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'Poor, Proud and Pretty'

Community History and the Challenge of Heritage in 'Darkest' Cheltenham

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It's the oldest part of Cheltenham… It was the closest you'll ever get to a community of its own. I don't think you'll ever see a community like that ever again.

What was the saying they said about Cheltenham? Poor, proud and pretty, was like our side, and that was somebody's description of... not the rich Cheltonians, our side.[1]

A recent television documentary series entitled *Britain's Most Historic Towns* selected Cheltenham Spa, a town on the western edge of the famous Cotswolds as one of six places "shaped by the dominant forces" of a particular age.[2] The age in question was the early nineteenth century, when George Augustus Frederick served as Prince Regent from 1811 after his father 'mad' King George III was declared unfit to rule.[3] Its rapid growth from small market town to spa resort was triggered by the King's famous visit in 1788 to take the mineral waters which were believed to have numerous healing properties. Cheltenham rapidly gained a reputation as one of Britain's most famous spa destinations for the upper classes. It also generated a building boom apparent in its impressive display of distinctive Regency-era architecture which forms the basis of the town's tourist industry in the present day. The popular appeal of Cheltenham's Regency narrative gives a localized expression to Stuart Hall's definition of "the heritage," which he suggested "is always inflected by the power of those who have colonised the past." While Hall's Foucauldian analysis was focused on the ways in which nations create problematic national narratives through the "discursive practice" of heritage, the principles are equally applicable on a reduced geographical scale.[4] In Cheltenham's case, the focus on its Regency heritage – stories of Georgian exuberance and excess and its architectural legacies - equates to the exclusion of the working-class experience, which are "a reflection and instrument of broader social and economic

inequalities."[5] In Cheltenham this exclusion reinforces social and geographical divisions that are imprinted in its contemporary landscape.

The comments above are from former residents of Cheltenham's Lower High Street area, and are indicative of this marginalised experience. This is one of the oldest parts of the town and represented the majority of Cheltenham in the pre-Regency era (fig. 1). Characterized by narrow streets of small Victorian terraced housing, it has traditionally been home to the town's poorer, working-class communities, but has also regularly accommodated migrants so that today the area is characterized by a visible ethnic diversity.[6] The Lower High Street has also been marked by a visible physical deterioration that clearly sets it apart from more affluent parts of the town. As in many inner-city residential areas with Victorian roots, over many years residents have moved out to suburban areas to take advantage of greater space, but the result is that the area has suffered from a lack of investment and local government neglect. This neglect is mirrored in Cheltenham's official histories, meaning the Lower High Street represents a marginalized community that suffers from what Michelle Caswell terms "symbolic annihilation;" it is treated "as if it did not exist."[7]

This article examines how the community based oral history project – 'Cheltenham's Lower High Street: Past, Present and Future' - gave voice to the underheard experiences of residents in an attempt to unsettle the exclusionary forces of the town's dominant heritage narrative, and challenge the area's 'annihilation.' Oral testimonies highlight stories of economic hardship and speak to the social marginalization experienced by many of its residents, subjects that are largely absent from Cheltenham's Regency story. The often positive and nostalgic recollections of community, class consciousness, and resilience also testified to a distinct shared experience and identity rooted in the area's marginal place within the town, making the Lower High Street a unique site of living memory. Importantly, these memories also exposed a disconnection with and mild resentment for the area's current

condition, and thus brought to the fore contemporary social anxieties. These are intricately woven into the broader ideological, cultural and social context of Britain in the EU referendum era, a period marked by growing scepticism over immigration and increasing disenchantment in communities deemed to have been "left behind."[8]

While the project represents one of a sprawling number of community-based 'histories from below' based on oral history, it brings together scholarship and practice from two main fields of public history. Firstly, the testimonies have been used to foster a more sensitive appreciation of the Lower High Street in Cheltenham through public and digital exhibitions, but also in the creation of a community-centred archive. As the work of Andrew Flinn and Anna Sexton highlights, the focus on local histories and creation of relevant archives allow us to better understand the complexities, nuances and variations of social change and identity. Importantly, the combination of these processes helps towards unsettling the dominant and exclusionary forces of 'the heritage' by "making our archival heritage more representative of the diversity of our whole society."[9] The success of these processes depends on the collaboration and involvement of the communities concerned, ensuring they are co-creators rather than simply the recipients of new research. Therefore, this project also applies the principles of a university acting as an 'anchor' institution by developing collaborative initiatives with community-based organisations. As Alix Green, Sarah Lloyd and Susan Parnham explain, universities occupy distinct geographic and cultural locations that can be exploited in various ways to both "elicit a nuanced sense of the past," but also help to inform policy where existing measures have been found wanting.[10] By collaborating with organisations such as the Cheltenham West End Partnership (CWEP) and the Cheltenham Civic Society (CCS), the project has also influenced public consultation on redevelopment schemes in the Lower High Street, and helped to develop new heritage initiatives that encourage a more inclusive appreciation of Cheltenham's past.

A History of Exclusion

The Lower High Street has a long history of marginalization. From the turn of the nineteenth century, the area was home to the "Lower Orders" and people who came to Cheltenham from the neighbouring countryside following the Inclosure Act of 1801. As in other parts of the country, almost all of these newcomers were motivated by the search for work in larger urban areas. Many hoped to take advantage of labour demand generated by the town's Spa-related growth, mainly in the building trades and domestic service.[11] By the mid-nineteenth century, the influx of labourers soon began to outstrip demand, which meant the area's streets of terraced housing that had sprung up to accommodate this growth became overcrowded, marked by poverty and poor sanitation (fig. 2). In 1845 it was described as a "*terra incognita*, not only to the visitor, but to many of [the] more fashionable residents."[12] The reasons for this became clear in a vivid image painted only three years later:

> an official enquiry had sharp things to say on 'the other Cheltenham' of filthy streets, of cheap, frousty doss houses for tramps, of back yard pig sties, and of the donkey carts of those who sifted the scavenger's rubbish. Water supplies and sewage were grossly defective. The narrow streets and close alleys of early Victorian slumdom were abundant; the scene was less attuned to Cheltenham's 'elegant' image than to the teeming, disease-ridden cellars and courts of contemporary Liverpool and Manchester.[13]

The women's rights campaigner and social reformer Josephine Butler, who had moved to Cheltenham in 1857, commented on the conditions in poorer parts of the town and noted that "[t]here are low class brothels and slums which would be a disgrace to London and New York."[14] Towards the end of the nineteenth century little had improved as the local press labelled the area as the "darkest Cheltenham" of "poverty-ridden back streets."[15] Brief references to Cheltenham's stark poverty in the Victorian era represent the small ways in

which this area appears in subsequent written histories. In her 'biography' of the town, Simona Pakenham, briefly acknowledges that the area was akin to a no-go zone in the nineteenth century, but resists explanations or further discussion. Robin Brooks' *The Story of Cheltenham* (2003) also avoids dealing with the issue of social inequality in Cheltenham. While guides of the town produced by local historian Steven Blake identify the Lower High Street as 'Cheltenham's most extensive working-class area,' very little exists on the area's role in the development of the town or the lives of its residents, especially in the twentieth century. The exception to this rule is the short booklet written by Heather Atkinson, *The Other Side of Regency Cheltenham: a History of the Lower High Street Area* (1997), which provides a brief overview of the area's architectural points of interest, but also in a limited way draws attention to the existence of a prominent working-class community that has suffered from long-standing local authority neglect. As she states, '[i]t is difficult to imagine the very poor conditions that still existed [in the 1980s] merely yards away from the High Street.'[16]

