



Institution: University of Gloucestershire		
Unit of Assessment: UoA28		
Title of case study: Cheltenham's Lower High Street: Past, Present & Future		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: January 2017 to June 2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Christian O'Connell Dr David Howell Dr Matt Kidd	Course Leader in History Lecturer in History p/t Lecturer in History	2013 to present 2015 to present Jan-July 2017
Period when the claimed impact occurred: July 2017 to present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>This project on the hidden and neglected story of Cheltenham's Lower High Street has had a beneficial impact in two main areas. First, by fostering a more sensitive appreciation of the area's neglected role in Cheltenham's social and economic development, it increased 'Understanding and Awareness'. Second, it has altered 'attitudes' by using community oral history to challenge the negative stigmatization that has resulted from the neglect of the Lower High Street, something which has been a source of spatial as well as social division in Cheltenham.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Traditionally home to the town's poorer, working-class communities, Cheltenham's Lower High Street has been marked by a visible physical deterioration and institutional neglect over many years, meaning it represents a marginalized community that suffers from 'symbolic annihilation' (Caswell, 2014). With the University acting as an 'anchor institution' (Alix Green <i>et al</i>, 2013) and collaborating with community organizations such as the Cheltenham West End Partnership (CWEP) and the Cheltenham Civic Society (CCS), the research team developed a community-based project which aimed to integrate this neglected area into Cheltenham's uneven heritage landscape, and address some of the issues of social and class division that have characterized Cheltenham's history.</p> <p>The project had two main elements. First, it was based on oral history research with former and existing residents. Testimonies gave voice to unacknowledged experiences of social marginalization and economic hardship, but also foregrounded positive recollections of a resilient and tight-knit community. The memories helped to establish the area's distinctive 'sense of place,' which is rooted in a working-class experience. By volunteering to take part in the project, and in their collective nostalgic responses, the interviewees revealed a significant grassroots willingness to challenge the exclusionary practices of Cheltenham's Regency narrative, and reclaim the Lower High Street as a significant site of memory (O'Connell, 2020).</p> <p>The second element of the project was focused on creating spaces to bring participants and various members of the community together to engage with the oral histories. The testimonies were the basis of two interactive public exhibitions which included the screening of a short documentary film with interviewees, a one-day symposium, and a permanent virtual exhibition</p>		



via the project [website](#). These events provided spaces for participants and visitors to share experiences, provide additional information, and take ownership of the discussion on the history as well as the future of the area. The exhibitions were designed around a poem about the Lower High Street that was anonymously sent to researchers, demonstrating how the focus of the research was framed around the ideas and sentiments of participants. The team invited interviewees to contribute to a short documentary film that brought the testimonies to life. The exhibitions were held at Chapel Arts gallery in June and December of 2017, whereas the film was screened on Civic Day in June 2017 and then made publicly available online. Importantly, new participants continue to make contributions to the project via the website as well the project's social media platforms, so the project acts as growing and evolving archive for the community. Researchers also organised a one-day symposium in June 2017 which brought together historians, local government, community-based organisations and residents. The symposium formed the basis for what Andrew Hurley (2010) calls the necessary 'collective stewardship' required to challenge the exclusionary forces of local heritage practices. In this sense, the project provides a model for Universities to act as 'anchor institutions' and working with local organisations to address social and economic issues in their unique geographical and cultural contexts.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Christian O'Connell, 'Poor, Proud and Pretty': Community History and the Challenge of Heritage in 'Darkest' Cheltenham, *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, Vol. 15 Issue 1 (2020), 48-69

Matthew Kidd, "Them and Us': Social Difference in an English Spa Town, 1928-2018', *Oral History*, Vol. 48 Issue 2 (2020), pp. 57-67

'Coronation Street's DNA Secrets,' *ITV*, 5 September 2018

[Project website](#)

[Virtual version](#) of exhibition held in June and December 2017 at Chapel Arts Gallery, Cheltenham

[Short documentary film](#)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The project team adopted three main evaluation methods:

a) **Exhibition Feedback, June 2017:**

General feedback was gathered from both participants and visitors to the exhibitions on a voluntary basis, through contact details left at the exhibitions, and on the project website. We gathered dozens of comments in a booklet which indicate the way the project connected with the experiences of visitors, and also revealed the areas hidden story to Cheltonians from other areas:

'Fantastic and thought-provoking'

'As a Cheltonian, I had to think hard about how this part of the town has changed since the 50s, and to consider people's comments.'



