

Part I

Engaging

with

activist/movement archives

ORCID ID:

0000-0002-5356-7460

Abstract (195 words)

This chapter explores the collection and utilisation of source materials in Britain over the last seventy years for historical study for and by a range of political activists broadly associated with political parties, industrial organisations and social movements of the left and the working class. Drawing upon traditions of auto-didacticism, independent working-class education and related critiques, this chapter examines the absences and misrepresentations of working-class life and the development of social and economic relations within most authorised heritage discourses, and endeavours such as the Marx Memorial Library and Schools, the Working-Class Movement Library, the National Museum of Labour History and the South Wales Mining Library.

In discussing these initiatives, particular emphasis is given to their programmes of (democratic) history production and publication, exhibition and education programmes and how they were designed

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to connect with and make a contribution to contemporary struggles, building class and other solidarities and providing those engaging with their activities with the tools to better achieve their aims of social, economic and political transformations. The final section draws some connections, continuities and ruptures of some contemporary social movement engagement with the production and use of history with regard to their contemporary activism.

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Making history of struggle part of the struggle

Andrew Flinn

This chapter describes the motivations and histories of independent, autonomous archives, libraries and resource centres created and used by political and social movement activists in the United Kingdom (UK) to document and support their activist practices. Activists in Britain (and elsewhere) have a long history of creating alternative knowledge spaces with physical archival, object and library collections which function as a resource for education and campaigning, as a forum to hold historically informed discussion and debates, and as centres of collective production of a range of 'useful' and critically engaged historical publications. Today some of this activity takes place in online environments instead of, or supplementing, physical spaces.

The research, exhibitions, publications and other products resulting from the activities undertaken by these initiatives are intended not only to create 'useful' histories of past struggles which support campaigning and struggles in the present, but also to challenge and subvert the orthodox historical narratives which misrepresent or ignore other histories and presences. This process of collectively creating knowledge and learning from the past for the present and future will be referred to in this chapter as 'history activism'. Critical commentators have termed the selective privileging of orthodox historical narrative as Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) (Smith 2006), which elides struggle or resistance histories that build solidarity, a collective consciousness and an identification with a shared past. Although as this chapter will suggest these authorised narratives shift and change over time, incorporating aspects of previously marginalised histories, and the 'non-authorised' counter-narratives that seek to subvert AHD frequently have their own omissions and absences.

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I will examine the development of some UK history-activist spaces such as the National Museum of Labour History (NMLH) and the People's History Museum (PHM), the Working Class Movement Library (WCML), the South Wales Mining Library (SWML), Marx Memorial Library (MML), the public monuments, festival and museum at Tolpuddle, and the Cooperative Archive and Museum, all of which have sought to challenge AHD from a socialist or people's history perspective. In exploring this history, the chapter will discuss how the activist frame affects the creation of the archive or library, helps to define the collections and the use of the archival space and the extent to which the institution, its collections and its broader context inform the history produced in these workshops. Although the institutions examined are broadly from the labour movement, similar examinations could be made of the role of Black, African and other national, faith and ethnic heritage bodies; queer and LGBTQ archives; and feminist initiatives for instance.

Besides working in and with these types of institutions (between 1989 and 2001 I was variously a volunteer, archivist and researcher at the NMLH during its early years in Manchester and at times a member of various regional and national labour and socialist history groups), I also have a research interest in public history, critical heritage discourses and history from below initiatives. As a frame of reference for this work, I emphasise the importance of gender, race and class in terms of challenging and refiguring the AHD in the subject matter of exhibitions (e.g. industrial museums without workers, women, people of different ethnicities, lesbians and gays, people with disabilities), in collections which neglect the material culture of these people, and in the attitudes and ethos of the cultural elites which (still) dominate the heritage professions and in so doing "deny the cultural and historical legitimacy and agency of those groups, including working class people, whose cultural, social and historical experiences fall outside the conceptual frameworks validated by the AHD" (Shackel et al., 2011, 291–300).

At some point in their histories all the endeavours examined here aim to provide alternative, activist-created and curated narratives to those typically advanced by mainstream history and heritage (Kean, 2011). Whilst 'new working class studies' and critical community history projects which seek to collect, display and study the full lived experiences of working-class peoples or women's or Black history are very significant, this chapter is predominantly concerned with activities which are explicitly "deployed . . . in political struggles for social and economic justice" (Shackel et al., 2011, 293). In particular, I focus on those efforts which seek to elude the appropriation and commodification of these histories, and rather seek to produce historical resources which help communities and activists negotiate contemporary challenges such as marginalisation, discrimination, workplace organisation, de-industrialisation, disempowerment and gentrification (Iles and Roberts 2012, 43–44; Klubock and Fontes 2009, 3).

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First, I briefly introduce independent radical archives and heritage activities and some of the common attributes that characterise them. I then give a brief history of some of the many labour, working-class and other radical, autonomous museums, libraries and archives in the UK. I address the development of the National Museum of Labour History, now known as the People's History Museum (NMLH/PHM), in more detail. Its nearly fifty-year history and its development first in London and later in Manchester touch on many of the key motivations, challenges, tensions and changes that many of those working in these bodies have experienced. In the course of these histories, I consider questions of the broader political context, political parties and movements; the significance of class and other identities; questions of ownership, autonomy and control over culture and knowledge production; notions of professionalism, activist learning and education programmes; and history activism, the use of histories and historical narratives within political and social movements. The chapter concludes by attempting to identify how an activist approach impacts on this type of archive and heritage activity, and what the contemporary and future challenges and opportunities for radical education in politically-aligned archives, libraries and museums are in supporting the public making of and engagement with history in order to challenge and transform society and social relations.

