Case Study - Valuing and Sustaining Nottingham’s Industrial Lace heritage in Partnership with Communities

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This paper documents the development of a partnership between researchers at NTU and members of the Nottingham lace community. The origins of NTU lie in its establishment as a School of Art and Design in the Mid 19th Century that provided training and skills to workers destined for the East Midland’s burgeoning lace industry. NTU is currently the custodian of a 75,000 item lace archive which, along with its original Waverley building represents some of the material, or tangible heritage of Nottingham’s lace industry. However, a research team at Nottingham Trent University is engaged with the intangible heritage of Nottingham lace and how these two concepts of heritage intersect for communities associated directly with the industry. Although production generally took place outside of the city, the industry’s trading base was in Nottingham itself and its impact on the social, cultural, economic, and physical landscape was significant. The lace industry’s decline and eventual collapse in the late 20th Century left communities not only bereft of their livelihood but also their identities as industrial citizens within a cohesive society.

In collaboration with members of the public the research team addressed these human aspects of the industry’s extinction. Over a period of three years the project brought together former lace workers, their families and other interested parties from the wider community via a series of informal social events, social media networking, relationship development, direct contact and word of mouth. Supported by the research team this group, ‘Nottingham P:lace’ became established as a self- supporting social network and independent body dedicated to sustaining the intangible heritage of Nottingham lace.

Within the context of a supporting academic framework, this paper discusses the study’s collaborative process and presents an analysis of its outcomes.

Keywords: Collaboration; communities; textile heritage; society; well-being.

Introduction

This paper documents the development of a partnership between researchers at NTU and members of the Nottingham lace community. The wider community that we, the researchers, worked with consisted of former lace industry workers, along with the families and descendants of lace industry workers including a group located in Australia. Designers, artists, historians, museum professionals and heritage entrepreneurs also became involved as participants in the project that is discussed here. The core, consistently participating group within this wider community emerged as largely comprised of former lace workers, the families of lace workers and people who claim the Nottingham lace industry as a significant component of their cultural identity. To understand the roots of this cultural identity it is relevant to place it within the historical context in which it developed.

Lace Heritage

The East Midlands and its people have long been associated with technological innovation in textile manufacturing, which began in 1589 with the invention of the stocking frame knitting machine by Rev. Lee who was then located in a village on the outskirts of Nottingham. The following two centuries saw an intensive cottage industry develop, both here and abroad until the principles of framework knitting became the basis on which mechanised lace production was founded. Initially the framework knitting machine was used to create netting circa 1760, which was then embroidered by hand by an army of hand embroiderers. This was followed by the invention of Nottingham lace machines, invented by Heathcoat (1808) and Leaver (1813), which twisted threads much in the same way as bobbin lace in the early 19th century. It is the
heritage of Nottingham Lace, the mechanised lace industry, that really put the region ‘on the map’ in terms of scale of production and global influence.

The rapid development of mechanised lace production during the 19th Century led to a burgeoning industry that was, at its peak in early 20th century, employing 60,000 people across Nottingham, its suburbs and the Erewash Valley into Derbyshire (Mason, 2013). The context of this rapid growth of textile manufacturing was that lace had previously been an unaffordable hand made commodity, which only the wealthiest could consume. The manufacturing process enabled the burgeoning middle classes of the growing industrial revolution to afford machine made lace which was created to emulate hand made styles. The technological innovations in lace machines came from the drive to copy hand made styles.

During this early 19th century period there was a growing recognition by government and industrialists that the lace industry, which had been developed through entrepreneurial spirit, also required design innovation to ensure that there was continued growth. Nottingham, therefore, became the centre of formal education for those who wished to enter the lace industry as both designers and in the more technical role of draughting. Initially, from 1838, courses in drawing were established at the Mechanic’s Institute followed by the opening of the Nottingham Government School of Design in 1843. Nottingham was the fourth art school to open after the Royal College of Art in London, Manchester and York. The current incarnation of the school of design, Nottingham Trent University, owes its beginnings to this political and industrial context of the Victorian era and ‘Waverley Building’, still part of the university estate, was a purpose built art school funded by the local lace industry, opened in 1865. The relationship between the industry and the school continued in formal and informal ways and a teaching collection to support the educational process was established when William Felkin, the author of the 1867 publication ‘History of the Machine- Wrought Hosiery and Lace Manufactures’, donated four pattern books containing thousands of cotton and silk point laces from the early 1800s. Donations and contributions continued to as least as late as 1946 when the library and other materials were purchased from the widow of William Pegg, a renowned and successful lace student, tutor and designer. These contributions amongst others (circa 75000) now form part of the Nottingham Trent University Lace Archive.

