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Live oral testimony 'darn pit': dynamic, non-extractive oral histories of extractive work in the South Yorkshire Coalfield

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Abstract
A long-standing consensus among scholars and museum professionals asserts that the inclusion of oral testimony in museum spaces is desirable. This article briefly overviews the attempts made hitherto to include oral testimonies as part of the offer at European industrial museums and heritage sites and asks if there is a museal model more adept at establishing meaningful dialogue between historical actors and museum visitors, less mediated by the agendas and assumptions of museum managements. It finds exemplary the model of employing former coal miners as tour guides, used at the National Coal Mining Museum in Wakefield, England and explores the ways in which this model centres former industrial workers in the retelling of their collective pasts and permits members of the public to engage in genuine and uninhibited questioning, illuminating the challenges involved in doing live, dialogical oral history.

Key words
history of coal mining, European history, oral history at museums, industrial museums

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Introduction[1]

For at least three decades, oral history scholars, museological scholars, and professionals in the museum sector have lauded oral testimony as a resource that can be fruitfully utilised to incorporate different and multiple voices into museum spaces and thereby enhance the museal experience. Different voices, "hitherto suspended, hidden or silent voices" emanating from subaltern social groups that have been unrepresented or misrepresented by the official, written historical record, can be contained within oral testimony, the inclusion of which in a given museum space qualifies it as a site of "history from below."[2] Furthermore, including varied oral testimony in the museum space can contribute to deconstructing dominant, sometimes pernicious, narratives and discourses about historical developments and their significance. First, amplifying multiple voices at museums and heritage sites can facilitate "greater multivocality on the past and is therefore particularly potent in the quest to challenge hegemonic narratives."[3] Second, it can democratise discussion about how that past has been preserved and heritagised, as it enables "the coexistence of potentially conflicting approaches and perceptions" regarding the historical and continued importance of a given heritage site.[4] For such discussions to be truly democratic and equitable, the voices participating in them must belong to a range of historical actors with differing perspectives and positionalities; that is, multivocality must be attended by radical multiperspectivity.

Notwithstanding its promise, the employment of oral testimony is not a panacea for the ills afflicting the European museum sector, which is often accused on the one hand of whitewashing the past to make it more palatable for members of the public, and on the other hand of intellectualising the past to the extent of rendering it inaccessible. Indeed, including oral testimony in the museum space

1 I would like to thank the National Coal Mining Museum for its cooperation; in particular, Pete Wordsworth, Ian Whibberley, Ian Steele, and Taz for graciously sharing their time and insights, and the remainder of the miner-guides with whom I had the pleasure of meeting and talking. The research for this article was conducted in collaboration with Professor Marta Kurkowska-Budzan, as part of the project "Work as Bodily Experience: The Representations of Cultural Heritage of Industrial Work in Europe".

2 A. Gazi, I. Nakou, *Oral history in museums and education: where do we stand today?*, "Museumedu", vol. 2 (2015), p. 15.

3 A. Cento Bull, C. Reynolds, *Uses of oral history in museums: a tool for agonism and dissonance or promoting a linear narrative?*, "Museum and Society", vol. 19, no. 3 (2021), p. 285.

4 N.A. Silberman, *Virtual viewpoints: multivocality in the marketed past?*, in J. Habu, C. Fawcett, J. Matsunaga (eds.), *Evaluating Multiple Narratives: Beyond Nationalist, Colonialist, Imperialist Archaeologies*, New York 2008, p. 141.

can actually "enhance a museum's strong, authoritative and linear narrative."[5] Whilst there may be an ostensible diversity of voices populating a given museum exhibit, these multiple voices can be "easily subsumed within an overarching linear narrative, preventing visitors from engaging with the complexity of the different motivations and contrasting perspectives of multiple actors."[6] Where there is a strong overarching curatorial voice, the oral testimonies disseminated may be heavily redacted to serve the narratory agenda of the museum. Alternatively, the narrators of the oral testimonies disseminated may appear to hail from distinct demographic backgrounds or, in instances where a historical conflict is focalised, from either side of the Manichean divide separating victors from losers and perpetrators from victims, whilst narrators with more complicated or nuanced historical agency, who cannot be easily pigeonholed into the glorified role of hero or the vilified role of transgressor, are excluded; that is, voices that "raise controversial issues or have the potential of unsettling visitors" that belong to bystanders, collaborators, or turncoats, for example, are sidelined or silenced.[7]

Perhaps more so than other types of historical sources, oral testimonies engender amongst those accessing them an ineluctable feeling of connectivity with the past. For visitors to museums and heritage sites, the spoken word breeds an inescapable sense of authenticity and objectivity, giving a relevant audible form to their perceptions of past and present realities and providing them with an opportunity to "associate someone's voice more directly with a specific person and that person's 'direct' experience of what is related."[8] Whilst this has positive implications for visitor engagement, the uncritical or unbalanced deployment of oral testimonies by a museum can have negative implications for the historical knowledge of visitors: "oral testimonies in museums cannot by themselves enable visitors, and especially children, to develop historical knowledge, thinking and understanding, unless they are presented within a museological, historical and educational context."[9] Ideally, this context clarifies that oral testimonies, like material and visual sources, carry meanings beyond the restricted meanings assigned to them in a given personal, social, or museological interpretation and must be scrutinised to be accepted as historical evidence.