These comments demonstrate the way in which the exhibition was challenging assumptions, especially for those less familiar with the area.

b) Online Impact Survey, 2019-20:

The exhibition feedback has been corroborated by the results of our survey that captured visitors to the project website and social media pages. This has received 124 responses, 76% of whom had lived or worked in Cheltenham's LHS area. Importantly, 41.9% of respondents were not directly involved with project, and were responding to their engagement with the virtual exhibition and film, highlighting the project was able to reach a significant audience even after its main public events:

Understanding & Awareness:

81% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed the project gave them a greater understanding of the area's history. In addition 83% agreed/strongly agreed that the project had increased public awareness of this history. The survey also explored other specific benefits:

- a. Have become more aware of area's history = 57.9%
- b. Now have a greater understanding of area's working-class history = 46.3%

Attitudes:

59% agreed/strongly agreed that it made their views about the area more positive. Furthermore, 42.1% felt proud of their connection to the area as a result of project, and 27.37% believed it has helped people think differently about the area, as supported by comments:

'It is great to see how many former residents of the [Lower High Street] came forward to share their memories. There is still a bit of snobbery about it from those who live elsewhere in the town but I know several people who now think differently about it and consider it to be one of the places to visit for non-British food purchases and very eclectic dining experiences.'

c) Testimonials:

Impact testimonials were gathered from key project partners who corroborated the impact both locally and more widely. Locally, the project has raised awareness of the hidden history of the Lower High Street, while also contributing to a previously unknown sense of pride. Maxine Melling of CCS commented that the 'project was significant in helping people who lived and worked in the area to tell their stories and to share experiences.' As Bernice Thomson of CWEP (who work actively in the community) acknowledged, the project provided spaces for community organisations to reach and engage new stakeholders, and for different organisations to begin collaborating:

'we were able to talk to people who would otherwise have been difficult to reach and engage with, which was very positive for us as an organisation... This research raised the profile of the Lower High Street and encouraged people to feel proud of it, which is very significant for us.'

Kishi Allebone of Unit 1 Films remarked that the 'project highlighted a real sense of regional community. We felt and saw a sense of pride in the Lower High Street and, in turn, I felt proud of my own connection with Cheltenham.' This sense of pride was reflected in the testimonies of project participants in the short film made for the exhibition, and now permanently on the project website.



The testimonial by *Coronation Street* actor Simon Gregson speaks to the project's broader national reach. The research was used for the ITV documentary 'Coronation Street's DNA Secrets' (Sep 2018). The project provided information and context for Gregson's ancestry in Cheltenham that would have otherwise been unavailable. His statement indicates the ways in which the project has helped bring wider attention to the hidden working-class history of Cheltenham, and how his preconceptions about the town's history had been challenged:

'To learn of the dire conditions my ancestors lived in and the stark divide between them and the rich folks in their comfortable abodes on the other side of town proved to me that you really needed grit and tenacity to survive as a pauper in the 19th century. I hope that I've inherited some of that perseverance from my ancestors from the wrong side of the tracks in Cheltenham.'

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Exhibition Feedback
2. Online Impact Survey, 2019-20
 - a. Survey results
 - b. Free comments on project
3. [Project Film](#)

Testimonials:

4. Maxine Melling, (former) Chair of the Cheltenham Civic Society
5. Bernice Thomson, MD of the Cheltenham West End Partnership (CWEP)
6. Kishi Allebone, Creative Director of Unit1 Films
7. Phillip McCreery (with comments by Simon Gregson), Producer-Director, Wall-to-Wall Media