Mausoleums or spaces of education, resistance and liberation

This chapter echoes the assertion by previous history activists that where museums, libraries and archives have been associated with such an activist agenda, they should not be viewed as -"mausoleums' or 'store houses of sacred relics', but seek to provide resources, perhaps fuel or nutrition, for those challenging and disrupting the status quo. These endeavours are born out of an understanding of the making of history not as neutral and objective, academic and dry, worthy or nostalgic but rather as an aspect of political commitment and activism. This chapter proceeds from the understanding that activism is fundamentally concerned with reflexive learning, often carried out in the course of struggle and as part of collaborative effort and put into practice in continuation of the struggle or campaign (Choudry 2015). History activism is concerned with this sort of learning, learning from the past for the present and the future and using the past to mobilise and organise in the present. Thus this chapter is primarily concerned with the power and resonance of those histories, the "useful past", to different communities and groups, and their utility as a mobilising and campaigning tool. The use of myth, histories of victories and defeats, and struggles against past oppressions and discriminations to mobilise social movements is well known, but underpins the focus of this chapter. But this characterisation of history activism leads to significant questions about what happens when these initiatives lose their dominant activist connection, become more professional and reliant on public

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funding. Do they tend to more closely resemble mainstream heritage bodies providing educational resources for academics and a general audience and concerned with the preservation of collections? Can they still contribute to challenging the AHD despite the loss of a close connection to a particular activist programme?

At varying points in the histories of these endeavours there is often a debate between activist and professional conceptions of what independent, autonomous museums, libraries and archives should be doing. Expressions favouring a more activist-focussed approach are not hard to find. During the debates over the direction of the People's Palace in Glasgow in the early 1990s (disputes marked by the resignation of Elspeth King as curator of the People's Palace), the Scottish activist and labour historian James Young argued for labour history and labour history museums not "as monuments or mausoleums" but rather as "resource centres to equip those who are struggling to eliminate unemployment, elitist education, poor housing and poverty" (Young 1990, 4).

A few years earlier, a 1985 meeting convened by the Society for the Study of Labour History and the Social History Curators Group debated the place of labour history in museums. Whilst King (1988, 11) warned against the "ghettoization" of "labour history from the rest of the material culture of the working classes" in separate institutions, labour historian and activist John Gorman argued for the importance of independent labour museums as "places of educational activity drawing upon the living memory of the community and not mausoleums of holy relics" where the past could be used actively as "a guide to the future" (Gorman 1988, 5).

What is striking about these statements is not just their explicit connection of learning about the past with contemporary struggles and forging a better world in the future, but also the clear rejection of the perceived "mausoleum" or storehouse approach of the mainstream heritage sector. These debates about the role of activist history museums and archives, their collections and objectives, and their audiences are clearly apparent in the trajectory of many independent labour and other archives, museums and libraries including the NMLH over the last thirty years. As suggested earlier in these history activist endeavours and initiatives, there are commonly two related objectives at work. There is a commitment to challenge the AHD's erasures and falsifications, and this engagement with public history (including the attempted subversion of dominant historical narratives) is embedded within a clear activist framework serving broader agendas of political struggles for social justice and civil rights. This chapter examines how some of these initiatives seek to meet the challenges of engaging with more inclusive formations of working-class identities and labour politics that transcend, without ignoring, the past exclusions of women, of ethnic minorities, of sexual identities, and attempt to overcome or survive the relative decline (or at least fundamental evolution) of organised labour (Kluboek and Fontes 2009, 4).

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Independent and community-based heritage sites¹

Studies of independent and community-based archives, libraries and museums have tended to distinguish between those politically motivated endeavours acting to counter the absences and misrepresentations relating to a particular group or community in mainstream heritage narratives and those whose inspiration is not so directly political, but rather is borne of a shared enthusiasm for the history of a place, occupation or interest. Whilst it is an important distinction, even the most locally focused community archive projects are inherently political with individuals and communities taking an active, participatory role in telling their own history and preserving collections that might not otherwise be saved or heard. Many independent and community-based heritage activities originate as a response to perceptions that mainstream heritage bodies are not interested in their histories. For some working-class, minority ethnic or LGBTQ independent community-based heritage activists, this perception is reinforced by a well-established mistrust of mainstream heritage institutions based on past experience of interactions with these bodies and by a desire to challenge these misrepresentations. Individuals and groups within these communities respond to these absences and misrepresentations by establishing their own autonomous museums, archives and libraries, “useful history” interventions into the political and cultural sphere as part of a broader agenda of social justice and political transformation. Such activity is best thought of as a social movement (or as part of a broader social movement) rather than one of preservation and heritage (Crooke 2007, 27; Flinn and Stevens 2009, 7; Gilliland and Flinn 2013, 18).

Some independent UK labour historical institutions have their roots in the growth of the organised labour movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But after the Second World War, and especially from the 1960s onwards, drawing inspiration from the work of the Communist Party Historians Group, new social history approaches, the New Left, civil rights movements, growing numbers of history from below and History Workshop-type endeavours (which sought to recover “hidden histories” and challenge the narratives of mainstream archives and museums) established new working-class, women’s, Black, gay and lesbian history bodies, including archives, libraries, museums, institutes, resource centres, infoshops and autonomous spaces. Despite differences in terminology, there have been significant similarities in terms of the types of materials they collected and used, and the political purposes for which they utilised these “useful” histories.