Given the absence of written information on the area's development and history, it is easy to see why the Lower High Street has struggled to shake off this long-standing negative reputation. Indeed, it continues to show visible signs of greater deterioration compared to other parts of the High Street, which has seen huge investment in recent years with the development of The Brewery complex and the arrival of the John Lewis department store. While the main stretch of the Lower High Street has become home to many independent grocery stores and restaurants that cater for residents from a range of backgrounds - including the Middle East, Brazil, South and East Asia, and Eastern Europe - many former shops that are identifiable from their large wooden window frames are now signs of the once bustling high street that was the centre for the local community. As one former resident recalls nostalgically,

Living in the Lower High Street was like living in a village where everyone knew everyone else and you didn't worry about leaving your doors open or allowing the children to play in the street. There were local grocery shops (Woods) and (Greens), a fish and chip shop (Pooles), Butchers (Manners) an antique shop (Mudways) and a fresh fish shop (Iddles), Coal Merchants (Nealons), Wool/Toy Shop (Nealons). The Nealon shops were owned by a brother and sister. Also a fruit and vegetable shop (Dimblebys) and the Essoldo Cinema. There was the George Inn and the Royal Oak, ice cream (Tartaglias), Shoe shop (Adcocks). On the corner there was Upholsterers (Dicks and Son) where my great grandmother worked as an upholsterer. There was also a gun and fishing shop and a faggot and pea shop. Everything was there that we needed, rather than going 'up town'.[17]

Many of these sites have been converted into low-rent housing or else lie empty, signalling the scale of change and deterioration in the second half of the twentieth century. Some larger buildings have become derelict or are awaiting redevelopment following years of neglect. Several older buildings, like the former bingo hall and previously the Essoldo cinema, continue to be demolished and replaced by housing projects. Developments such as these are seen as part of the process of improving "a low value part of the High Street," something which Robin Jenkins suggested "must be a priority." Writing in the local newspaper, he reiterated "[w]e need to find a way … of bringing Lower High Street up nearer to the level of attractiveness of upper High Street."[18]

These visible deficiencies help to explain the area's omission by the local heritage industry. None of the historic buildings mentioned in the *Illustrated Cheltenham Guide* of 1845, or in Atkinson's booklet are acknowledged in the town's 2018 tourist guide. Furthermore, the town's central museum recently showcased the 'Hidden Cheltenham' project, which attempted to bring "attention to the stories of the people, places and

communities of Cheltenham that have been overlooked and forgotten." However, the Lower High Street was excluded even here, despite the fact it houses Cheltenham's oldest workhouse and its first 'ragged school,' buildings which point the area as a centre for poor relief activity.[19] When the ragged school opened in 1863, the town's clear socio-economic and spatial divide was made evident in the *Cheltenham Chronicle*: "[i]t may appear strange to those of our inhabitants and visitors who never traverse beyond our beautiful streets and promenades that a 'ragged school' is needed in our Queen of Watering Places."[20] By contrast, the promotion of "beautiful streets and promenades," as in the central pedestrianized Promenade, the lavish Montpellier and Pittville districts, often ignores the fact that much of the Lower High Street's population was directly employed in the construction of its famous architecture, and provided much of the domestic service for the town's "wealthy leisured classes." [21] This exclusion is emblematic of the way, as Frans Shouten argues, "heritage is a product," and as such is constitutive of a number of processes that focus on stimulating tourism, and ignoring unsavoury aspects of the past in order to "create the right impression."[22]

The uneven heritage narrative is mirrored in generations of local urban policy that have disproportionately affected poorer areas. Significant buildings of historical interest were lost in what local historian Brooks termed the "demolition decades" of the 1960s and 1970s. The Lower High Street was one of the main areas of Cheltenham affected by the slum clearance programmes that characterised British housing policy between the 1930s and the 1960s.[23] In addition, one of the consequences of much clearance activity was to increasingly stigmatize inner city areas across Britain.[24] The emphasis on the need for redevelopment and regeneration tends to obscure underlying issues of social and economic inequality. The result is that issues of poverty remain largely invisible. A report published in May 2019 documented that 22.8% of children were living in poverty, while BBC West's *Inside Out*

highlighted that in some parts of the town, including the Lower High Street, the rates were as

high as 40%. These revelations about poverty in a rich town such as Cheltenham have been

mirrored at the national level. A recent United Nations report found that a fifth of the UK

population was living in poverty, and criticised policy makers of being in "a state of denial"

about the scale and increase in inequality.[25] Over the past two decades there have been

greater efforts in terms of local government and community-based institutions working to

manage and improve the Lower High Street for current residents, such as the attempted

renaming of the area to the 'West End.' However, even in these local development

frameworks and public consultations on regeneration plans very little appears on the area's

past, nor has there been any acknowledgement of the diverse social experiences that

characterized Cheltenham's development.[26]

One of the effects of this exclusion is that residents create and maintain their own

unofficial heritage networks. In addition to more formal organisations such as the

Cheltenham Local History Society, which is based on more traditional forms of historical

research, a clear example of more popular and less formal memory work can be seen in the

Facebook group 'Days Gone by in Cheltenham.' This group is made up of over 16,000

members regularly sharing photographs, personal experiences and memories, reconnecting

relatives and rekindling old friendships. There is also an implicit emphasis on what the

town's tourist trail excludes, primarily the experiences and memories of Cheltenham's

residents from and beyond the Lower High Street, often coupled with substantial doses of

nostalgia.[27] While frequently contradictory and fragmentary in terms of content and scope,

this deployment of social media as a process of gathering and sharing experiences can be

interpreted as a growing form of 'heritage from below' that exploits the possibilities of

presented by social networks. Despite obvious analytical shortcomings that are to be expected

in such public expressions of nostalgia, this form of participatory memory work via sharing

on social media can be understood as a multifaceted – but not unproblematic - process of "democratizing the past."[28] Indeed, the group's activities are an indication of the importance of locality to members, and their willingness to share and validate their experiences embodies a subtle yet significant grassroots process of heritage making. It also reflects some of the class-based inequities that are maintained by Cheltenham's official expressions of heritage, which ultimately reinforce long-standing class and economic divisions.

'Cheltenham's Lower High Street: Past, Present & Future' Project

The absence of history in this regard raised simple but intriguing questions for historians on the Lower High Street's doorstep. Based at the University of Gloucestershire's Francis Close Hall campus which borders the area from its northern side, my colleagues and I were keen to examine this case of social inequality because of our sheer proximity to the area: why does this area, despite its historic place in the town, not feature in any of its histories? Who were/are the people that live(d) there and what do they make of their experiences? How might a focus on this area's history be useful in addressing contemporary issues of social inequality and urban planning? Answering these questions by making use of voices from the community helped to capture the Lower High Street's "sense of place," that is, those characteristics, connected experiences and legacies that make it unique and distinctive that in turn help to identify why it matters.[29]

In order to answer these questions, historians at the University joined with two local organisations – the CWEP and the CCS - to develop the project. This had the aim of addressing two interrelated problems of perception predicated on a significant gap in local historical knowledge. The first was to provide a counter-hegemonic challenge to

Cheltenham's dominant heritage narrative by focusing on the history of social inequality and poverty through the Lower High Street. The second was to overturn the stigmatization of the area by bringing to the fore the lives and experiences of its residents and establish the area as a site of living history. Both would be achieved by gathering oral histories that would be the subject of public and virtual exhibitions, and also form the basis of a new publicly available oral history archive. While the aims of the CWEP and the CCS differ, they share an interest in the management and appearance of the town's architecture and infrastructure for purposes of community improvement and conservation.[30] However, both felt that a more nuanced appreciation of the area's past was necessary. For CCS, this would broaden their remit on conservation and appearance to focus on areas of Cheltenham that traditionally fall outside the Regency characterization. CWEP, on the other hand, located in the heart of the Lower High Street and intimately involved in community organisation, felt that the area was not considered historic in the sense that other parts of Cheltenham were, and suffered in terms of town planning as a consequence. Creating a greater awareness of the area's past and sensitivity towards its experience as a marginalized community, were important not only in terms of harnessing community cohesion through a shared understanding of the past, but also to promote more sensitive approaches to town planning that acknowledge experiences of social division.