Clearly, there are numerous ethical issues, both hypothetical and observable, involved with the distribution of oral testimonies in museums. In practice, oral

5 I. Nakou, *Oral history, museums and history education* presented at *Can Oral History Make Objects Speak?*, Nafplio 18–21 October 2005, p. 4.
6 A. Cento Bull, C. Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 289.
7 *Ibidem*, p. 294.
8 J. Mildorf, *Life Storying in Oral History: Fictional Contamination and Literary Complexity*, Berlin 2023, p. 23.
9 I. Nakou, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

testimonies are often strategically selected and presented by museum curators to fulfil the historicising objectives of the museum and to transfix visitors by appealing to their senses and thereby disarming their capacity to think critically. Additionally, there are numerous ethical issues implied by the generation of oral testimonies for the purpose of subsequent, delayed distribution. Oral testimonies, especially those which reflect upon specific themes, do not simply "exist in nature" but are usually begotten by an interlocutory process, where one interlocutor addresses targeted questions to another who then responds.[10] Traditionally, the professional historian takes on the role of questioner, though an increasing number of oral history projects affiliated with museums profit from public volunteers surveying and interviewing historical eyewitnesses.[11] The results of the interlocutory process are temporally, spatially, and situationally embedded, as an interviewee recounting the past is influenced by their "current dispositions, worries, anxieties, expectations" and by the subjectivity of the interviewer.[12] The 'now', when an oral testimony is being generated by an interview, and the 'then', when this oral testimony is being relayed to a third party, are moments separated by time, space, and context. Acknowledging and negotiating this inherent breach is practically and cognitively challenging for interviewers, interviewees, and individuals who become privy to the interview contents later, including museum curators and visitors.

In an instance where an interviewee is primarily concerned with addressing their interviewer in the now, "not fully cognisant that they may also be addressing a wider, possibly international, audience or even posterity," they may overshare;[13] that is, they may intimate details that they would not be totally comfortable sharing with other individuals in the near or distant future.[14] In an instance where an interviewee is fixated on the historical dimension of the interview and its reception by an anonymous, hypothetical audience in the near or distant future, they may consciously or subconsciously elaborate or obfuscate certain historical details, engaging in a double dialogue whereby they simultaneously address the interviewer and a third party.[15] Foresightful, conjectural self-editing on behalf

10 A. Portelli, *Oral history as genre*, in M. Chamberlain, P. Thompson (eds.), *Narrative and Genre*, London 1998, p. 24.

11 M. Kopiniak, *Historia mówiona jako narzędzie partycypacji muzealnej*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej", vol. 11 (2021), p. 101. The accounts featured in exhibits at the Warsaw Rising Museum were generated by interviews between volunteers and eyewitnesses.

12 J. Mildorf, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

13 A. Gazi, I. Nakou, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

14 R. Perks, A. Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, London 2006, p. 335.

15 M. Quinlan, *The dynamics of interviewing*, in D.A. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, Oxford 2011, p. 27.

of the narrator bears upon the story eventually encountered by a future listener. Additionally, the interpretive activities of the interviewer, the interpretive activities of the museum curator, and the museum environment itself inculcate how the listener experiences the oral testimony.

During its journey from narrator to museum visitor, the oral testimony usually undergoes a double or triple interpretive operation, and a separation comes to intervene the intended meaning of the narrator and the received meaning of the narrator: "the final story presented tends to acquire a variety of meanings and connotations which are, in turn, reinterpreted by the visitor as part of a larger narrative."[16] Whilst the reinterpretation of historical accounts and events by museum visitors is to be encouraged, the regurgitation of oral source material ready-digested and ready-analysed by a museum curator impedes spontaneous interpretation on the part of museum visitors. The museum curator must walk a fine line between objectively contextualising the oral testimonies they exhibit and subjectively framing them. The present article asks if there is a museal model capable of establishing a more direct congress between historical actors and museum visitors, unmediated or less strongly mediated by the agendas and assumptions of museum managements.

Certainly, the more traditional, top-down curatorial approach alluded to above, whereby a museum curator calculatedly weaves oral testimony into the overall narrative fabric of the museum, is not the only approach favoured by practitioners. The participatory museum, pioneered by Nina Simon, invites museum visitors to participate in the interpretation of artefacts, sources, and stories, and the creation of exhibits based on their own priorities and perspectives. This participation may occur on different scales: some museums "co-develop exhibitions with community members" over a short period of time, behind closed doors; other museums design experiences that encourage audience participation over a long period of time, calling on museum visitors to physically alter museum spaces by moving exhibit elements or casting votes for their favourite exhibit, for example.[17] The operationalisation of the participatory model might see museum visitors as visitor–curators, complementing the efforts of the official museum curator in transcribing, categorising, describing, and problematising the contents of oral testimonies. The relational museum, devised and theorised by Janusz Byszewski and Beata Nessel-Łukasik, prizes the multidimensional and multidirectional relationships that can be cultivated between museums, museum visitors, and local communities, including eyewitnesses, striving for a synergy between actors. In this synergy, museum managements and museum curators act as facilitators rather than authoritative

16 A. Gazi, I. Nakou, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

17 N. Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, "Principles of Participation", 2010, https://participatorymuseum.org/read/ [accessed: 07.10.2024].

gatekeepers singly producing and communicating a 'definitive' historical record.[18] In some instances, the concept of professional museum curation is turned on its head entirely as historical eyewitnesses, untrained in the discipline of history or heritage conservation, decide to curate their own knowledge and experiences for public consumption, delivering tailored walking tours or building digital homes for their spoken or written recollections. The prescriptions of the participatory and relational museum approaches, as well as the circumnavigation of the institutional museum by historical eyewitnesses in the communication of their stories, suggest that the transmission of historical knowledge need not proceed linearly from the eyewitness, through the interviewer, through the museum curator, to the museum visitor or member of the public.