One trajectory examined here is the shift (or struggle) between visions for these bodies as independent, social movement history activist organisations, and as more professionalised, more academic research and/or general public-focussed mainstream heritage bodies. Of course, this is not fixed binary choice, but a continuum on which organisations would change and move over

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time. Whilst many of these collections and independent institutions from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s have eventually made their way into professional, often higher education, repositories, others remained autonomous, committed to retaining control over the resources for the production of their useful histories.

In recent years, a combination of developments on the web, community computing and social technologies, and substantial public funding via the Heritage Lottery Fund has resulted in a significant growth of digital community-based heritage activity in the UK, including projects drawing inspiration from a profound desire to re-appropriate control over the “writing of one’s own story” (Flinn and Stevens 2009; Hall 2005). Alongside these publicly funded “independent” heritage activities, there remains a resilient strand of activist thinking which advocates an alternative, autonomous approach hostile, or at least antagonistic to AHD and Hall’s ‘The Heritage’ and also to much publicly funded “independent” heritage.

Independent working-class education and the origins of historical institutions

Independent labour archives and libraries long pre-dated the civil rights, new left and new social history movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Independent workers’ or working-class libraries developed in the UK in the nineteenth century associated with the first wave and second waves of cooperation, Chartism and some of the trade unions, notably the Miners’ Institutes and Libraries in South Wales and elsewhere (Baggs 2006). Mostly these were a response to dissatisfaction with the provision of library facilities to working-class readers rather than an attempt to provide a political resource for organised labour. But some exhibited a more political character. For example, libraries supported by local co-operative societies and guilds played a role in promoting education in co-operative principles and contained books about the theory and practice of co-operation. The foundation of the Pioneers’ Museum in Rochdale in 1931 was an acknowledgement of the importance of this advocacy and educative role (Burgess 2009, 27). Even in the current, perhaps more challenging days for the UK co-operative movement, the funding of a National Co-operative Archive and the refurbishment of the Rochdale Pioneers’ Museum shows that the movement retains a belief in the importance of education and fostering a cooperative mind set. Similarly, the Trade Union Congress (TUC)’s organisation of the centenary commemorations and establishment of a Martyr’s museum and library in Tolpuddle in 1934, was an attempt to establish an inspiring narrative of the strength and purposes of the organised labour movement in the UK in a period when it was under considerable strain and challenge (Jones 2002; Kean 2011). The museum and the annual festival continue to play an important role in reaffirming the roots and traditions of the organised labour movement. Jeremy Corbyn’s 2017

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speech at the festival was one in a series by leading Labour figures which emphasised the importance and relevance of the history of the Tolpuddle Martyrs and the mass movement that supported them for contemporary struggles (Corbyn 2017).

This more political, more didactic aspect became more pronounced in the twentieth century with development of large organised working-class political and industrial organisations and the growth of independent working-class education. The provision of working-class education classes (including economics and labour history) by the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) and Plebs League, as well as to a lesser extent by trade unions, cooperative societies and political parties increased the need for access to the books and publications which addressed the subjects of their study. Some adult working class education programmes included political theory and history, as being an essential part of the struggle for social change in workplace, at the ballot box and in more revolutionary situations (Ruskin History Workshop Students Collective 1981, 17–20).

The numbers of Miners' Institutes and Libraries in South Wales grew in the early twentieth century. After the First World War, many came under the control of political and union activists, including Aneurin Bevan who chaired the Tredegar Institute Library Committee in the 1920s. These changes in political control were reflected in the book choices, with Marx, political economy textbooks and works of labour history being added to the works of fiction. Again the notion that these spaces were resources for learning and struggling for a better future was very strong. As one commentator wrote, such books and the libraries in which they were held “were, in a real sense, pistols pointed at the entrails of capitalism, the intellectual sources from which the workers would draw the means to build a better world” (Johnson, 1973 reprinted in Francis & Williams 2013, 3).

Similarly located within the framework of the provision of class-based education was the establishment by the Labour Research Department (LRD) and supporters mainly inside the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1933 of Marx House schools and bookshops in London and in Manchester. Although the Manchester Marx House closed in 1945, Marx Memorial Library in London remains to this day as an independent library and archive of Marxist, socialist and working-class history (Marx Library 2008). The Marx Memorial Library and Workers' School was opened at 37 Clerkenwell Green to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Marx's death. The building itself had a significant place in working-class and socialist history as it was where the Social Democratic Federation's publishing arm, Twentieth Century Press had been located and where Lenin had worked on *Iskra*. A leaflet issued at the time to mark the lending library's opening stressed its working-class ownership, describing Marx House as an achievement for the class, which, if supported, would become a “real centre of working class culture”. This idea of control

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and ownership by the working class was actively promoted by the library. Fees were low and the lending library membership was limited to those from a “bona-fide working-class organisation (or the wife of a member)”. Potential members had to produce their organisation’s membership card, fully paid up, before they could join.

In the early years, the Marx House focussed on the provision of workers’ education and educational materials. It was only in the post-Second World War period that the idea of a “central national library of the literature of the labour movement” really took hold as the primary purpose for the building (Cohen, 1992). Today the two strands of education provision and resources for research and learning remain core to the library’s identity. There are a number of very significant collections, including over 61,000 books and pamphlets “relating to all aspects of the science of Marxism, the history of Socialism and the working class movement” and the UK International Brigades Association archive. A commitment to autonomy and working-class independence remain strong. Politically the library still has close links with the Communist Party, and though not opposed to accessing public money to support work on collections, it remains fundamentally independent. It is supported by its members and by affiliated labour movement organisations with a board of elected trustees, committed to promoting political education and historical research within a Marxist framework on the basis that such education “has the potential to make significant contribution to current intellectual and cultural debate in order to enrich civil society” (Marx Memorial Library 2015).