The oral testimonies of the Lower High Street's residents were essential in the process of *re-humanizing* the area through people's memories and "thrust[ing] life into history," especially considering the ways lived experience has been hidden under vague characterizations of the area as a slum, or marginalized by a focus on its architectural deterioration.[31] As Andrew Hurley also notes, oral accounts have the added function that they can "carry narratives up to the present," and are characterized by the dualism of being centred on memories of the past while having the ability to address contemporary issues.[32]

Importantly, using testimonies from volunteers and designing exhibits around their accounts provided an important means of making them co-creators rather than simply recipients of the research. The method of using oral history in community-based projects is by no means a new trend. As several scholars demonstrate, oral history in community projects and the creation of alternative archives has been a common practice since the shift of emphasis towards social history and the academization of oral history in the 1960s. Indeed, there are scores of examples of such projects throughout the world.[33] However, co-designing the project with CWEP and CCS was an opportunity to apply the principles of a university acting as an 'anchor' institution. The long-standing stigmatization of the Lower High Street area, despite numerous initiatives by the local council and CWEP to include residents in regeneration plans, is ultimately the result of the failure of years of local urban policy. As indicated by the important work carried out as part of the *Connected Communities* research initiative, it is in cases such as this that the co-design of research projects - involving various interest parties and expertise - can provide alternative solutions.[34] Furthermore, as Green, Lloyd and Parnham demonstrate in their University of Hertfordshire project in Hatfield, universities occupy unique geographical contexts in relation to their surrounding communities, which place them in important positions of responsibility to address local issues of inequality and marginalisation.[35] In this sense, the University of Gloucestershire (alongside it's collaborating partners) is uniquely placed to help address issues of social inequality in Cheltenham.

Interviewees were identified by making use of CWEP's community networks, by developing a social media presence to connect with the with existing groups such as 'Days Gone by in Cheltenham,' and by inviting volunteers via the local newspaper the *Gloucestershire Echo*.[36] The resulting one-page story about the project was successful in getting to people beyond the reach of social media, and generated lots of responses from

potential participants by email, post and telephone. Between February and May of 2017 a dozen former and existing residents of the Lower High Street area were interviewed, with several others writing about their experiences via letters and the social media site. This small sample of respondents highlighted a potential issue of adequate representation. Most were of a similar age range, primarily over fifty-five, skewing the interviews towards recollections of the area between 1930 and 1970. Furthermore, most were former residents of the area, indicating a disconnection between the area's present and former residents, creating a potential issue for engaging current stakeholders with the outcomes of the project. Considered all together, these characteristics could signal the markings of an "intellectually impoverished" and therefore unrepresentative sample.[37] However, the shared socio-economic background of the interviewees is indicative of the Lower High Street's demographic make-up throughout the twentieth century. Participants, most of whom had retired, included a number of people who had various careers in trades such as building, painting and decorating, landscaping, but they also included a barber, a gas fitter, a homemaker, a plumber and a few shop assistants. Many had also moved out of the area from the 1960s onwards, signalling the process which saw many of the Lower High Street's residents take advantage of improved social and economic standing to move to new and more spacious housing states in Leckhampton, Whaddon, Hester's Way and Arle.[38] While not an exhaustive selection of participants, the sample is fairly representative of the area in terms of class and occupation, and is therefore useful in an initial phase for collecting overlooked experiences about life in the area, as well gauging current views about the area's past. As Alessandro Portelli rightfully notes, oral history is not just about collecting memories of past events, it also indicates how the past is understood for different purposes in the present.[39] In the act of volunteering to be interviewed and willingness to share their personal experiences, participants expressed their desire to claim the area as a site of memory as well as contest and alter existing perceptions.

The desire to reshape popular perceptions was made evident in an anonymous poem that was received after the newspaper call out, which was also the first response received by the project team. The 'Lower High Street Poem' nostalgically recalls a bustling community which thrived around numerous family-owned shops and businesses that supplied every need for local residents. It simultaneously bemoaned the negative effects of post-war developments of suburban "housing estates" and modern "shopping arcades:"

> But that end of town was a world on its own,
>
> And whatever you wanted was there.
>
>
> We all knew each other, husbands, wives, sons and mothers,
>
> Your sorrows and joys were shared
>
> And to shop was a pleasure you did at your leisure,
>
> When shopkeepers and customers cared.[40]

In its declaration that "that end of town was a world on its own," the poem defined a clear 'sense of place' rooted in a distinctive shared experience of separation from the rest of the town. It provided an unexpected but clear evocation that the area existed as a site of memory. In the subjects it covered, role of the shops in the community, poverty, hardship, change and decline, the poem also provided a methodological basis for the interviews. These became semi-structured and often free flowing conversations that used themes and names mentioned in the poem as points of departure. In the same way a photograph, a smell or a specific sound can elicit memories, different respondents focused on different names mentioned and themes raised by the poem in more depth, adding their own experiences and interpretations. This was particularly effective with interviewees who were more reserved or hesitant about being recorded, as it allowed them to reflect on their own interpretations and compare their own

memories to those of the author. For instance, fondness for the area's local businesses and community ties were echoed in almost all of the interviews. This was also the case also for the sense of decline brought about by Cheltenham's post-WWII growth and modernisation, which are largely held responsible for the loss of community cohesion and the area's physical decline. While it is difficult to exclude the possibility that the poem overly influenced the recollections of interviewees, particularly in heightening the sense of nostalgia, it nonetheless provided a unique starting point for conversations by referencing many of the Lower High Street's peculiarities and triggering individual responses.

'A World On Its Own'

Interviews often began in response to the *Gloucestershire Echo*'s use of the name 'Lower Dockem' for the area. This nomenclature caused varying responses from a number of interviewees and members on the Facebook site who were divided not only on the name, but where it was. Some were eager to differentiate between the Lower High Street and the area of St. Peter's parish further west which was often regarded as poorer and more deprived,

> Dockem would never go up as far as Ambrose Street, to be honest with you. I think that's a bit of a fallacy, because the slums did start literally from White Hart Street all the way down… That was even poorer than where the shops [we] were… The shops weren't known as Dockem. They weren't known as part of Dockem. The shops supported Dockem.

