributors to reassure them of the importance of their stories.

Conducting over fifty oral histories has been critical in building local rapport and accessing emotion, directly recording certain under-represented voices, extracts of which are edited for the website, or uploaded as sound files, and shared with the interviewee. One interviewee noted, 'I think the fact that you've come and you've asked me [about Whitechapel] I feel quite honoured that I can actually [be a] voice for vulnerable people' (Ahmed, 2016). In another interview, one long-standing trader at the Petticoat Lane market reflected on the decline of the market, 'It is scary. I hope somebody comes out and says, "Look, we want to keep some of the heritage"' (Haq, 2016).

We have found that ‘in real life’ relationships foster digital engagement and vice-versa. Personal individual connections between Survey historians and members of the public have been principally established through community group workshops, the snowballing of oral histories, and the Survey-initiated Whitechapel History Fest. ‘Danny’, who grew up in Whitechapel in the 1960s and 70s, first encountered Histories of Whitechapel online, and, coming across the website, he ‘knew it was something I could work with’ (McLaughlin, 2018). Discussions over email and in person whilst walking around Whitechapel with Danny have increased a sense of shared purpose and understanding with him. He has submitted over thirty of his own historical photographs (see Figure 3), all carefully labelled, and written two lengthy contributions, one about his Mum’s workplace, and one about what his housing estate means to him. Of the labour exchange he recalled, ‘...this building was where I went to "sign on" to claim unemployment benefit. My memories of that time, and what I felt then too, was that entering the building, joining the queue and signing on was as if you were being transported in a time machine back to that 30s depression era’ (McLaughlin, 2018). In many ways the submissions can seem low key, but that is to misunderstand the importance of the everyday as evidence of the implications of local power dynamics (Osborne, 1999, p. 59). But, if we take it that ‘good’ archives produce ‘good’ history, we must undoubtedly be aware of the ways in which ‘power drives which events become records, which records become archives, which archives become narratives, and which narratives become histories’ (Caswell, 2014, p. 36). Everyone who makes a submission to the website is making a statement about what they think should be included in the history of Whitechapel’s built environment, claiming their right to speak about the past: an emotional demand. Submissions like Danny’s are, in important ways, anti-sensationalist histories of place, reinforcing attachment and identification with the local area. Personal connections encourage citizen-historians in the importance of co-creation.

Authority and the Survey

Aiming to reflect the spirit of Whitechapel's diverse stories and voices, the next phase of work for the Survey is to consider how each individual story can be related to a larger historical narrative of urban change. The resultant Whitechapel volumes will reflect a further evolution in how the Survey tells stories of place, integrating material gathered on the website with 'conventional' Survey building histories. Whilst the Histories of Whitechapel website includes more than it excludes, the publication will necessarily take the opposite approach, for we hold that a 'catch-all' digital project does not negate the importance of the 'coherent' analogue narrative. The two act in different, complementary ways, one dependent on the other for the Survey of London's intention of stimulating the 'historic and social conscience' of citizens to be fulfilled. Difficult editorial choices are critical to formulating a narrative of historical change that bears witness to the reality of places and can be deployed in service of the widest range of people with all sorts of place attachments. Public historians must be willing to make limiting judgements about which representative stories serve as the best guides to places, based on their specific expertise and preferences. While Histories of Whitechapel over-turns established hierarchies in the creation and editing of the online platform, it should be acknowledged that Survey historians know this digital archive very well, and in all likelihood, best, supporting a sense of their authority.

Any sort of collaboration is not without its frictions and failures. Though three years is not an insignificant length of time for a project concerned with a relatively small geographical area, to local people, many of whom feel embattled, the Survey's presence and engagement in Whitechapel can seem fleeting and has on occasion been met with suspicion or disinterest. More generally, I attended an event organised by a local resident and historian, who presented her project with the note that she would not 'extract information and disappear'; another long-standing resident told me she had been 'consulted to death' in recent years as authorities and developers had contact with only a few well-known local voices in relation to changes happening in the area (Cat of Aldgate, 2018; Celeste, 2018). If collaboration and participation is to be sincere and constructive (and

received as such), it is clear that outputs of projects must benefit both parties. For several months during the Whitechapel project, the Survey was able to engage two Whitechapel-born interns, initially to undertake oral histories with their own contacts, focussing on Bengali women of middle-age or above, but expanding in scope. One of the interns, Tanha Quadi, feels her approach to places, and indeed her career, changed significantly as a result of her work on the Survey. She reported that ‘I found out more [about my area] because I was on the project, it changed the questions I asked... The Survey didn’t require a certificate for me to take ownership of my own project... You shut out a lot of community voices if you stick with... a traditional [academic] structure’ (Quadi, 2019). But she did encounter the tension of being personally invested in Whitechapel as a resident, with an intimately close place attachment to the area, and working for an ‘outside’ organisation capturing the situation on the ground as it stood. Tanha remembers one Whitechapel business owner who ‘made me feel like I was on the other side, and I wasn’t sure if I was’. He warned her, ‘Tanha, you need to understand, you might think you’re doing good but remember that you’re on the other side now... you need to think about the best interests of the community and where does this research go and how does that benefit this space, how does it affect us?’ For Tanha, work with the Survey embedded her more closely with the lives and personal situations of her interview subjects in the present even as they reflected on the past. She noticed a growing awareness of the connection between people, place and space. Such an experience can be read in accordance with Laurajane Smith’s assertion that heritage is ‘a process of remembering that helps to underpin identity and the ways in which individuals and groups make sense of their experiences in the present’ (Smith, 2006, p. 276).

Conclusion

Public history in the twenty-first century requires collaboration. The Whitechapel website serves to foreground and endorse ongoing practices of collaboration and participation, to a greater extent

revealing how the Survey's 'official' history of the area is being constructed. One consequence of opening up the research stage, and publicly representing 'our' developing archive of sources, is that the haphazard, uneven nature of the way history is made and imbued with personal meaning, is made clear. In both setting up such a project or in choosing to participate in it, a degree of humility is needed. As Survey historians, we have had little control over the messy non-linear process of collecting content, nor the way in which the source material is read. For the contributor, trust in the Survey as a group of individual historians 'on their side', who will not misrepresent them in the way their submission is handled and positioned on the website, is required. This has been made easier on account of the Survey's pre-existing reputation for producing 'fair' and objective records of London's varied built environments, yet this reputation dissuades others from engagement. In spite of this, it can be argued that the new digital methodology has inclined the Survey to engage more deeply with residents and stakeholders on the ground in Whitechapel. Specifically, it has prompted a shift in the way the role of the historian is conceived of, where proactive engagement and communication with people and groups outside of professional or scholarly circles, is as valuable and fruitful a use of time as solitary work in archives or writing up notes which will come to form more traditional building histories. Indeed, in setting down their own histories, publicly and online, local participants implicitly or explicitly stake a claim to the past, sometimes emotively, and therefore also envision a future identity of the area. Historians too are shaped by their own mixed agendas, personal experiences of place and relationships. Judging that successful urban historiography is reliant on the integration of official and unofficial histories, our project aimed to provide a framework to hold all sorts of discourses, associated with all kinds of place attachments, together. What emerges is the complexity of the relationship between history and heritage and between historic places, people and attachment. On reflection, it is clear that boundaries of many kinds have been, and should be, necessarily blurred in pursuit of a more nuanced and democratic history of place.

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