“People’s Remembrancers”: collecting and collectors

Activist collectors and the act of collecting are crucial to the existence and development of many of these independent libraries, museums and archives. After the Second World War, the study of labour movement and working-class history expanded inside and outside the universities – in WEA and adult education classes, the work of the Communist Party Historians Group, the History Workshop and oral history movements and other local labour history societies where academics and labour movement activists worked together to research histories of past labour movement struggles. The emphasis was often on identifying a useable past, of struggles, victories and setbacks, which suggested a progressive move forward towards socialism and economic justice but also provided lessons to be learnt for contemporary struggles in shaping that future. The example of E. P. Thompson and *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) greatly influenced these developments, but this work was in itself symptomatic of changing interests and approaches.

The growing interest in producing working-class history had important consequences for the formation of resource centres for researching and writing these histories and for the collection of “raw materials” that could support these historical investigations. This awareness of the need for materials to

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write such histories resulted on the one hand in an increased interest in the location and preservation of archival sources for labour movement research (Halstead 1978). In the 1960s and 1970s, the Archives and Resource committee of the newly formed Society for the Study of Labour History, founded in 1960 to recuperate “the rank and file, their aspirations and activities” (Robinson 2012, 59), sought to identify lost or endangered local union, cooperative and party branch records, and where possible to work with sympathetic local archivists, librarians and museum curators to find a local or university repository to look after these records and associated books, objects and ephemera. This process culminated in the early 1970s with the establishment of the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick as a home for the TUC archive and records of the British trade union movement (Bell et al., 2005).

On the other hand, a number of activists sought to personally collect the material culture of the working class and the labour movement and then to establish independent archives and museums, where such material could be held, controlled and consulted by the class the materials described. Individual collectors such as Henry Fry, Walter Southgate, James Klugman, Eddie and Ruth Frow, John Gorman and John Smethurst were all members of the CPGB or close to it, active in all branches of the labour movement (trade unions, cooperatives and the peace movement) and, Klugman excepted, for the most part working-class autodidacts or perhaps more accurately “organic intellectuals” educated not in the state education system of schools and universities but in formal and informal institutions of the organised labour movement. Robinson (2012) locates the urge to collect and document in the political ambitions and desire for future history making and remaking of this grassroots, autodidact activism that typified this generation. There could be a reverence accorded to this role. The obituary of John Smethurst, a labour movement activist, founder of the Trade Union Badge Collectors group, and close friend and collaborator of the Frows, described him as being the “essence of the labour history movement, a worker who made, recorded and rescued labour history, a people’s remembrancer” (Devine 2011–2011).

The Frows spent their summers travelling in their caravan touring second-hand book shops filling up their home with all sorts of publications, badges, archives, banners until eventually there was no more room to live, and the collection and its creators had to be re-housed in a property offered by Salford Council. While starting out as personal collections, the owners were keen that they were available to researchers interested in workers’ struggles and the labour movement. Even before they outgrew their house, the Frows wrote of the importance of their work which resulted in the “deterioration in the normal living conditions of a home where there is not even room for a television” arising from a profound conviction of the political value in what they were doing (Frow and Frow 1976, 178). One volunteer wrote that the library was a contemporary version of an older “radical tradition of self-help” which had

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“educated and inspired generations of the culturally dispossessed” and today “offered in abundance the resources for future reconstruction and rethinking about politics and social wellbeing” (Gerard 1997, 394).

Similarly both Henry Fry and Walter Southgate, whose personal collections formed the basis of the NMLH, had long active lives within the labour movement, and according to John Gorman (1985, 11) were “consumed with a squirrel-like passion for the acquisition of anything connected with the history of labour”. Amongst the things they collected which made up the core of the museum’s collections were furniture, badges, banners, emblems, membership cards, printed ephemera, posters and photographs. As with the Frows, Southgate and Fry did not collect for their personal benefit, but for these materials to be used and made publicly accessible.

Although some of these collectors were occasionally criticised for a lack of discrimination and strategy about what they collected (Gorman 1985; Mansfield 2013), many of these collections were extremely significant (e.g. the banners collected by Fry and Southgate, the books collected by the Frows, the ceramics and cartoons collected by Klugman). At the time this type of material was not being collected by many others, and certainly not by the mainstream heritage institutions. At the very least, the collections were significant in frequently being unique representations of past events and movements. Most importantly, they were not hidden away but became the foundations of major labour history archives and museums (the WCML in the Frows’ case and the NMLH for Fry and Southgate).

The motivations for collecting and making these materials accessible were two-fold, to preserve and then to use them within a working-class context. First there was a pressing sense that these materials had to be saved before they disappeared because the mainstream repositories were either not interested or deemed appropriate bodies to care for working-class collections. The decision in 1933 to establish the Marx Memorial Library was taken against the background of Nazi book burning in Germany and the loss of rare works (Rothstein 2008, 10). In his introduction to *Images of Labour* (the 1985 guide to the original collections of the Labour History Museum), Gorman noted that in recent years “working people from many trades are separately and collectively engaged in the rescue, preservation and study of a tangible form of British history” which had been “neglected and even ignored by universities, museums and galleries” (1985, 11). The motivation behind the founding of the South Wales Miners’ Library in 1973 was a similar act of ‘salvage’. The apparent complacency of most of the professional collecting institutions in Wales who, despite the closing of the Miners’ Institutes and Libraries across South Wales, with the potential loss of hugely valuable book collections and other numerous personal collections “failed (or refused) to recognise the urgency of the problem. . . . It was as if the written and spoken word of the common miner should not be saved, even for posterity” (Francis 1976, 183). The resulting South Wales Coalfield project and eventually the

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establishment of the SWML sought to try to save as much of this material in the face of this professional inertia and the profiteering of the second-hand book dealers (Francis and Williams 2013). The impact of this material on students and researchers is testified to in personal testimonies published in the recent book celebrating the SWML's fortieth anniversary, some of whom describe the effects of using its resources as "life changing" or as "reinvigorating . . . a new thirst for learning, for knowledge" which countered "the educational alienation" suffered at school (Francis and Williams 2013, 93).