Without seeking to overlook the numerous oral history projects carried out at post-industrial sites which contest conventional wisdom about how the eyewitness–historian–curator–visitor relationship should look, the article holds that the curation of oral testimony at European industrial museums and heritage sites has tended to circumscribe visitor engagement, as professional museum curators have dominated decision-making on how oral history narratives have been generated and interpreted therein. It argues that employing former industrial workers as tour guides is one example of how industrial museums can foster authentic and organic dialogues between historical actors and museum visitors. This strategy decentralises the onus of historical interpretation, reducing the centrality of professional historians and museum curators without making them redundant, whilst increasing the interpretive agency enjoyed by eyewitnesses and members of the public in the production of industrial histories.

Oral testimony at industrial museums and heritage sites

At the typical European industrial museum or heritage site, the inclusion of oral testimony in the museum offer revolves around recordings of industrial workers or members of an industrial working community who are prompted to share their insights into working or everyday life. The museum or heritage site will generally present such recordings to visitors in one of the following ways: spliced with an elucidatory or complementary video, the recording is played aloud for visitors traversing a specific space organised to have a cinematic feel or to contain a related historical artefact or object;[19] accompanied by a synoptic but laconic text, the recording is continuously piped through a headset for the visitor to ear that

18 M. Kobielska, *Wymyślanie muzeum relacyjnego*, „Muzealnictwo", vol. 63 (2022), p. 128.

19 The Museum of the Factory in Łódź, visited in October 2022, had a projector room where films from the late 20th century were shown. In these films, textile workers and their families reflect on how they spend their leisure time outside the textile factories.

is relegated to a peripheral space or corner;[20] the recording constitutes part of a broader narration that is transmitted, sequentially or in a spatially-dependent manner, through a headset to the visitor as they advance through the museum space;[21] the recording is textualised and read from a script by a museum guide, who reads the text either detachedly or theatrically, affecting the persona of the original narrator;[22] or the recording is textualised and pasted or projected as a quotation onto the wall.

These methods for sharing oral testimony with the public can be restrictive. They involve the unidirectional conveyance of information, as the original narrator directly furnishes an interviewer with information and, through the use of technologically mediated communication, indirectly informs a museum visitor, who may have an opportunity to express or record their reflections, but who cannot address the original narrator. Such a process is, therefore, only partially dialogical: the interviewee and the interviewer are participants in a dialogue and the museum visitor is a witness to it, unable to interrupt or pose questions to the interviewee arising from their own perspective rather than that of the interviewer. Owing to developments after the interview, the questions posed by the interviewer during the interview may also have limited topicality when replayed to a museum visitor, and the responses of the interviewee, as they relate to a known past and present or an unknown future, are frozen in time, unchanging.

Furthermore, the recording that the museum visitor hears has customarily undergone a curatorial redaction, manipulated and manicured to include only the most newsworthy, pithy, or relevant information and to exclude mundane, technical, or digressive information. This redactive process, which typically involves historians and museum curators listening to hours of recordings to discern suitable material, and the complementary process of building up a more or

20 The Kelham Island Museum in Sheffield, visited in January 2024, had headsets attached to a wall where recordings from recent years were played. In these recordings, steelworkers talk about the experience of being a newcomer in the daunting environment of the steelworks. The Coalport China Museum in the Ironbridge Gorge, visited in April 2024, similarly had headsets attached to a wall where audio materials based on oral history interviews with female porcelain and pottery producers were played.

21 Visitors to the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk have the option to proceed through museum exhibits with a headset which plays excerpts from oral history interviews with various historical actors, such as striking shipyard workers, who were instrumental in the establishment and continued functioning of the "Solidarity" trade union.

22 The living museum in Beamish, visited in September 2022, had museum actor–guides stationed at the museum site which recreates a typical colliery of the Great Northern Coalfield of the early 1900s. These museum actor–guides included excerpts from oral history interviews with coal miners in their re-enactments of life as a coal miner. Museum guides at the Guido Mine and Coal Mining Museum in Zabrze, visited in August 2023, and the Centre of Mining Experience and Memory in Sotón, visited in October 2023, similarly included excerpts from oral history interviews with coal miners in their informational tours of the former collieries.

less polyphonic museum narrative with this material, are complex and labour--intensive. Exhibition consultants and curators face the challenges of selecting representative stories without stereotyping experience, satisfying the community from which oral testimonies hail "while also capturing the interest of a wide range of people," and deciphering usable, understandable sound recordings and soundbites from those which are unintelligible or feature distracting extraneous sounds.[23] That the majority of industrial museums and heritage sites choose to expend resources extensively screening oral testimony before using it in their exhibits partially results from an ethical responsibility to safeguard narrators and visitors and from a need, arising from their status as sites of education and entertainment, to tell a coherent story. Not only does the process of sifting through oral testimonies for incorporation in an exhibit require that multiple important decisions be made, but many agonising decisions go into how excerpts from these testimonies are sequenced and arranged in the museum space. Enlisting graduate history students and eyewitnesses themselves in this decision-making process can produce fruitful results for the quality of the resulting exhibits whilst allowing museums to realise their social responsibility, as with the oral history exhibition about the Frankton Junction railway community held at the Waikato Museum of Art and History.[24] Without the involvement of such actors as stakeholders, developing and disseminating oral history in the museum setting can appear highly transactional and extractive: an interviewer collects the experiences of an interviewee; a museum curator carefully selects and repackages these experiences to fulfil certain objectives; a museum visitor voluntarily or involuntarily collects these experiences as they are presented and then returns home, potentially to share these experiences with family members and friends.