There were others that did not identify with 'Lower Dockem' as a name, which meant that the debate over its boundaries remains unresolved. Nevertheless, the emphasis on the names and the various physical reference points that were used to define the area highlighted how memories are deeply intertwined with specific places, even within very small geographical areas. The testimonies thus began to reveal the extent to which the Lower High Street area - while historiographically and physically marginalised - exists as a living site of memory for its former residents. The discussion of terms like 'Lower Dockem' as well as the names of the many shops and local pubs that had long since closed down was in itself revelatory, as these had never been mentioned in written histories of Cheltenham.[41]

For many of the respondents the name 'Lower Dockem' was indicative of the area's marginal position in relation to Cheltenham's genteel society, and the stigma attached to being a resident: "you didn't tell anybody you lived in Lower Dockem. You never told people you lived there." This was so even when respondents did recognise the name: "[i]t was like a 'them and us.' It was always, 'oh, you lived in Lower High Street.'" Some commented on the clear class divisions in the town by noting the saying that was associated with residents of the Lower High Street, "Poor, proud and pretty… and that was somebody's description of... not the rich Cheltonians, our side." This was manifested in the physical divide between the Lower High Street area and the more picturesque central Promenade and Montpellier areas, which were purpose-built to accommodate the leisure activities of wealthier classes in the early nineteenth century: "I can remember my father telling me that you weren't allowed to go up the Prom unless you had your Sunday best on." In fact, one interviewee recalled being reprimanded by "some colonial person or ex-officer of the Indian army" (Cheltenham was often seen as a retirement destination for officers of the military) on the Promenade for not wearing a tie when he was seven or eight years old.[42]

The levels of social difference that became reflected in spatial divisions across the town led some of the respondents to highlight common perceptions held about the area by other Cheltonians:

> People that never went down that area in those years, the 40s, 50s and parts of the 60s, they never understood the area… they never understood the people, and I don't think they wanted to know the other type people down that end of the town, and that was such a great shame really.[43]

The sense that Cheltenham's wealthier residents held either negative or misinformed views of people in the Lower High Street was for another interviewee a symbol of the way poverty was ignored and kept hidden: "people don't like poor people… how can you be rich and not worry when people are poor? But they don't do they, as long as they don't see you!"[44] While highlighting the clear social divisions in Cheltenham that echo trends of the nineteenth century, interviewees were keen to emphasise that they were nonetheless "proud to come from Dockem." This pride became expressed in many ways, but for one respondent it was the fact that ordinary workers who lived in the area provided the backbone of the local economy,

> if you were a visitor to Cheltenham and you wanted to find out about Cheltenham, all you're going to do is find out about the spa, the retired colonels coming to live here and all that… My grandmother was in service around Suffolk Square, in the big houses, and some of the stories she used to tell me... But I'll bet the people that lived there didn't even know her name… Any of these wealthy people used to go into these shops, but it would be my dad

repairing their shoes without them knowing it… That's what made Cheltenham tick, people like that.

Again, at the heart of this testimony is a clear sense of separation between the rich and poor, but also that the lives of people from poorer parts of Cheltenham were hidden from view, and thus ignored.

This separation seems to have been mitigated by the distinct sense of community cohesion in the Lower High Street. As one participant reflected on the poem's closing line "when shopkeepers and customers cared," this revolved around the local businesses, "that really was what the Lower High Street was all about. The people in the shops cared about the people that lived around them. It was a community in its own right." Oral accounts share this idea of the community as an extended support network, "if anyone hurt themselves, if someone saw someone hurt, they would be there." This had an important function in terms of countering the effects of social inequality and economic hardship. Interviewees remarked about the generosity of shop keepers who supported residents struggling financially, "the Lower High Street really supplied and helped everybody from that end of town, which included Dockem. If people would come in and say, 'Oh, can I pay you for this next week?' people would do that."

Many of the interviewees had similar positive memories of life in the area from the interwar years to the late 1960s and 1970s, despite the clear evidence of economic struggle for residents in this part of Cheltenham. As one former resident recalled,

We enjoyed ourselves, to a certain extent, but we certainly didn't have anything. We didn't have anything to play with or anything... you had to make your own things. I just could not

believe that five of us lived in that room… When you played, you played underneath the

table.

These included fond memories of childhoods spent playing outside, "it was like our

playground, because there was hardly any traffic around… we used to play on the lorries." At

the same time, the emphasis on such memories highlighted the ways in which these

recollections underplayed other significant issues linked to social deprivation. Respondents

commented on the economic struggles of many residents, but characterized these as an

indication of their resilience as well as their ability to survive with very little. One former

resident remarked, "food on the table, roof over your head, fire in the grate: that's all you

need. Everything else is extra." In this way, the Lower High Street's 'sense of place' is

intimately linked to this experience of struggle which separates it from other parts of the

town.

This focus on the positive represents a problematic yet inevitable aspect of the oral

history process, exemplifying what Michael Frisch describes as "the selective, synthetic, and

generalizing nature of historical memory itself." This process of constructing "self-

validating" and generalized testimonies is characteristic of recalling memories of hardship.[45]

This seems only logical given no validation came from outside the community. However, the

fact that recollections share these nostalgic characteristics is also indicative of the reasons

why respondents agreed to take part. Indeed, as Ben Jones suggests, nostalgia can be

considered a critique of the status quo, a process by which those recalling are actively voicing

their dissatisfaction at the stigmatization of their neglected neighbourhoods, and therefore

challenging negative perceptions perpetrated by the outside world, albeit indirectly.[46] This

was the case particularly when interviewees discussed the negative perceptions of the area as

dangerous or especially violent. Many respondents were eager to counter these perceptions:

"you could've gone out any time of night and never have closed up your door;" while another commented that "back in the middle fifties to maybe the beginning of the sixties, it was a nice area." Consequently, the acts of omitting or downplaying more negative experiences represents some of "the most precious information" to oral historians.[47] Nostalgia for the Lower High Street, must not therefore be viewed simplistically as an inconspicuous longing for the past. Rather, in that which memories both include *and* exclude, nostalgia can be a form of indirect protest, as well as an expression of wider contemporary social, political and cultural anxieties.

It is clear from the interviews that these anxieties focussed on specific concerns rooted in the local experience. The Lower High Street's current condition and its future were frequently discussed in relation to residents' past experiences. Many shared a sense of regret at the area's aesthetic deterioration, often blaming urban policy and local authorities for infrastructural changes that adversely affected its residents and businesses, and acknowledging that residents has tried to affect change before. One respondent commented that "it would have been nice if the council had been able to inject some proper money to get things smartened up, but that's never happened, although there have been lots of campaigns over the years."[48] In many interviewees' accounts this translated into a resignation that the area would never change for the better,

> I think the transport systems and the other things that came into being, with Cheltenham Borough Council… it was let go and it fell into disrepair. I can't see a future… I think that there's nothing really that can be done to bring it back ever.

What makes this particularly important is that the combination of nostalgic memories of community and regret over the area's current condition are symbolic of the area's significance to former residents. It matters because it is deeply intertwined with their lives, experiences and identities. Therefore, in the act of remembering, interviewees were consciously and unconsciously countering the long-standing negative perceptions of the area, and claiming a sense of heritage based on their experiences of living in Cheltenham's Lower High Street.

These locally rooted concerns also speak to broader national and international anxieties. For instance, some admitted to being reluctant or unwilling to visit the area, as one former resident stated, "I wouldn't walk down the Lower High Street on my own now." While this testifies to the persistence of stigmatization in the area, it is also a reflection of the feelings some former residents have towards its current demographic make-up. Indeed, recalling the late 1950s, the same respondent remarked that "[t]here weren't so many foreigners in those days." These comments reflect some of the unease over immigration that has been incredibly significant during the EU referendum era, particularly in the areas deemed to have been 'left behind,' and thus more likely to have voted for 'Brexit' in order to register their dissatisfaction with the status quo. Similar concerns have fuelled a rise in nationalist sentiment as well as a sharp increase in race related crime in the UK since 2017.[49] Underpinning much of this growing scepticism over immigration and multiculturalism is what Svetlana Boym termed "restorative nostalgia," the idea of a return to an idealized past which is at the heart of many populist and nationalist movements today.[50] What is relevant here is that while the Lower High Street has in many senses been 'left behind', it is also remembered nostalgically as a self-sufficient and tightly-knit community. These testimonies therefore not only reveal a hidden past but reflect the consequences of larger social, political and cultural forces that have increased social inequality from the second half of the twentieth-

century. In turn, by exposing these historic divisions that have clear significance in the contemporary social and political landscape, the localized focus on a hidden history of a marginalized community allows projects like this to contribute to addressing issues of social justice and inequality.