Centres of publication and research

After salvage, the next fundamental aspect of these history activist collectors was that as they viewed this material as a significant resource, it was felt it was best kept in working-class hands, preferably in independent working-class institutions where it could be used and not hidden away within a less accessible professional or academic institution. As early as 1969, the Frows turned over their personal collections to a trust, The Manchester Working Class Movement Library, whose working-class trustees were responsible for the library's management, working-class orientation and long-term independence. In the 1970s, the trust rejected moving the library into an institutional setting (Manchester Polytechnic or Manchester University) despite its probable administrative benefits, because it might restrict its use by working-class researchers (Smethurst 1998, 47). In the early 2000s, similar doubts over access and ownership were raised when the NMLH developed an administrative relationship over its archive collections (particularly the Communist Party archives) with a local university.

Notably, the WCML in Salford, the NMLH in its Limehouse incarnation and the South Wales Miners Library were all centres of independent, non-academic or collaborative working-class history study and publication. This was an individual and a collective activity. The Frows became prolific researchers and publishers of labour history materials. In her biography of Eddie, Ruth Frow described their motivation to collect and research in clear activist terms, "we collected material we wanted to make use of them. . . . We were basically socialist propagandists rather than historians or librarians" (Frow 1999, 97).

Many other local activists and labour historians also published their work as part of the WCML series. The North West Labour History (NWLH) Group of which the Frows and Smethurst were such active and long-term members has been closely associated with the WCML for all its existence (Taplin 1998), and numerous other local history and History Workshop groups have also held their meetings and conferences there. Similarly Llafur, the Welsh Labour History Society and publications was closely linked to the SWML (Francis and Williams 2013, 91). Under Terry McCarthy in Limehouse, the NMLH

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published books on Ireland, the dock strike, the matchgirls, etc., liaised with trade union education departments and the WEA, ran education programmes for local groups using the collections, and put on exhibitions designed to raise consciousness and provide political education (McCarthy, 1988; Gibbs, 1980).

All the labour institutions hosted local activist history groups and staged exhibitions aimed at predominantly working-class or labour movement organisations. Archival spaces and resource centres affiliated to anarchist-orientated and autonomous movements such as Infoshop 56a in south London are intimately related to a range of past and present local activist history networks (Southwark Notes, Pass Tense Press and the South London Radical History Group for instance), publish and engage in a range of radical public history activities and interventions. However after its “professionalisation” and move to become a more recognisable mainstream heritage in Manchester, the NMLH/PHM became less a resource aimed exclusively at activists. Its exhibition programme was aimed at a more general people’s history, even social history audience, and its very significant archival collections (the national archives of the Labour Party and the CPGB) attract overwhelmingly academic researchers.

History activism, political education and shifts to professionalism

Like the WCML, the NMLH was largely based upon the personal collections acquired over many years by Henry Fry and Walter Southgate. When Southgate and Fry first merged their collections, they formed the Trade Union, Labour, Cooperative, Democratic History Society (or TULC), and began to put on displays in Fry’s house. Eventually, with the support of Tower Hamlets council, the collections moved into more suitable accommodation in Limehouse Town Hall in 1975, where the new curator and museum director was Terry McCarthy. From the beginning of the TULC, Fry and Southgate were primarily concerned with political education and consciousness raising. In McCarthy’s words, the museum was never “a mere intellectual exercise or historical aesthetic . . . it was agreed that the museum should also become a resource centre for the Labour Movement”. Following on from the traditions of the Plebs League, the emphasis was on displaying materials, making them available for education and discussion rather than the long-term care and preservation of “relics”. The politics of the museum were very clearly that of organised labour and the labour movement (McCarthy n.d., 1988). While the active publication and education programmes supported these aims, in the end the active political dimension and concerns over professionalism gave the authorities in the local council, the TUC and the museum profession the opportunity to tie further funding to the making of significant changes (Burgess 2009, 28–29).

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s the museum was beset by continual financial worries, concerns over space and ongoing controversy

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over the professionalism with which the collections were being looked after and documented. Both [Gorman \(1985\)](#) and [McCarthy \(n.d.\)](#) refer to external professional criticisms over some of the exhibition practices and possible damage to the collections, but put this in the context of a lack of resources and a concentration on salvaging and then making the materials available. [Burgess \(2009\)](#), arguing from a professional standpoint, believes that the rejection of conventional museum practices and standards meant that NMLH placed itself outside the museum world and resulted in failure to gain significant long-term funding from the government or the trade union movement. This view is also held by the long-serving former director Nicholas Mansfield, who was appointed after McCarthy and was a key figure in overseeing this transformation of the museum ([Mansfield 2013](#)).