Perhaps due to its incapacity to propagate connection or discussion between historical actors and museum visitors, such a model has been repeatedly found to have negligible efficacy in piquing and retaining the interest of museum visitors. As one museum professional laments, "intense and heart wrenching" stories are often skipped over.[25] Having developed a 'talking head' style exhibit at their museum, they found that "many visitors walked right past the stations, or only briefly paused before moving on to the photos and artefacts."[26] Confronted with such challenges, professionals in the museum sector question how to effectively inspire within museum visitors the patience to listen and how to exhibit oral testimony

23 A. Green, *Returning history to the community: oral history in a museum setting*, "The Oral History Review," vol. 24, no. 2 (1997), p. 63.

24 *Ibidem*, p. 53.

25 S. Gould, *Challenges in exhibiting oral history*, "Oxford University Press Blog", 4 March 2016, par. 3, https://blog.oup.com/2016/03/exhibiting-oral-history/ [accessed: 07.10.2024].

26 *Ibidem*, par. 4.

in a way that engages museum visitors and activates their imagination without intimidating or overwhelming them.

A temporary solution to such questions is encapsulated by the model of employing former industrial workers at industrial museums and heritage sites to deliver their own eyewitness accounts of working and everyday life to visitors. A number of European mining museums operationalise this model, including the Old Mine Science and Art Centre in Wałbrzych, Poland, the German Mining Museum in Bochum, Germany, and the Estonian Mining Museum in Kohtla-Nõmme, Estonia. The National Coal Mining Museum in Wakefield, England, employs a staff of approximately thirty former coal miners as miner–guides who individually lead underground tours of the previously operational Caphouse Colliery, during which time they tell a semi-structured history of mining work in the local area of the South Yorkshire Coalfield and the national area that is complemented and enriched by their personal story.[27] Evidently, this model is an attractive, lucrative, and successful one. In 2023, the museum won the Sandford Award, a quality mark for heritage learning: "Unique to this site, pupils can be transported underground with ex-miners as tour guides, giving inspiring first-hand accounts, which leave a lasting impression."[28] In early 2024, the museum was rated second by Tripadvisor in a list of Best England Hidden Gem Attractions.[29] The museum consistently wins the annual Tripadvisor Travellers' Choice Award, based on publicly available reviews and ratings by visitors, which almost invariably make mention of the "brilliant," "engaging," "humorous," "informative," and "knowledgeable" miner–guides.

The remainder of the article explores the deployment of miner–guides by the National Coal Mining Museum as an exemplary model for communicating and popularising oral testimonies of mining work and doing dialogical, live, non-extractive oral history in the museum space.[30] The following exploration is based on fieldwork undertaken by the author at the museum in February 2022 and September 2022, whereby three underground tours were taken and five interviews were conducted with different miner–guides. During interviews, miner–guides were asked about their motivations for becoming tour guides, their positive and negative experiences of sharing personal accounts with members of the public,

27 https://www.wakefieldexpress.co.uk/whats-on/things-to-do/behind-the-scenes-at-the-national-coal-mining-museum-meet-the-volunteers-who-are-preserving-the-mining-legacy-4616358 [accessed: 07.10.2024].

28 https://www.heritageeducationtrust.org/award-holder/national-coal-mining-museum-for-england [accessed: 07.10.2024].

29 https://www.wakefieldexpress.co.uk/whats-on/tripadvisor-rates-national-coal-mining-museum-as-a-top-hidden-gem-attraction-4574746 [accessed: 07.10.2024].

30 The miner–guides at the National Coal Mining Museum are briefly mentioned in B. Dicks, *Performing the hidden injuries of class in coal-mining heritage*, "Sociology", vol. 42, no. 3 (2008), p. 438.

and their reflections on how effectively or equitably power-sharing plays out at the museum. Their responses ranged from optimistic comments on the potentialities of their employment as tour guides for the satisfaction of visitors and former mining communities alike, to frustrated comments on disappointing encounters with visitors and unheeded suggestions to the museum management about the spending of museum funds. The following sections outline and consider these responses in terms of what they communicate about the promises and challenges of employing former industrial workers as tour guides at industrial museums.

Oral history at the National Coal Mining Museum

Like a former miner who decides to participate in an oral history interview with a professional historian, a former miner who decides to become a miner–guide is governed by multitudinous motivations. Some miner–guides at the National Coal Mining Museum opt into the profession predominantly because they are passionate about preserving the intangible heritage of mining, of which they are indubitably rightful custodians. For Ian Wibberley, "it's just that mining is never forgotten; how everything started, our industrial past, never gets erased."[31] Ex-miners are living bridges between this industrial past and the post-industrial present, gainfully engaged by the museum to provide museum visitors with first-hand information. Others choose to work as miner–guides for the sense of personal and social fulfilment that the work provides. For Steve "Taz" Graham, being a miner–guide is about keeping occupied: "My main motivation is, I've never been one to do this, sit down. I'm always doing something, and if I can't find something, I'll make something. You know, I'm one of those who's got to be active. I don't like being out of work."[32] For Ian Steele, being amongst other former miners on a regular basis, sharing the "same *craic*, banter, and everything" characteristic of his working life when the coal mines were in operation, brings an unparalleled sense of belonging.[33]

The underground tours led by the miner–guides are semi-structured, both in a physical and metaphysical sense. Partly owing to the need to adhere to health and safety regulations and partly owing to the need for practicality the miner–guides and the visitors under their care must proceed through the underground space of the decommissioned coal mine in a specific, regulated way, passing from one particular space to another at specified times. Corresponding to this passage is a sequence of informational points the miner–guide must go through, regaling visitors with historical details and facts.