Public Engagement and Working for Change

The public exhibition held at the Chapel Arts gallery in Cheltenham in June 2017, which included a short film of interviews, functioned as a catalyst for challenging the area's exclusion from Cheltenham's history and reshaping local attitudes. Centred on thematically arranged panels on topics discussed in the interviews, the exhibition included an important interactive element: open-ended questions at the foot of each panel and a large table top map of Cheltenham in the centre of the room (fig. 3). These invited personal reflections, aiming to take the oral testimonies beyond the process of data collection, and effectively "connecting narrative to action."[51] A simple yet effective way of engaging visitors, it worked towards both enriching and complicating the picture of the Lower High Street. People attached vivid and sometimes moving notes on their own personal experiences which often corroborated the excerpts from interviews. They identified themselves or relatives in old photographs from local newspapers, mentioned shops, people, and events they felt had been omitted. They even recalled songs that were about people from the area, and remembered when the African American boxer Joe Louis took part in an exhibition bout in the area during World War II (figs. 4-6).[52] Importantly, this interactive element allowed for visitors to challenge some of the views expressed on the panels. For instance, some visitors took issue with the representation of Grove Street as one of the poorest and most dangerous in the area, and used

the interactive function to voice their disapproval (fig. 7).[53] The presence of contradictions and opposing views helps to create a much more pluralistic, diverse, and complex interpretation of community groups that approximates the historical reality. As Linda Shopes argues, the term 'community' is often used uncritically in ways that can be counterproductive to analysis, particularly when blurring or obfuscating issues of social, cultural, ethnic, or ideological tension.[54] Allowing contradictions and different perspectives also helped to mitigate the effects of nostalgia, which unchecked could also create a heightened sense of community that obscures significant issues of social inequality and marginalization.

The twelve-day exhibition received over one-thousand visitors between 17 and 30 June in 2017 following significant local media coverage.[55] Several visitors to the gallery requested a second exhibition which took place in November and December of 2017. This response suggested that visitors found the exhibition a validating experience, seeing themselves reflected in the memories of others who had shared similar experiences. It also indicated the widespread appetite for residents to challenge negative perception of the area and claim it as a site of living history in which their lives and identities were deeply intertwined. Subsequently, interviews with former residents have been ongoing since the summer of 2017 based on connections made at the exhibitions, with all interviews and exhibit materials being made available on the project website and the testimonies forming the basis of a growing open-access archive.[56]

Importantly, the exhibition followed on from a symposium held at the University of Gloucestershire on 9 June during which findings from the research were discussed with members of the public, representatives from Cheltenham Borough Council, CWEP, CCS, as well as other heritage specialists working on similar projects in other parts of the UK. This was a particularly important step in connecting the oral history project with decision makers and members of the community. As a result, the project team and collaborating organisations

are engaged in discussions on the ways these lived experiences might be commemorated in future. CWEP now have the exhibit permanently on display in their community premises, and have used it in public consultations with existing residents as a means of harnessing the historic 'sense of place' in plans for future urban developments.[57] In addition, the organisation now works much more closely with CCS to adopt a more inclusive focus on conservation and heritage management, which includes areas falling outside 'Regency Cheltenham.' Furthermore, historians at the University are collaborating with CWEP and Cheltenham Borough Council to develop funding applications for heritage related development schemes that include the Lower High Street.

Despite the progress in challenging the Lower High Street's 'symbolic annihilation,' the project did not attract much attention from the area's newer residents with origins outside the UK. Given the great stake these groups have in current issues of urban regeneration, this represents a significant gap in the process of connecting past lived experience with contemporary concerns. However, the manner in which this disconnection was made apparent by levels of participation in the project, helped to showcase the continued marginalization of the Lower High Street. The gap between past and newer residents is thus not coincidental, but a mirror of current social, economic and to some extent ethnic divisions in the town. It indicates that solutions need to be developed in order to connect past and present, especially if a greater sensitivity to the past experiences of exclusion and marginalization are to have positive effects on issues of social division and urban planning. As Andrew Hurley explains,

> Only through careful analysis of previous uses and functions can communities
> build intelligently on what previous generations left behind. Only by
> acknowledging the full array of social forces that contributed over time to the

uniqueness of urban places can city dwellers cultivate an inclusive sense of belonging and ownership that translates into collective stewardship.[58]

By connecting the work of historians, local government, community-based organisations and residents, the Lower High Street project has formed the foundation of this 'collective stewardship' that has begun to challenge the exclusionary forces of Cheltenham's dominant and exclusionary heritage practices. The experiences and identities of marginalized communities such as the Lower High Street are formed in their unique geographical and cultural contexts, and this project highlights that it is in those local contexts that concerted action can be taken to combat issues of cultural loss, social alienation, and inequality. This is not a simple process, but universities working in their particular locales can support and work alongside their communities in addressing issues of social, economic and cultural division by fostering a greater appreciation of the past that more accurately reflects the diverse make-up of society. This is important not only for the communities concerned, but can also be instructive for universities, particularly at a time when such institutions are under increasing pressures to justify their existence and prove their 'value.' Importantly, the uncovering of hidden stories and marginalized experiences in specific local contexts such as Cheltenham, serves the process of unsettling broader notions of power expressed in Hall's definition of 'the heritage.' Indeed, it is unrealistic to expect these the larger power structures, that divest the past of nuance and pluralism in order to present ordered and stable versions of the past, to be challenged from within. Consequently, it is in specific local, regional contexts, and in community-based initiatives that these challenges can take place and a more inclusive and sensitive sense of the past can be fostered.

Figure 1: Cheltenham Map 1806. The High Street runs horizontally through the town, with the Lower High Street comprising the area left of the central church. Courtesy of Cheltenham Borough Council.

Figure 2: The area in 1902-3, showing the development of densely packed streets of terraced housing on either side of the High Street. Courtesy of Cheltenham Borough Council.

Figure 3: The launch of the exhibit, and the table top map of the area. Courtesy of University of Gloucestershire.