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The Decline of the Industry

The lace industry in Nottingham began to decline in the early part of the 20th century when the 1st world war, the changing role of women and its impact upon fashions, as well as a lack of design innovation began to affect the industry. During the 20th century the lace industry went into permanent decline and in 2017 we find that there is now one business left in England based in the east midlands which manufactures Nottingham lace and employs a small team of highly skilled and knowledgeable people. Over the course of a century the scale of lace manufacturing has transformed from employing around a third of the Nottingham population to less than a 100 people.

It is in this context of a textile industry which has demised but significant numbers of people involved in the Nottingham lace industry since its emergence over two centuries ago until the early 2000s led the research team to explore the more human aspects of its heritage and how that has, or has not been recognised in Nottingham.

The lace industry’s decline and eventual collapse in the late 20th Century left communities not only bereft of their livelihood but also their identities as industrial citizens within a cohesive society. From prior and ongoing work with Nottingham lace communities the team established that an overriding theme is one of feeling that aside from a few examples of “ambient heritage” (Samuels 1994) such as the lace motif concrete cladding of the Nottingham Contemporary Art gallery, street signage and lace themed public art the lace industry is ignored by the city that it was once such a vital part of. A key issue among citizens of Nottingham, and specifically those industrial citizens of the former lace industry (Strangleman, 2011) is the lack of a museum dedicated to it that both celebrates the impact it had as a world leading industry and offers displays of its artefacts and achievements. Moreover, the presence of a major working museum in Calais¹. The town of Calais has important links to Nottingham and is itself historically significant to the story of the Nottingham Lace industry. Nottingham lace machines were smuggled to Calais at the beginning of the 20th century and therefore the fact that the French have seen fit to celebrate their heritage seems only to aggravate the disappointment and resentment felt by those communities.

Alice Mah (2012) explains that the redundant workers of formerly successful industries are often thought of as ‘losers’ or the ‘waste’ products of the capitalist driven ‘creative destruction’ processes from which urban regeneration emerges. She argues that local governments are desperate to make the transition from being known as places of urban decline to those of hip, creative and therefore desirable centres riding on their ‘authentic’ industrial heritage credentials. In this vision of newly constructed urban narratives there is no room for the shameful failed industries of the past, however humanly present they may be. Thus, the new civic pride taken in the many ‘creative quarters’ mushrooming across the UK, USA and Australia is countered by the civic shame, or to paraphrase Collins (2016); those versions of the city and its recent industrial pasts that do not warrant or inspire pride.

The Tensions Between Tangible and Intangible Heritage

Unable to provide the museum so badly wanted by industrial citizens and other interested parties associated, or interested in the heritage of the East Midland’s lace industry, the research team looked to the concepts of ‘Intangible’ and ‘unauthorised heritage’. Developed by leading heritage scholar Professor Laura Jane Smith these concepts challenge the primacy of ‘authorised’ heritage and explain that the privileging of monuments, buildings and artefacts

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¹ La Cite de la Dentelle, Calais, France.
deemed worthy of preservation and edification prioritised narratives of power, thus denying other, non-sanctioned narratives (Smith, 2006). Smith argues that since those without power or privilege tend to leave few, if any ‘valuable’ material artefacts, their narratives are considered to lack significant meaning so are therefore dismissed, overlooked and unacknowledged. She argues for the recognition of non-material heritage, that is, ‘unauthorised’ and ‘intangible’ heritage to be recognised as equal in value to that of the ‘authorised’ and ‘tangible’.

During 2012/13 the research team collaborated with Nottingham Castle to develop a season of events to celebrate the regions heritage called lace:here:now. The season ran across the city using key cultural spaces as venues to engage the public with both the ‘tangible’ heritage of this industry - artefacts and the history as well as contemporary art and design to demonstrate the the continued inspirational impact that the material culture has on practice. The season intended to offer a range of opportunities to explore lace – its history, its impact on the city through economic, social and cultural contexts: the opportunity to interact with lace artefacts through exhibitions and the opening of archives; to engage with dialogue with those who worked in the industry; consider the impact of the industry on the architecture of the city; through exhibitions of artworks inspired by this rich industrial heritage; film showings of archive footage of the city and its lace industry as well as a premiere of ‘The Lacemakers:The forgotten story of English Lace’ directed by Edward Jarvis and introduced by Robert Lindsay; talks by lace historians such as Sheila Mason, Director of Cluny Lace, and author of ‘Nottingham Lace 1760s-1950s’; story telling and lace making events. The intention of these events was to offer those in the city and beyond the opportunity to celebrate the civic pride associated with the impact of the lace industry. This season was a great success and the Lace Works:Contemporary Art and Nottingham Lace exhibition held at Nottingham Castle had the largest number of visitors recorded in their exhibition history (Briggs-Gooke & Dean, 2013).