This arrangement does not preclude the miner–guides from interspersing factual information with personal anecdotes, which enrich the history communicated and

31 Interview conducted on 26 February 2022.
32 Interview conducted on 26 February 2022.
33 Interview conducted on 22 September 2022.

engross visitors. During their training, the miner-guides are given a brief document, entitled *Meet a Miner*, which outlines the historical information deemed most important and noteworthy by the museum management: "You've a little bit of homework to do. There's certain things we're to talk about: the Huskar Colliery Disaster which was in my neck of the woods. And you tell visitors about various dates that's changed things in mining."[34] The 1838 Huskar Colliery Disaster, when 26 child miners tragically drowned after a mineshaft became flooded, is mentioned early in the underground tour as it precipitated the passing of the 1842 Mines Act, which prohibited boys under the age of 10 and girls and women of all ages from labouring in mines.[35] Whilst the miner-guides are encouraged to openly discuss developments that were pivotal in altering how extractive work would be done, they are instructed to tread tactfully where the 1984–1985 Miners' Strike is concerned, as this remains a divisive episode in the history of British coal mining.[36] These subtle interventions in the activities of the miner-guides by the museum management evidence its will to ensure that all oral history narratives communicated at the site are consistently contextualised and sit comfortably within the overall museum narrative. Sheer pragmatism requires such interventions. Museum managements "must maintain considerable autonomy and authority in cultural production" as they seek to respect institutional imperatives such as "maintaining collections, facilities, institutional collaborations and funding streams."[37]

Though the miner-guides are necessarily heedful of the agenda of the museum management, they are accorded a sizeable degree of autonomy in determining how they outwardly reflect on the history of mining work in the local and national area and how they incorporate their personal anecdotes and recollections into the underground tour. The miner-guides inflect the historical information prioritised by the museum management with their own flair: "You learn like a hard core on it, and then you puts your own spin on it."[38] This freedom allows miner-guides to feel meaningfully included in the work of the museum, co-creating a broad but rich history of mining work. This co-creation is not seamless, and requires "monitoring, feedback loops, and adjusting" to ensure that the contents of the underground tour remain germane to the broader museum offer

34 Interview conducted with Ian Steele on 22 September 2022.

35 B. Elliot, *South Yorkshire Mining Villages: A History of the Region's Former Coal Mining Communities*, Barnsley 2017, p. 14.

36 J. Harris, *Almost 40 years on, the miners' strike still casts a long shadow over UK politics today*, "The Guardian", 27 August 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/aug/27/40-years-miners-strike-long-shadow-uk-politics-pit-closures [accessed: 07.10.2024].

37 H. Robinson, *Curating good participants? Audiences, democracy and authority in the contemporary museum*, "Museum Management and Curatorship", vol. 35, no. 5 (2020), p. 479.

38 Interview conducted with Ian Steele on 22 September 2022.

and agreeable to the miner-guides, and "to ensure that the goal for increasing inclusivity is being met – without being to the detriment of the participants."[39]

The occupational backgrounds of the miner-guides not only inject their accounts with authenticity, but they also facilitate nuanced discussions about mining work that are tailored to the specific questions and curiosities that a visitor might have. Their individual memories, experiences, and skills, which are intrinsically linked to their occupational and generational profiles, constitute the cornerstone of the underground tours that the miner-guides deliver. Spurred on by one another and by the museum management to do so, they emphasise how the experience of mining work was coloured by whether an individual laboured as a driller, faceworker, ripper, header, haulage worker, electrician, fitter, winder, onsetter, or overman, for example. They often light-heartedly remark upon how these occupational distinctions played out during a typical mining shift: "Everybody's got their own discipline, so you'll know the guides who love electrical, without going too much into it, you'll know. Electricians and fitters, there was a lot of rivalry wasn't there? They'd always blame the other shift: 'Other shift's done that, it's not my fault, it's the other shift's."[40] Such quips make for a vibrant, exclusive experience for visitors. The miner-guides maintain that the continued allure and success of the underground tours inheres in their individualised nature:

> And we do get, seriously, a lot of people who've been to visit us and we say to them, 'Have you been before?'. 'Yeah, I've been on the underground tour five times, brilliant mate.' And you think they might not enjoy it as much when they come down with you. They'll come out after and say to me, 'Thank you very much, I've really enjoyed that, it was a totally different tour from what we've had in the past'.[41]

Unlike former miners participating in oral history interviews designated for later distribution to museum visitors, miner-guides have a direct interface with museum visitors and consequently have greater agency in tailoring their narration according to their audience. As such, the risk that a visitor may "glean information that was not originally intended for them" and the regretfulness this can engender on behalf of the original narrator is mitigated or removed entirely.[42] The model of doing oral history utilised by the National Coal Mining Museum better protects the sensitivities and preferences of the original narrator as these relate to different age groups and social groups and the types of historical information that can be appropriately divulged to such groups: "There's things