But the debate about professionalism is also a debate about class and control over these materials. The heritage professions reflected the dominant ethos of the cultural and political elites who (still) socially made up the bulk of those working in these professions ([Shackel et al., 2011](#), 291). It could be argued that rejecting professionalism also meant rejecting professionals and professional control (e.g. middle-class control of working-class history). But this denial of the social bases of professionalism did not necessarily mean having to reject the adoption, where possible, of professional practices and best practice standards.

Moving towards the mainstream? Difficult environments, pragmatism and change

In the 1970s, Hywel Francis argued that the SWML, the WCML, the NMLH and the MML should form a network of independent workers' libraries and museums whose "twin and complementary tasks of preservation and education" should be supported by the organised labour movement ([Francis 1976](#), 192). By the mid-1980s, this network had been established and extended to include the MML, the Trade Union Library and the NMLH in London, the WCML in Manchester and Salford, the Martyrs Museum and Library in Tolpuddle, the Co-operative movement archive and libraries in Manchester and its museum in Rochdale, the SWML in Wales and the William Gallacher Memorial Library in Scotland. Even in the professional heritage world, more positive relationships were established between organised labour and curators, archivists and academics in publically funded institutions. In Liverpool there was a Merseyside Museum of Labour History, while in Glasgow Elspeth King and her staff were transforming the People's Palace. Trade union and labour movement archives flourished in universities like Warwick, Hull and the LSE. Elsewhere, independent non-aligned bodies like the Bishopsgate Library had significant holdings relevant to the study of the organised working-class. Many local archives, through partnerships with activists and academics, had begun to acquire and make available significant collections of local labour

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organisations. Labour history, whilst not necessarily a mainstream academic discipline, was firmly established inside and outside the universities with active national and local labour history societies meeting and publishing throughout the UK.

However, this apparent success in establishing the history of the organised working-class in a range of institutions, and as part of academic and professional discourse, ignores a number of ongoing problems and challenges, particularly over funding, which would confront these institutions over the next twenty years or so. This highlights one of the most difficult and ongoing issues for activist-orientated history institutions. Increasingly relying on public funding to function (rather than a community's own resources, the Labour movement, as suggested by Francis) means that core funding (and hence core activities) are complicated by local and national political factors threatening the independence of institutions and forcing them to make difficult, pragmatic decisions in order to survive in complicated and changing political environments.

For the most part, the NMLH in Limehouse was run by volunteers or staff accepting extremely low wages in order to keep the museum going. The funding situation was frequently uncertain, and although more money was available from the Greater London Council (GLC) in the early 1980s, the Liberal Party's success in Tower Hamlets and the GLC's abolition meant that by 1986 the museum was no longer supported locally. Although there was an option to find another home locally in Newham, an alternative offer from Manchester City Council seemed more attractive to most of the trustees (but not the director and the staff) and the museum moved north, sharing the building (103 Princess Street) where the TUC first met in 1868 with the Mechanics Institute.

However, at the insistence of Manchester Council and the TUC, this time the museum was to be run primarily as a professional museum, not as a labour movement organisation. After an inquiry, the old London staff including McCarthy was dismissed and a new professional staff under Nicholas Mansfield's direction was appointed to take the museum forward. According to Mansfield (2013), he was appointed because fairly uniquely at that time within the museum world, he had three different levels of experience (as a museum professional in local authorities, as a labour historian and as a person with connections with History Workshop and oral history worlds) – and a working-class accent. In a situation in which everything about the museum, including the board of trustees was contentious and controversial, issues of class were still very important.

The move from Limehouse to Manchester marked a significant shift in terms of adherence to professional museum standards and in the approach to the museum's subject matter. For McCarthy, following in the spirit of Southgate and Fry's vision, the museum's purpose was never an academic one – it was designed to engage, educate and stimulate political awareness.

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However, the focus of the museum in Manchester was somewhat different. Although this shift evolved over time, from the start the museum was committed to developing a broader and less overtly party political agenda. At an event to mark the reopening of the museum in Manchester in 1990, veteran trade union leader and museum trustee Jack Jones quoted the founder of the engineering union in 1851 as marking “our duty . . . to record its struggles, to mark its victories, point to fresh conquests, and to gather from defects the elements of success”. But at the same time, taking as their model the People’s Palace in Glasgow, the museum’s new curators were committed to covering the history of all working-class people and all aspects their lives and not just those who were part of organised labour (Trustram 1993). Although the museum in Limehouse had not shied away from critically examining its practice on ensuring women’s history and Black history were not ignored (McCarthy 1983), at the Manchester site whilst the displays (and certainly the archive collections) still dealt with the organised labour movement and class, the museum was (at times) also more critical of the official labour movement, more willing to embrace the new histories of gender, race as well as class, and open to exploring issues of working-class life and experience beyond the workplace and struggle. Change was both clear and at the same time gradual.

As previously suggested, pragmatic political realities influenced some of these changes. The museum was funded by ten mostly Labour Greater Manchester local councils but also included individual Liberal Democrat and Conservative councils. This funding was continually under threat and rarely agreed on anything beyond an annual basis. Additionally until 1997 the museum was committed as a national museum to seeking sources of national funding and support in an era of Conservative governments. So it is not hard to imagine why temporary exhibitions on Conservative women, the history of Liberal and Conservative parties as well as on migration stories, brass bands and football were put on alongside the more traditional fare of union and cooperative histories and exhibitions on the Labour and Communist parties, nor why some of these exhibitions attracted criticism from those who felt the museum was changing too much.