Figure 4: A visitor recognises herself in one of the newspaper images from 1953. Photo by David Howell.
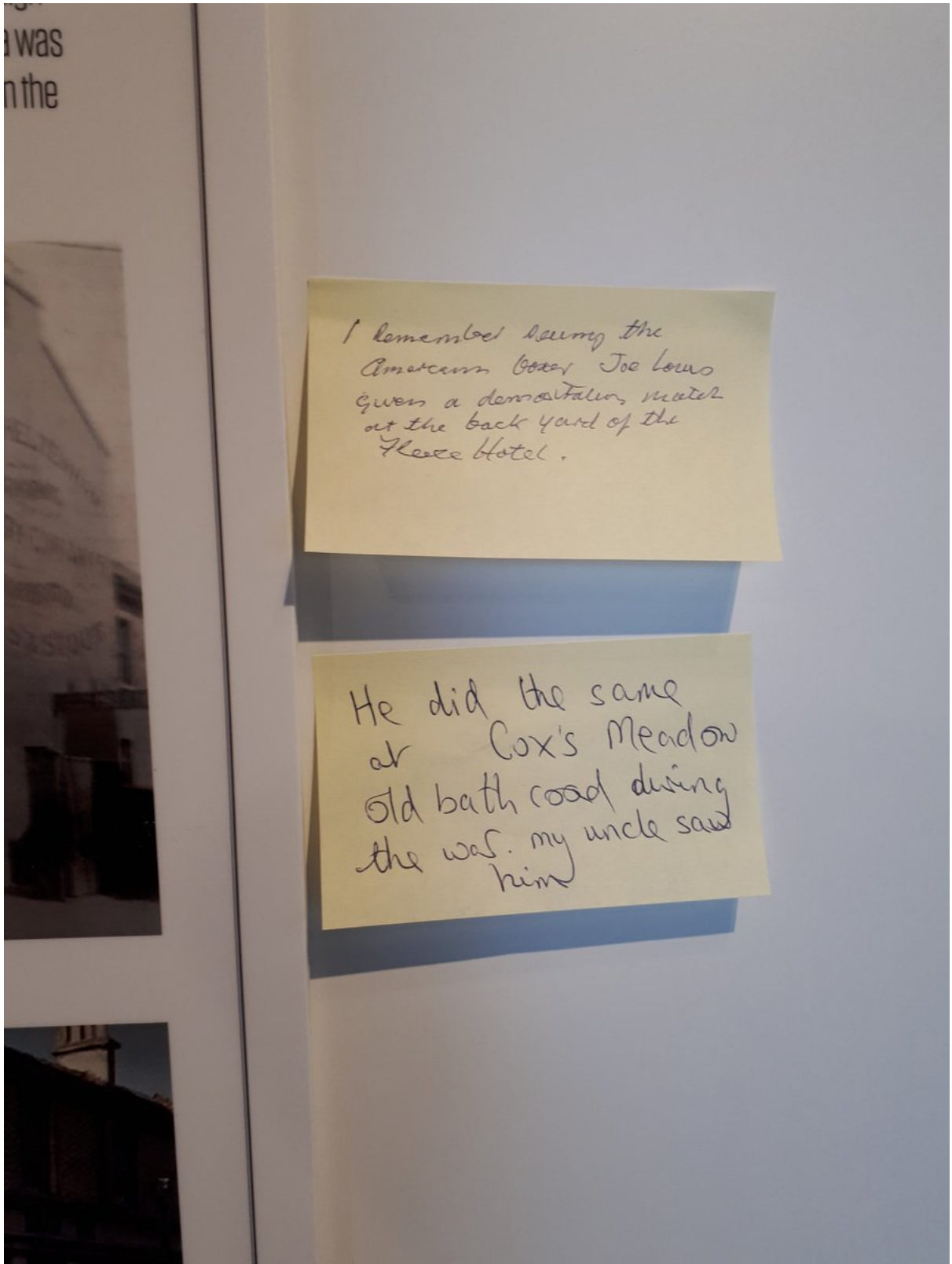
Figure 5: Visitors recall the visit of the African American boxer Joe Louis in April 1944. Photo by David Howell.
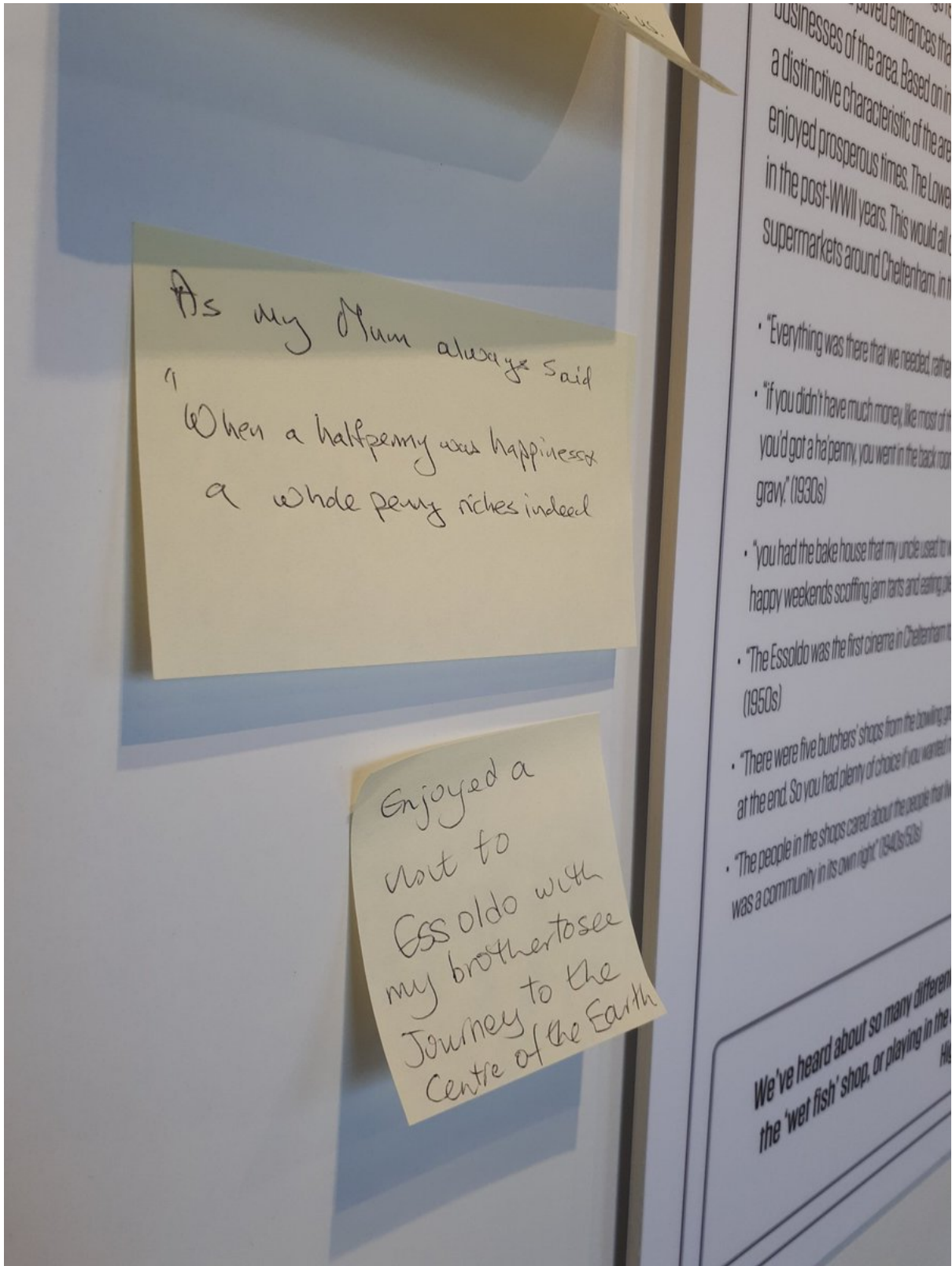
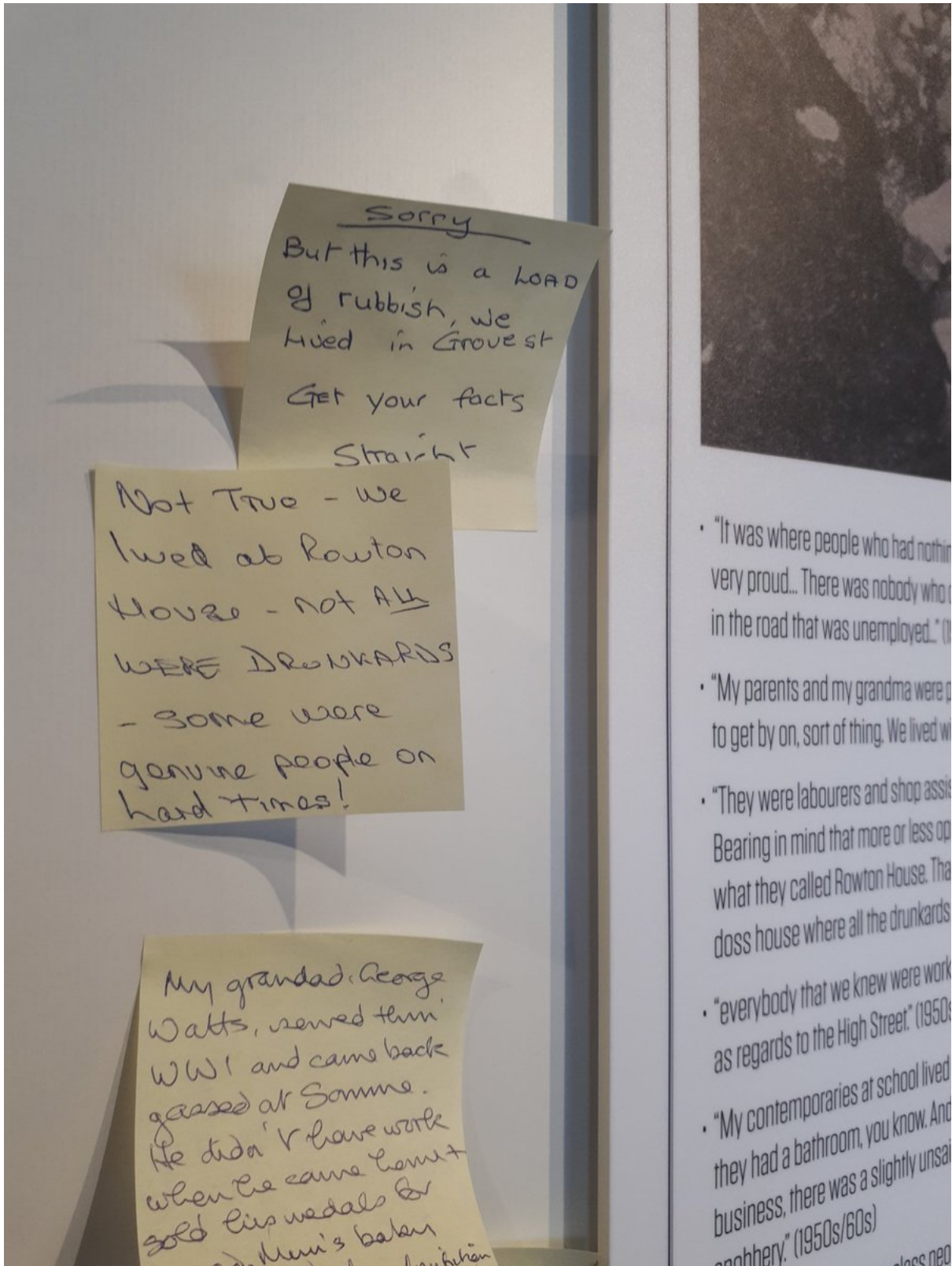*Figure 6: A visitor responded to the panel entitled 'When Money was Tight'. Photo by David Howell.*