39 C.E. Ariese, M. Wróblewska, *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples*, Amsterdam 2021, p. 40.
40 Interview conducted with Ian Whibberley on 26 February 2022.
41 Interview conducted with Steve Graham on 26 February 2022.
42 J. Mildorf, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

we do and don't mention, depends on your audience of course. Like if you've got kids on, if you've got someone what's afraid, you don't mention about all the colliery deaths, because the last thing you want to do is frighten them. So you'll gear your tour up to the people who's on it."[43] Whereas an interviewee must make conjectures as to the demographic makeup of their prospective audience, a miner-guide has access to information about the demographic makeup of their actual audience. They are therefore empowered to make ethical and reasoned decisions about which aspects of their historical record they divulge or withhold. Such decisions are usually outsourced to a museum curator endowed with the quality of a gatekeeper who manages public access to the collective memory of a subaltern social group, whereas the miner-guides at the National Coal Mining Museum are enabled to themselves control how their own memories are shared.

The interactive dynamic observed on the underground tour ensures that unique and rapidly evolving dialogues take place, where historical actors as miner-guides respond to the concerns of museum visitors as they arise. A former miner will likely censor and edit their utterances in both the setting of an oral history interview and an underground tour, but an interviewee self-edits in anticipation of the responses of an imagined listener, whilst a miner-guide self-edits in consideration of the listener in front of them. When the listener or listeners in front of them behave respectfully and display signals of interest and investment, the miner-guide will tend to reward such behaviour: "They were interactive, they wanted to know, and it gives you a buzz because you think, 'I'll tell them about this' or 'I'll take them to that bit and show them.' If the audience is nice, I'll tell them about everything, I'll try and pass as much information on as possible."[44] This is not to say that a disrespectful or disinterested visitor will receive unfair or unprofessional treatment by a miner-guide, but that the miner-guide dispenses with treasured memories more energetically and willingly in situations of positive mutuality and trust, and justifiably so. In their public-facing role, the miner-guides are perhaps more mindful of political correctness than they would be in the role of an interviewee conversing with an interviewer in a domestic and intimate setting: "You've got to be very careful with what you think is funny and what you think is the *craic*. What you would say amongst the lads, a lot of people take offence to these days."[45]

In conversation with a professional historian, a former miner may not only impart things that they would not with a member of the public, but they may also presume that the professional historian has a certain familiarity with the history of mining work and the way that extractive work is carried out. They may therefore

43 Interview conducted with Ian Whibberley on 26 February 2022.
44 *Ibidem*.
45 Interview conducted with Ian Steele on 22 September 2022.

neglect to properly explain things during their narration which could be invaluable to a member of the public. Aware that many museum visitors have a limited knowledge base, the miner-guides are keen to include explanations of the basic processes of drilling, extracting, and transporting coal in their underground tours. They take recourse to illustrative metaphors to do so: "I've adapted and we all have to explaining it in the best possible way, and you've got to keep it simple. Like when we're on the coalface, 'taking the jam out of the sponge,' you can't go far wrong with that. 'We've got to take the jam out of the sponge without dropping the top sponge on us. How do we do it? This is how we do it.'"[46] The miner-guides do not take for granted the imbalance of knowledge between themselves and the museum visitors: "The majority of people that goes underground has never been underground before, you could tell them that when they cut the coal it's green and the nightshift paints it black so you get more money for it, and they wouldn't have a clue."[47] Without a museum curator acting as an intermediary, it is a conceivable possibility that the miner-guides would take such liberties, but in reality they take solemn responsibility for teaching members of the public about the intricacies of the coal mining process and the difficulties encountered by coal miners in their daily working lives. The miner-guides empower museum visitors to comprehend the complexities and hardships of mining work, going beyond a static recounting of historical fact to furnish visitors with personal and personalised narratives.

In establishing an immediate connection between former miners and museum visitors, the model of employing former miners as tour guides accommodates unhindered discussion and questioning. The limited knowledge base of most museum visitors prompts them to ask questions of eyewitnesses to the recent past of mining that would not occur to a professional historian. The ostensibly trivial issues of how miners sustained or relieved themselves during shifts are fascinating to many visitors: "Without fail, one of the main questions you always get is, how did you go on for the toilet?"[48] Additionally, visitors frequently express wonder at the decision of an individual to become a coal miner: "Why did you want to work down here and why would you work down here?"[49] One miner-guide was once asked by a member of the public whether they had been offered the option of coal mining as an alternative to going to prison, expressing their disbelief that an individual would voluntarily subject themselves to such taxing working conditions and stating, "I didn't know grown men did this."[50] Such questions betray gaps in public knowledge relating to the historical realities of being born and socialised

46 Interview conducted with Ian Whibberley on 26 February 2022.
47 Interview conducted with Ian Steele on 22 September 2022.
48 Interview conducted with Ian Whibberley on 26 February 2022.
49 *Ibidem*.
50 Interview conducted with Ian Steele on 22 September 2022.