Donovan’s (2015) PhD research led her to complete autoethnographies through hiring two market stalls in 2011 called ‘Lacepoint’ where she sold, made and exhibited lace as a ‘foil’ to draw people in to talk about their relationship with Nottingham’s lace heritage. These market stall environments sought to create ‘conditions where power between ‘actors’ could, in a Foucauldian sense, be elastic, contingent and open ended, and thus mark our dialogical terrain in which multiple epistemologies and discourses of identity might be shared’ (Donovan, 2016) These events brought together people from the city and beyond as well as a broad age demographic to talk about lace, as Cover (2006) argues they can do so in a context where they can interact and take authorship as opposed to responding to a guided text or activity. Therefore, the initial discussion may begin from a displayed object but from there on the conversations would develop from an ‘interaction’ between ‘actors’. The ‘actors’ asked questions, shared stories and talked about what lace means to them and Nottingham ‘then’ and ‘now’ and these were recorded in note form after they had left so as not to disturb the flow of dialogue or create self-consciousness. This also, inevitably, included their frustrations at the limited access they have to the material culture of this industry ‘It must not disappear without trace’ was the refrain.

Community Narratives

What became apparent to the organisers and researchers of these events is that there are a great many stories and personal histories, in particular, of those who worked in the lace industry that are missing from our understanding of this industry and the impact that it has had upon their sense of community and identity. Their willingness to talk and share their stories offered insight beyond the nostalgic memories – it offered perspectives on the economic, cultural and social context of the city during the post 2nd world war years which enriched the ‘authorised’ versions of this period.
As a result, the research team began to consider what it might be possible to provide for the city as an alternative to the physical museum that many people felt was lacking, as well as healing the psychic wounds that may, or may not have been inflicted by Nottingham’s civic shame regarding the industry. To do this the research team set about bringing together the material or physical, ‘tangible’ traces of the Nottingham lace industry, such as those that are kept at the lace archive at Nottingham Trent University and the non-material ‘intangible’, narratives of the lace community. These two versions of Nottingham lace’s heritage intersect in the social, cultural, economic and physical landscapes of the city at points around the city centre. Examples include the Arkwright Building at NTU, where so many lace industry workers were trained, the waste ground beneath the sleek tramways that was once the Narrow Marsh slums where so many poor lace workers lived, and The Pitcher and Piano pub is located in a 17th century church, now on the premises that was once the site of a privately run museum dedicated to Nottingham lace. As well as the lace market itself once the administrative capital of the industry with ‘listed buildings’ of Victorian warehouses and and now the home of apartments, nightclubs and the creative industries.

Rather than reject examples of that which might be understood by Smith’s definition of ‘authorised’ heritage, the team instead sought to integrate them with the stories, biographies, recollections, and oral histories of industrial lace communities. This work began with an afternoon ‘Lace Tea Party’ at the NTU Bonington Building, which is the home of the Lace Archive. The schedule offered a screening of the film ‘The Lacemakers: The forgotten history of English Lace’ alongside displays of items from the Lace Archive and refreshments. The research team conducted informal interviews with guests to establish a nascent community of former lace workers, relatives, creatives, academics and heritage professionals. Two oral histories were recorded in tandem between a (female) former Managing Director and (male) Technical Manager of a major Nottingham lace factory were created in the weeks following the event, which as the dialogue unfolded revealed long held beliefs that both had independently made decisions they each felt had contributed to the demise of the company they had worked for. The revelations that each made came about through an initial ‘catch up’ on the life of the other since redundancy in the early 2000s, individual accounts of daily life at work, reminiscences, and eventually ‘confessions’ of mistakes that each felt they had made. The recording was made in the Lace Archive and here, these two people unburdened themselves of years of guilt, apologised to one another for what they felt they had done wrong, reassured each other that they had done ‘what they thought was right at the time’ and parted with a warm embrace. On following up the interview with these two participants the interviewer, a member of the research team, discovered that both had found the experience healing, cathartic, and the female participant in particular “felt much, much better about the whole sorry business, it was good to get it out” (2012, name with-held).

Subsequently we brought together a range of people from the Nottingham lace community but specifically aimed to attract a cross generational participant body. For six months Debbie Bryan’s Shop and Tea Rooms, which is a creative, lace themed venue situated in Nottingham’s Lace Market district hosted monthly meet ups for a varying 12 to 17 people. On instigating this project we originally conceived it as being solely an oral history project. However, we learned through our consultations that the group were interested in including other media to collaboratively create what might be understood as digital, multi-media biscuit tins, shoe boxes, or family albums that could be not only looked at, browsed through and listened to, but
also continually developed as people’s life stories continue. A group identity of P:Lace emerged which they felt articulated the aims of the meetings.