Figure 7: Visitors contest the depiction of Grove Street on the panel. Photo by David Howell.

[1] All the interviews quoted in this paper are available at the *Cotswold Centre for History & Heritage Archive,* Special Collections and Archives, University of Gloucestershire, last modified September 26, 2018 http://sca.glos.ac.uk/index.php/cotswold-centre-for-heritage-and-history

[2] *Visit Cheltenham*, accessed June 14, 2018, https://www.visitcheltenham.com/blog/read/2018/05/britains-most-historic-towns-cheltenham-regency-b91

[3] "Britain's Most Historic Towns: Regency Cheltenham," *Channel 4*, May 5, 2018, accessed July 18, 2017, http://www.channel4.com/info/press/programme-information/britains-most-historic-towns

[4] Stuart Hall, "Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage,' Re-Imagining the Post-Nation," in *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of Race,* Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005): 25-7

[5] Andrew Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 28:2 (October 2007), 151-176: 151-2

[6] Cheltenham's population was 115,732 in the 2011 Census, less than 10,000 of this population was born outside of the UK, accessed November 30, 2018, http://www.ukcensusdata.com/cheltenham-e07000078#sthash.PKpLrXZe.dpbs

[7] Michelle Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation," *The Public Historian*, 36, 4, (November 2014), 26-37: 27

[8] See for instance Matthew Watson, "Brexit, the left behind and the let down: the political abstraction of 'the economy' and the UK's EU referendum," *British Politics*, 13:1, (2018): 17-30

[9] Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives," 160-1; see also Andrew Flinn and Anna Sexton, "Research on community heritage: moving from collaborative research to participatory and co-designed research practice," *Nexus, Confluence, and Difference: Community Archives meets Community Informatics*: Prato CIRN Conference, October 28-30, 2013, accessed October 15, 2019, https://www.monash.edu/it/hcc/research/cosi/prato-conferences/prato-cirn-2013/prato2013papers

[10] Alix Green, Sarah Lloyd, Susan Parham, "Living Heritage: Universities as Anchor Institutions in Sustainable Communities," *International Journal of Heritage and Sustainable Development*, 3:1 (2013), 7-20: 17-8; see also Keri Facer and Bryony Enright, eds, *Creating Living Knowledge: the Connected Communities Programme, community-university relationships and the participation turn in the production of knowledge* (University of Bristol: AHRC Connected Communities Programme, 2016), accessed 21/1/2020, https://connected-communities.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Creating-Living-Knowledge.Final_.pdf

[11] Stephen Blake, *Cheltenham Historical Walks: No. 3, St. George's Place and Lower High Street* (Cheltenham Art Gallery: Cheltenham, 1978) n.p.

[12] George Rowe, *George Rowe's Illustrated Cheltenham Guide 1845* (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1981): 83

[13] Bryan Little, *Cheltenham in Pictures* (David & Charles: Newton Abbott, 1967): 55.

[14] "When squalor was rife across the country," *Gloucestershire Echo* 4th October 2018, 28

[15] 'Mission Work in Darkest Cheltenham,' *Cheltenham Chronicle*, Saturday January 12, 1895, n.p.

[16] Simona Pakenham, *Cheltenham: A Biography* (MacMillan: London, 1971); Robin Brooks, *The Story of Cheltenham* (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing, 2003); for the ignored architecture of the Lower High Street see Heather Atkinson*, The Other Side of Regency Cheltenham: a History of the Lower High Street Area* (Cheltenham Borough Council, 1996): 11

[17] Carol Collins email to the author, March 10, 2017

[18] Ellis Lane, "Bingo! How 40 new apartments and three new shops will transform Cheltenham's Lower High Street," *Gloucestershire Live*, August 7, 2018, accessed February 14, 2020 https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/news/cheltenham-news/bingo-how-40-apartments-three-1850988; Robin Jenkins, "The future's bright, the future's Cheltenham (but it's not all rosy in this town's garden)," *Gloucestershire Live*, February 5, 2018, accessed November 23, 2018, https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/news/futures-bright-futures-cheltenham-but-1158908

[19] See the areas highlighted by '2018 Map & Guide to Cheltenham' *Visit Cheltenham*, accessed July 19, 2018, https://www.visitcheltenham.com/your-visit/2018-guide; 'Hidden Cheltenham,' *The Wilson Gallery and Museum*, accessed November 8, 2018, https://www.cheltenhammuseum.org.uk/event/hidden-cheltenham/

[20] Untitled article, *Cheltenham Chronicle*, January 19, 1864, 5: 'Ragged schools' were set-up by charitable organisations in working-class areas throughout Britain in the 19th century with the aim of providing free education to deprived children

[21] Sampson and Blake, *A Cheltenham Companion,* n.p.