in a mining community, and the historical exigencies of coming of working age in a monotown where the coal industry reigns. The opportunity for members of the public to pose such questions to living historical actors is crucial for the development and deepening of their historical knowledge. The model of doing oral history utilised by the National Coal Mining Museum also ensures that topical questions that are pressing in the contemporary context can be asked of historical actors, which was the case shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022: "Somebody asked me last week, you know, this situation in Ukraine, do you think you'll open the pits up again?"[51] The limited knowledge base of the museum visitor and the spontaneous nature of questioning can produce miscommunications, as "people aren't always right good at explaining what they want to know," but this does not detract from the value of permitting individuals who are not professional historians to ask questions of historical actors.[52]

There is undoubtable value in facilitating former miners to become stakeholders and managers in the heritagisation of their collective past. Discussing their past with members of the public allows former miners to activate and actively live out their pride on a continuous basis: "The guides love telling the story, because they're proud of their past. We're proud people."[53] Contemplating their time leading underground tours, one miner–guide stated: "I loved every minute on it. When I first started, I didn't want a shift to finish, I couldn't wait for the next one to start, because it was absolutely outstanding."[54] The positive feeling accrued by giving a one-off oral history interview is augmented and temporally extended for a former miner acting in the professional role of miner–guide.[55] At the National Coal Mining Museum, the sense of pride and fulfilment felt by the miner–guides as a result of their story-telling activities is accompanied by a sense of purpose and skill, as technical skills obtained during their working lives are called upon for the safe running of the underground space of the decommissioned coal mine. Although extractive work at Caphouse Colliery was abandoned in 1985, the National Coal Mining Museum is classified as a working coal mine: "We are still bound by 2014 health and safety regulations, so the guides have still got responsibilities under these regulations, whether they're an electrician, a fitter, a winder, or a deputy. So, they need to be aware of them responsibilities."[56]

51 *Ibidem*.
52 Interview conducted with Steve Graham on 26 February 2022.
53 Interview conducted with Ian Whibberley on 26 February 2022.
54 Interview conducted with Ian Steele on 22 September 2022.
55 C.E. Ariese, M. Wróblewska, *op. cit.*, p. 39–40. Engaging ex-miners for a long period by employing them as miner–guides bespeaks a thoroughgoing commitment to inclusion on behalf of the museum: "Asking someone to participate in a focus group interview for a museum program is relatively shallow inclusion, whereas hiring someone specifically as a representative of a certain community, for instance, reveals a more long-term intent".
56 Interview conducted with Pete Wordsworth on 22 September 2022.

The strategy of employing former miners as tour guides benefits both former miners and museum visitors, as visitors are acquainted with a vision of the past informed by personal experience, whilst ex-miners are enabled to purposefully and pridefully relive their pasts and utilise their learned knowledge and skills on a regular basis. This strategy results in dynamic and inclusive dialogues about coal mining history and heritage.

The challenges of doing oral history at the National Coal Mining Museum

There are manifold challenges involved in broadcasting oral testimony in a live, public setting. Whilst setting up a direct relationship between former miners and museum visitors is highly advantageous for the uninterrupted transferral of historical knowledge from its custodians to members of the public, the resulting encounter is occasionally marked by dissonance or discomfort. For example, members of the public who partake in the sensationalisation of mining accidents and disasters represent a special challenge for the miner-guides, many of whom hold traumatic associations with such distressing events. For one of the miner-guides who was himself involved in one, the excited obsession of some museum visitors with mining accidents is jarring, and to be swiftly neutralised during the underground tour: "To me personally, I don't know about the rest of the lads, it's something you shouldn't dwell on. Because if you were to dwell on it, you wouldn't do the job."[57]

Visiting members of the public who once worked in the coal industry represent a challenge, despite being warmly welcomed at the museum. Some encroach excessively on the narration of the miner-guide: "Some of the worst people to take on a tour underground is ex-miners, because 'we didn't do it like that at our pit, we didn't call it that at our pit,' and they all talk amongst themselves."[58] The miner-guides must tread a fine line between letting visiting former miners tell their personal story and delivering the underground tour that they wish to, which they have diligently developed, rehearsed, and invested with their individual interpretations and quirks. Elderly or infirm visiting former miners, and the emotions evoked by revisiting a coal mine, can be difficult for the miner-guides to respond to: "They might be 80 years old, and you see the tears in their eyes. It really upsets you because they're proud. We've had old deputies and everything. They come, old colliery managers and the lot, and they come down, they've come in wheelchairs and everything and it's hard for them. And I'll be honest with you, it does pull on your heartstrings."[59] Difficulty also ensues when the miner-guides are confronted with visiting former miners who voice opposing opinions to their

57 Interview conducted with Steve Graham on 26 February 2022.
58 Interview conducted with Ian Steele on 22 September 2022.
59 Interview conducted with Ian Whibberley on 26 February 2022.

own about the 1984–1985 Miners' Strike, as they are torn between defending their personal principles, permitting multivocality on a contested historical event, and diffusing a potentially conflictive disagreement. Such moments produce uncomfortable tensions between the overlapping individual identities of the miner–guide, who is simultaneously "the ex-miner and the current tour guide."[60] Complex class subjectivities come into play for miner–guides during tours: "As guides they exercise autonomy over tour groups and tell their own stories, yet as ex-miners they cannot help but remind visitors of (even if reticent about publicly accounting for) the economic and political events that have left them redundant [colliery closure]."[61]