The group stimulated creative thinking about alternative approaches to collecting the histories. We initially developed the idea of digital storytelling. While enthusiastic about the possibilities that this model can offer, many attendees felt that it failed to imbue the subject of the digital artefact with sufficient gravitas and recognition. As such we adopted the term ‘digital heritage album’ to identify the multimedia, digital artefact that will enable participants to work together, create and pass on that knowledge. Digital heritage albums, can be added to and developed over time, rather than a finite archive of family and social history. They also promote inter-generational contributions along with a continuing family and community history.

The group members actively engaged with social media via Facebook (sharing digital images and information), YouTube (webcasts of P:Lace meetings) and have also instigated publication of an article in NOTTSGEN Digest (Volume 8, Issue 71) and a blogpost to ‘Rootsweb’. The article and blog were seen by Megan Fox, President of The Australian Society of the Lacemakers of Calais, who has subsequently expressed her members’ keen interest in our group and their wish to be a part of it. Megan Fox joined the December Nottingham P:Lace meet up via Skype and explained how a Nottingham lace community came to settle in Australia, and since then her members have been corresponding with Nottingham P:Lace members.

A core of 9 people attended regularly and gradually took ownership of the group, directing the meet ups according to how they wanted it to be. For example, by the 3rd meet up the ‘organisers’ had decided that the next month they would bring in their wedding dresses, many of which were made from Nottingham lace. At the 4th meet up 2 wedding dresses arrived amid much excitement from the group. A former, now elderly lace worker brought her wedding dress and explained that her employers had given her the lace for her wedding present. Another person brought in her Mother’s Nottingham lace and tulle gown, all 100 metres of it, complete with the original receipt.

Once the receipt was inspected the group found that the dress had in fact been made, fitted and sold from the exact premises in which the meet up was taking place. Having recently lost her Mother the participant was evidently moved by this discovery and having experienced what had happened “felt that she (her Mother) was close” (2015, name with-held). The former lace worker actually gave her dress to the owner of Debbie Bryan’s Shop and Tea Rooms so that other people could see and appreciate it. She later told the researcher facilitating the meet ups “The thing that people don’t realise is that I loved every single piece of lace that I worked with, loved it.” (2015, name with-held).

Conclusions

The researcher’s observations of the monthly meet ups was that the purpose of them became that they should be spaces for people to tell their stories, to be heard and to have their perspectives on the Nottingham lace industry acknowledged, appreciated, and recognised. This seemed to apply to all ages, from the 16 year old granddaughter of a former Twisthand, the (mature) grandson of a Calais lace family originally from Nottingham, the Australian descendants group who joined in via Skype, to the sisters who had grown up in poverty among the Narrow Marsh slums. The evidence of well-being that emerged for those people is to be seen in the ongoing exchanges posted on the dedicated FaceBook page, and in the continuing relationships that were established at those meet ups.

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During the earlier stages of this work the research team became very familiar with and indeed was very sympathetic towards complaints about Nottingham’s lack of a museum dedicated to its lace industry. For the groups that the team have worked with the so far, those complaints now seems to have fallen silent.

The methodology used to develop these projects creates dichotomies in that the ‘performative’ dialogue exists only in its moment of expression and this is a difficult balance with traditional concepts of valid knowledge or heritage. There is no formal trace of knowledge in an accountable, measurable format. What remains is subjective and relies upon nuance and sensorial experiences. This then leads to questions about how we might use the narratives of others to further develop knowledge and potentially creates tensions between an exploitation of peoples lived experience against an opportunity to create a space where ‘small narratives’ can be recognized and valued.

In conclusion the research team found that the benefits of social interaction around a common theme that is elicited by intersected heritage concepts can lead to well- being in the community. At the research team facilitated meet ups, and now at independent, community arranged events the stories, reminiscences, ‘show and tells’ and Facebook chats took their place as valid, intangible and unauthorised but vitally, legitimate heritage. What is most important is that the community now recognise and vigorously support the validity of their intangible unauthorised heritage. Strangleman (2011) observed that a difficulty with industrial citizens is that they can find it difficult to see as legitimate, or authorised, anything that is not in the realm of the professional, such as educators and ‘museum people’ (Strangleman, ibid). Therefore, it is vital that ‘professionals’ include space and opportunity to recognise the intangible and unauthorised through engaging with those who have a vested interest in this significant industrial heritage.

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