[22] Frans F.J. Shouten, "Heritage as Historical Reality," in Heritage, Tourism and Society by David T. Herbert, ed. (London and New York: Mansell, 1995), 21-31: 26; 'right impression' in Andrew Hurley, *Beyond Preservation: Using Public History to Revitalize Inner Cities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010): 155

[23] Brooks, *The Story of Cheltenham*, 164/8

[24] 321,444 homes were either demolished or closed by the first 'slum clearance' programmes of the mid-1930s, and a further 3.66 million people were displaced by programmes between 1955-85. It is unclear exactly how many homes were affected in Cheltenham, Jim Yelling, "The Incidence of Slum Clearance in England and Wales, 1955-85," *Urban History*, 27:2 (2002), 234-254: 234-5; Ben Jones, "Slum Clearance, Privatization and Residualization: the Practices and Politics of Council Housing in Mid-twentieth century England," *Twentieth Century British History*, 21:4 (2010): 510-539

[25] Kim Horton, 'Shocking child poverty figures for Gloucestershire reveal link with Universal benefit cap,' *Gloucestershire Live*, 19 May 2019, accessed October 30, 2019; https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/news/gloucester-news/shocking-child-poverty-figures-gloucestershire-2881665; BBC West, *Inside Out*, 9 Sep 2019 7.30pm, accessed October 30, 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0008dwb; May Bulman, "UN tears into Tory-led austerity as 'ideological project causing pain and misery' in devastating report on UK poverty crisis, " *The Independent*, 22 May 2019, accessed November 12, 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/un-poverty-austerity-uk-universal-credit-report-philip-alston-a8924576.html

[26] See for instance "Cheltenham Local Development Framework: Lower High Street Character Area Appraisal and Management Plan," Cheltenham Borough Council (July 2008), accessed February 22, 2017, https://democracy.cheltenham.gov.uk/Data/Cabinet/20080722/Agenda/2008%2007%2022%20agenda%20item%2014%20-%2018.%20Lower%20High%20Street%20Character%20Appraisal%20&%20Management%20Plan.pdf; see the consultations promoted by the Lower High Street Regeneration Action Group, "Lower High Street Regeneration Open Meeting Consultation," Cheltenham Borough Council, Accessed February 22, 2017, https://www.cheltenham.gov.uk/downloads/download/1267/lower_high_street_regeneration

[27] see https://www.cheltlocalhistory.org.uk/; 'Days Gone by in Cheltenham,' Facebook Group created November 3, 2013 https://www.facebook.com/groups/243104989178394/

[28] See Cayce Myers and James F. Hamilton, "Open Genre, New Possibilities: Democratizing History via Social Media," *Rethinking History,* 19: 2 (2015), 222–34: 223, doi:10.1080/13642529.2014.973712; also Maria Economou, "Heritage in the Digital Age," in *A Companion to Heritage Studies*, eds. William Logan, Máiréad Nic Craith, Ullrich Kockel (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 216-229

[29] Green, et al, "Living Heritage," 8

[30] The Cheltenham West End Partnership is non-profit organisation which aims at improving the area and the lives of residents, created as part of the UK government's Single Regeneration Budget programme in 2000, accessed 15 January, 2017, https://cheltenhamwestendpartnership.org/; The Cheltenham Civic Society is 'an independent charitable organisation whose aim is to maintain the special architectural qualities of Cheltenham and its environment, and to encourage good design in new developments,' accessed 15 January, 2017, https://cheltenhamcivicsociety.org.uk/

[31] Paul Thompson, "The voice of the past: oral history" in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. By Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 2nd Ed. (London: New York; Routledge, 2006), 28

[32] Hurley, *Beyond Preservation*, 185

[33] Flinn, 'Community Histories, Community Archives,' 155; Anne Valk and Holly Ewald, "Bringing a Hidden Pond to Public Attention: Increasing Impact through Digital Tools," *The Oral History Review*, 40, 1, (2013), 9-24: in addition to their own project in Rhode Island, the authors demonstrate a number of projects to reveal hidden voices in North American cities such as Toronto, Cleveland and New York; see also Richard L. MacDonald, Nick Couldry and Luke Dickens, "Digitization and materiality: researching community memory practice today," *The Sociological Review*, 63, (2015), 102-20;

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[35] Green, Lloyd and Parham, "Living Heritage," 18

[36] See 'Cheltenham Lower High Street Project' https://www.facebook.com/CheltenhamLowerHighStreetProject/; Robin Brooks, 'Memories of Lower Dockem,' *Gloucestershire Echo*, 7 March, 2017, 23

[37] Linda Shopes, "Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities," *The Journal of American History*, 89:2 (Sep. 2002), 588-98: 590

[38] For information on the development of these new housing estates after WWII, see Brooks, *The Story of Cheltenham.*

[39] Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, 67

[40] "The Lower High Street Poem," *Cotswold Centre for History & Heritage*, accessed 15 October, 2017, https://cc4hh.co.uk/the-lower-high-street-poem/

[41] Shopes, "Oral History and the Study of Communities," 593

[42] "The Lower High Street Film," *Cotswold Centre for History & Heritage* (2017), last accessed 1 November, 2019, https://cc4hh.co.uk/the-lower-high-street-film/

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Michael Frisch, "Oral History and *Hard Times:* A review essay" in *The Oral History Reader,* 36-7

[46] Ben Jones, "The Uses of Nostalgia: Autobiography, Community Publishing and Working Class Neighbourhoods in Post-War England," *Cultural and Social History*, 7, 3, (2010), 355-374: 356

[47] Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," 69

[48] "The Lower High Street Film"

[49] Matthew Weaver, "Hate crime surge linked to Brexit and 2017 terrorist attacks," *The Guardian*, 16 October 2018, accessed November 1, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/oct/16/hate-crime-brexit-terrorist-attacks-england-wales

[50] Samuel Earle, "In search of lost time: how nostalgia broke politics," *New Statesman*, 3 June 2019, accessed 5 June, 2019, https://www.newstatesman.com/2019/06/search-lost-time-how-nostalgia-broke-politics

[51] See for instance questions at foot of panel "When Money Was Tight", *Cotswold Centre for History & Heritage* (2017), last accessed 30 June, 2019, https://cc4hh.co.uk/when-money-was-tight/; Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, "Introduction: Building Partnerships between Oral History and Memory Studies" in *Oral History and Public Memories,* eds. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 2

[52] While Louis' visit to Cheltenham was acknowledged in the local press, there was no reference to his exhibition bout in the Lower High Street which was in addition to the one that took place on Reeves field on Old Bath Road, see Robin Brooks and Daniel Smith, "Packing a Punch in Wartime Cheltenham," *Gloucestershire Live*, May 9 2017, accessed November 30, 2018, https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/news/history/packing-punch-wartime-cheltenham-51239

[53] Carol Collins, 'Growing Up in the Lower High Street – a memory of Cheltenham,' *The Francis Frith Collection*, accessed 29 November, 2018, https://www.francisfrith.com/cheltenham/growing-up-in-the-lower-high-street_memory-224431#comment

[54] Shopes, "Oral History and the Study of Communities," 588

[55] An interview with XXXX was broadcast on the Steve Kitchen show by BBC Radio Gloucestershire on Saturday 17th June https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p054qs8p?fbclid=IwAR1X_G_0adSvcgvI6CaTFbim_OrgQAKCeuLAHnhlbj_qoxDbF4qZJ8cMMnU; "Discover Hidden History," *Gloucestershire Echo*, Thursday 29 June 2017

[56] See "The Lower High Street Interviews," *Cotswold Centre for History & Heritage* (2018)*, last accessed 1 November, 2019, https://cc4hh.co.uk/the-lower-high-street-interviews/

[57] The most recent example was the 'Family Fun Day' on 10 August 2019, which combined public consultation on local development initiatives with activities and entertainment for residents, accessed 01 November, 2019 https://www.facebook.com/events/cheltenham-winston-churchill-memorial-gardens/family-fun-day/974755436053999/

[58] Hurley, *Beyond Preservation*, x