Employing former miners in a capacity which requires them to recount the past also obliges them to engage in an extensive degree of emotional labour and opens them to the cognitive challenge of remembering. Selectivity, partiality, and patchiness are integral to individual memory and the process of remembering.[62] The process of remembering itself incurs a process of forgetting, and forgetting is an occupational hazard of the miner–guide.[63] Whilst the miner–guides remember a lot about the realities of mining work, they cannot and do not remember everything: "There are some very knowledgeable people, and there are some people who can remember a conversation they had 50 years ago. And there are some people like me: two or three years down the line, and it is gone. We are not all storage facilities."[64]

The delegation, by the museum management to the miner–guides, of the responsibility to share oral testimonies of mining work and impart historical knowledge to members of the public implies the challenges innate to any power-sharing project. The museum management convenes regular meetings during which the miner–guides can express concerns or suggestions relating to the underground tours. Though this feedback loop functions to increase the stake the miner–guides have in the management of the National Coal Mining Museum; they are ultimately bound by their status as employees of the museum and a resulting need to be respectful of its agenda. Herein lies the paradox of participation and inclusion, especially as it relates to actively including former industrial workers in the production of their historical record at museums: "its democratising agenda becomes merely rhetorical as soon as the promise of egalitarian access and shared authority is constrained by a unilaterally determined set of social

60 B. Dicks, *op. cit.*, p. 438.
61 *Ibidem*.
62 J.K. Olick, *Collective memory: the two cultures*, "Sociological Theory", vol. 17, no. 3 (1999), p. 334.
63 J. Assmann, *Communicative and cultural memory*, in A. Erll, A. Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin 2008, p. 113.
64 Interview conducted with Steve Graham on 26 February 2022.

outcomes."[65] The model of employing former miners as tour guides, a non-extractive model of doing oral history insofar as it bestows members of a subaltern group otherwise atomised by deindustrialisation with continued agency to control how their history is told and shared, risks becoming extractive when the goodwill of such individuals is exhausted. Between 26 October and 30 October 2022, after the museum proposed a pay offer that was half the rate of inflation, the miner–guides took industrial action.[66] Thankfully, the threat of further industrial action exacted from the museum a 10.5 per cent rise in pay for the miner–guides.[67]

Conclusion

This article has reaffirmed a long-standing consensus that the inclusion of oral testimony in the museum offer is desirable. It has illuminated some of the shortcomings in how this has been attempted and implemented hitherto. The preponderant model of including oral testimony in the exhibits of European industrial museums and heritage sites has involved a professional historian interviewing and recording a former industrial worker, and a museum curator editing the recording and inserting it into the museum space as part of a broader curated narrative. This model leaves former industrial workers negligible room to determine how their history is publicly communicated and leaves museum visitors little opportunity to independently interpret or interact with the historical accounts of such former industrial workers, which has negative consequences for their engagement and enjoyment.

The model of employing former industrial workers as tour guides, as operationalised at the National Coal Mining Museum, simultaneously ensures that the educational objectives of the museum are met and that the personal stories of former coal miners are told *mostly* on their own terms. Without the intervention of professional historians and museum curators in their conversation, former miners are freed from the worry of having to wonder how and by whom their firsthand account is going to be heard, and museum visitors are liberated to engage in genuine and uninhibited questioning and dialogue with historical actors. This model is not without its issues, but it is a model which centres former industrial workers in the retelling of their collective pasts and involves them as stakeholders in the heritagisation of these pasts.

Furthermore, this model encourages the existence of dynamic, unhindered, unmediated dialogue between eyewitnesses to the past of coal extraction and contemporary museum visitors. This avoids the pitfalls of oral eyewitness accounts

65 H. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 485.

66 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-63389631 [accessed: 07.10.2024].

67 G. Adams, *National Coal Mining Museum agrees 10.5% pay rise for striking workers*, "Museums Association", 25 November 2022, https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2022/11/national-coal-mining-museum-agrees-10-5-pay-rise-for-striking-workers/# [accessed: 07.10.2024].

being conveyed to museum audiences and the public in an excessively curated, manicured form. Rather than receiving an account born from the prerogatives of an interviewing professional historian, filtered through the mind of a professional museum curator, museum visitors can interview eyewitnesses themselves. Consequently, these eyewitnesses can adjust their accounts, being attentive to the specific questions of the museum visitor and thereby creating a reactive and immersive learning experience. The directness of the eyewitness–visitor interaction characterises the shared oral history with spontaneity and high emotional resonance and frees it from the rigid framing often imposed by traditional, top-down curatorial processes.

As a fluid, dialogical, and interactive model of oral history in the museum space, the model used at the National Coal Mining promotes a deep connection between the lived experiences of former miners and museum visitors, and delivers them each a stake in the interpretation of the past. Unfortunately, it is an unsustainable model insofar as eyewitnesses to the industrial past are a precious, finite resource. Nonetheless, just as coal did, this valuable resource should have its time in the sun.

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Summary
A long-standing consensus among scholars and museum professionals asserts that the inclusion of oral testimony in museum spaces is desirable. This article briefly overviews the attempts made hitherto to include oral testimonies as part of the offer at European industrial museums and heritage sites and asks if there is a museal model more adept at establishing meaningful dialogue between historical actors and museum visitors, less mediated by the agendas and assumptions of museum managements. It finds exemplary the model of employing former coal miners as tour guides, used at the National Coal Mining Museum in Wakefield, England, exploring the ways in which this model centres former industrial workers in the retelling of their collective pasts and permits members of the public to engage in genuine and uninhibited questioning, illuminating the challenges involved in doing live, dialogical oral history.