The shift to consideration of a broader conception of working-class life and experience, including the experience of gender and race within a broadly political context was reaffirmed with the opening of the museum’s new permanent exhibition site in 1994, the Pump House, in which Labour History was replaced by People’s History in the title. The whole museum is now known as the People’s History Museum, the original commitment to a more direct, overtly partisan labour or socialist politics replaced by something undoubtedly progressive and committed to equality but not necessarily based solely on class politics. Samuel’s (1981, XV) description of people’s history usually entailing “a subordination of the political to the cultural and the social” seems to be too damning in this case but if politics at the PHM have not been subordinated by the cultural, reviews in 1999 and 2005 certainly noted an

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evolving re-balancing of the museum away from the labour movement and political commitment to “an emphasis which more explicitly recognises the diversity of working-class politics and even more so of working-class social and cultural life” (Bongiorno 1999; Wrigley and Walsh 2005, 346). Visiting the buildings and galleries since the 2010 renovation, the museum is still an important resource with much to commend it, but the over-riding sense of the displays is one in which the struggle for suffrage and equality is now the main thrust of the narrative rather than of a particular class organising for social and economic justice. The labour movement is still well represented but no longer exclusively.

Many other labour archives and museums have faced similar challenges and changes. In Liverpool, the Merseyside Museum of Labour History became part of the Museum of Liverpool Life, which in turn has recently become the Museum of Liverpool. The People’s History Museum is having to cope with the removal of its central government funding. On the other hand, the working-class ownership and (partial) autonomy of the Marx Memorial Library and the Working Class Movement Library (where assertion of working-class control by the trustees has to find practical ways to operate within structures of public funding from Salford Council and others) provides another model of continuity. But such an existence is frequently precarious, and is reliant on the support of members, friends and affiliated bodies. As Salford Council reduced their funding of the library, a fundraising appeal noted “in these turbulent times that history has never been more relevant – and its survival will depend on the generosity of our supporters” (Working Class Movement Library 2011).

In considering activist and community-based archives and museums, it is important not to just focus on the collections and dismiss the value of the physical institution and space. A controlled and moderated virtual space may have some of the same attributes for activists as a safe community space but it is unlikely to have quite the same symbolic power. The physicality of the cultural heritage and historical building is powerful and important both in its role in challenging the AHD as represented by mainstream heritage buildings and also in the more activist/activism dimension. Although as King argued in 1985, there is a danger in ghetto-ising labour history in separate institutions away from mainstream social history narratives in the major museums and archives of the country. However it is not necessarily an either/or proposition. It is surely possible to have social history museums like King’s vision for the People’s Palace in which working-class history, including the history of organised labour and its struggles are fully represented or even the present PHM in Manchester, and also to have separate institutions owned and run by the class or group whose histories they wish to represent. One could argue that with their ownership and control arrangements, the WCML and the MML remain in the hands of the organised labour movement but the NMLH/PHM

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is no longer owned by the movement in the same way, even if it is still strongly represented on the Board of Trustees.

The existence of a separate institution may make a powerful emotional statement about presence, an acknowledgement of those who have gone before and their rights to have their histories included. But these spaces also can act as spaces for discussion, the production of ideas and as catalysts for action. The Infoshop and the social centre movement often provides spaces to bind activists together and to consult archives of previous struggles, debate and plan action and much more. A blog describes the importance of the space for those that use it:

we still primarily happily continue the tradition of radical spaces where people can meet each other. . . . That seems the most radical thing possible. . . . For people to meet and talk and to argue and to agree or not. . . . After the talking, activity might happen.

(Anon 2008)

The archive and library which takes up much of the Infoshop wall space may or may not be the focus of each discussion and debate, or each action, but the history of challenge and the past provide the backdrop to and infuse the debates and planning of actions. In an activist context, the library or archive is both something to consult and to research, and a space to plan and organise, and these two functions may be indivisible.

Conclusions

The activist archives, libraries and museums described here seek to do two things often within a broadly progressive or social justice agenda. First, they strive to make an active intervention in an authorised heritage narrative which they perceive to be discredited and full of absences and erasures, with the understanding that such interventions in challenging the authorised heritage will impact positively in different ways on members of their class, community and group. Second, putting history more directly to the service of activism, they engage in historical activity, including archival research, producing publications, exhibitions and other educative or consciousness-raising public history activities aimed at promoting a collective engagement with and understanding of a 'useful' past, often of past struggles for the purposes of contributing to challenging the present and changing the future. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive and are often very closely linked, but one can dominate over the other depending on the type of activist organisation and its objectives. However, what is excluded here is the collecting and curating of material. I exclude this not because collection, salvage in particular, and curation are not important, but to distinguish it from mainstream heritage activity where preservation for preservation's sake often

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seems to dominate. Collecting materials for history activists is clearly crucial to the success of these endeavours. A necessary step even, often pointing to the failures and silences of mainstream heritage, but in activist archives collection and curation are always secondary to doing and using.

The overall circumstances over the last ten years or so have not been very conducive to the success of traditional labour history archives and museums in the UK. Francis argued that a set of broad social and economic changes made it harder for the Miners Libraries to survive in the 1960s. Since then, the decline in labour movement organisations (both parties and trade unions) particularly in terms of attracting the young, and the accompanying decline in the level of activity and advocacy of labour history activity inside and outside the universities make the task of attracting and sustaining audiences for a traditional, labour-movement-focussed museum or archive difficult to achieve. Recent growth of interest amongst young people in radical politics may begin to shift some of this decline but it is unlikely to result in the revival of traditional labour studies. This will continue to pose difficulties and challenges for archives and museums to acquire and sustain funding, particularly in these difficult financial times (McIlroy 2012).

Certainly, whilst in the past, when unofficial histories and history from below practices in general and labour history in particular were more present in universities, it sometimes felt that preserving such collections in institutions of higher education might be the best option in the long term. Despite concerns over the Women's Library and the fate of black cultural and race relations archive collections at Middlesex University after the university closed down its black history courses, it seems that for many former activist archives, libraries and museums, universities may still be the most likely eventual home. In the case of labour archives and museums, even if a narrowly defined labour movement approach is unlikely to sustain themselves in terms of users or public funding, a broader focus incorporating elements of people's history, new working-class studies, aspects of cultural history and a strong programme of temporary exhibitions (which engage a wide range of communities and political interests alongside more traditional elements such as labour and political history) seems to be working for the PHM as a vital body, even if it faces a very difficult funding situation. We should also acknowledge that some of the challenges posed to the subject matter of narrowly defined labour history were fully justified and that whilst class and labour organisation are important factors in understanding the past, these are clearly not the only factors. Making connections around, for instance, climate change, racism and decolonisation initiatives, gender and transgender issues, the refugee crisis, precariousness and new working-class struggles would offer routes to broadening both the subjects of the collections and the displays, and audiences without jettisoning an active political commitment to social justice and equality.

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It is also possible for activist archives to survive and continue in their work if they retain and build their community and active supporters. The MML² and the WCML³ remain significant institutions, relevant to researchers and true to their founding principles. Neither is immune to financial problems, but both have demonstrated the ability to survive and continue to make their collections and facilities available to those interested in labour and radical histories within their own traditions. It would be useful to investigate the extent to which they are engaging new or younger activists who may be coming to historical activism through feminism, anarchist, environmental or anti-austerity protests, but who have little or no connection with traditional labour activism or history.

The latter activists provide really interesting possibilities for a continued upswing in activist history and heritage activities. Although radical, often anarchist-orientated and non-sectarian history groups never disappeared, in the aftermath of the financial crash and Occupy movement, there is significant evidence of a growth in this kind of activity, using archival research and history materials particularly in the case of anti-gentrification, anti-development struggles. This development is accompanied by the well-documented increase in history and archival researchers amongst young feminists. As outlined by [Iles and Roberts \(2012\)](#), 44) the value for these activists of history activism or history from below approaches is not just a pragmatic, practical one about identifying the planning documents which might support campaigns against regeneration and gentrification, but also as with the previous generations of activists described in this chapter of identifying in the histories of past struggles, in the victories and defeats, in the myths and facts, the contingencies and agency in those histories, “this in turn animates the forms of contingency and possibility available to the present” ([Iles and Roberts 2012](#), 296). The archive collections held by many independent activist groups suggest this alternative, contingent world. By recording the many examples of people’s struggles against injustice and repression and their attempts to construct alternative ways of living, it shows that even when not recording success, the archives document contestation and resistance rather than acquiescence and passivity. As such, this gives hope and inspiration to those who follow. For those that interact directly with the archives, and indeed in these movements more generally, the documenting of those struggles and the sense that another world is possible, that the possibility of a different past and different future is contained within the archive is tremendously significant on an emotional and intellectual level.

Even if the official labour movement and trade unions and their histories do not attract the same levels of interest and loyalty in the ways that they used to, that does not equate to saying that there is no interest in history, or in struggle or in the history of struggles. The idea of an archive or museum acting as a resource centre for social movements, non-aligned histories and struggles which included revitalised and engaged trade union organisations might well

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offer a presently sustainable model. Independent, non-aligned and accessible institutions with radical collecting policies and interests offer really interesting possibilities of growth and interest at present.

Key to some of these possibilities is the impact of digital technology. The development and popularisation of cheap and relatively easy-to-use scan, upload and share software has meant that it became easy to actively participate in online heritage and history activities by sharing and engaging with historical materials, images of objects, photographs of people and places in a social manner across communities no longer defined by geographic proximity and the ability to visit a physical exhibition or archive (de Groot 2008, 100–101). The facility to comment on, add new images and interact with the materials as well as with others via the Internet introduces a whole new dimension and visibility to community-based heritage activity. The ability of geographically dispersed individuals to connect around and participate in the creation of a shared digital heritage around historical struggles offers the possibility of transforming the reach and popularity of such activity into something which would support identity constructions that could address and challenge other marginalisations, diasporic dislocations and disempowerment across borders. The ability by almost anyone to establish online archives of political materials and history resources, from small individual efforts to large digital libraries suggests that much of this material might be more easily available to a wider, global audience than ever before. Although this would raise significant questions about the long-term preservation of these materials, in access and use terms this might mean that the useable past and unofficial histories would be more easily and sustainably available than by trying to run and sustain museums or archives. Notwithstanding the many problems of online environments (digital divides, proprietary platforms and software, etc.), by supporting processes to “re-appropriate control over the ‘writing of one’s own story’ as part of a wider process of cultural liberation” (Hall 2005, 28) and as “a tool for reworking desires and memories, part of a project for sustaining cultural identities” (Featherstone 2006, 594), digital community-based heritage could aid the building of communities, the mobilisation of solidarities and the sharing of activist learning and aspiration for transformed futures in ways which match and even exceed the achievements of the physical spaces created and sustained by earlier generations of history activists.

Notes

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■ The history and diverse forms of independent community-based archives and heritage activity in the UK summarised in this section is examined in much greater detail in [Gilliland and Elms \(2012\)](#).

■ Available at: www.marx-memorial-library.org

■ Available at: www.wcml.org.uk