Memories of Mr Seel's Garden

Michelle Bastian, Alex Buchanan, Frances Downie, Alex Hale, Niamh Moore, Chris Speed

Memories of Mr Seel's Garden: Engaging with historic and future food systems in Liverpool

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Executive Summary

The *Memories of Mr Seel's Garden* project demonstrated the potential for hybrid research/community projects to meet locally-identified needs while also producing rigorous academic outputs. Working with members of the local food movement in Liverpool, the academic team trained volunteers in a variety of historical research methods. In the process new historical resources were produced which were then used to engage people in Liverpool more widely. The outputs of the training sessions were used as the basis of a range of creative tactics that challenged linear stories of progress, instead troubling the relationship between past, present and future and between the local and the global. These tactics included a bespoke iPhone app, an interactive online map, a postcard series, local food storytelling and poetry, as well as branded food packaging. The team is currently engaged in writing up their analyses of the process, which will contribute to debates around affect in the archive, digital versus analogue tools in community archaeology, perceptions of time in the local food movement and ways of 'reterritorialising' the cloud in digital arts. The methods we developed for utilising historical research in future-oriented activist projects will also be shared more widely through a Handbook for Excavating the Future.

Researchers and Project Partners

Researchers: Dr Michelle Bastian (University of Edinburgh), Dr Alex Buchanan (University of Liverpool), Dr Alex Hale (RCAHMS), Dr Niamh Moore (University of Manchester), Dr Chris Speed (University of Edinburgh)
Community Engagement Officer: Frances Downie
Project Partners: Friends of Sudley Estate, Friends of Everton Park, Transition Liverpool, Liverpool City Council, Liverpool Primary Care Trust

Key words

Local food, History, Time, Locative Media, Community Mapping, Archives, Oral History, Community Engagement

Project Overview

The *Memories of Mr Seel's Garden* Pilot Demonstrator project explored the potential for using community-based heritage projects to intervene into current understandings of the possibilities for developing more sustainable ways of life. The approach was inspired by the Transition Town emphasis on looking to the past as part of re-visioning a community's future. Our particular focus was local food in Liverpool.

The reference to 'Mr Seel's Garden' was drawn from a plaque located in the new Liverpool ONE development, which reproduces an 18th Century map, indicating that on a site now occupied by a chain supermarket, there was once a growing space, owned by the slave trader Mr Thomas Seel. The uncanny juxtaposition of modern and historic food systems, produced by this plaque, has been

commented on by a number of Liverpool local food activists, and draws together multiple elements – food, maps, history, time, power, cruelty, memory and the intertwining of the local and the global – to paint a complex picture of changing patterns of connectivity within and between communities.

The project drew on discussions Bastian had been having with local food activists as part of her work with Transition Liverpool. They had identified a need for developing more historical research skills as well as raising the profile of local food more widely. Fittingly for a project about food, the underpinning philosophy used to design the project drew on ideas from permaculture. We wanted the project to meet a diverse range of needs and interests and permaculture offered a way of thinking about this diversity as a strength rather than a weakness. We were particularly inspired by Tom Henfrey's argument that permaculture could help support activist research by finding ways for academic and practical aims to be reconciled by eliminating some of the tensions between them.

The permaculture principle of 'stacking the functions' was our key guiding philosophy. The idea of stacking is fairly well-known in garden design and describes the desire to make sure every element serves multiple functions. Chickens, for example, can provide eggs, eat pests, and also produce fertiliser. Applying this idea to a community research project ended up supporting a wide number of synergies between those involved.

Achieving our Aims

In our original application we set out five key aims for the project that were integrally interconnected with each aim being dependent on those preceding it. In what follows we set out how we achieved each of these aims over the course of the project.

1. To develop a multi-layered account of the contrasting local food heritage of north and south Liverpool and in the process embed research skills in the community.

One of the benefits of our methodological approach was the ability to combine processes that often remain distinct from each other. Keeping the permaculture aim of 'produce no waste' in mind, we designed a series of workshops that would enable participants to develop new research skills, while also producing material that could be used to engage more widely with people in Liverpool.

In developing the bid we had worked with the groups involved to get a better picture of what kinds of issues they wanted to explore and which methods they'd like more expertise in. Our research team thus included experts who designed workshops that explored food archives (Alex Buchanan), interrogated historical maps of Liverpool (Alex Hale), and recorded oral histories from local residents (Niamh Moore).

In total we ran 15 workshops (10 planned and 5 additional) with a core team of 12 volunteers across the three methods. Participants had a range of experience levels, with most already having some familiarity with the research methods. Indeed archival research was the only research method with which some volunteers admitted complete unfamiliarity (2 had not heard of archives before the project, 1 had heard of archives but never used them). However, most participants had not used the methods explicitly for research before.

An important aspect of the project was the hope that our volunteer researchers would develop new skills that they could share with their community groups, so we placed as much focus on demystifying the research process as on the content of the materials we found/developed. Here we seem to have been successful, in that by the end of this strand everyone agreed that the project had encouraged them to take part in community history projects in the future, and nearly all also described concrete current or future projects where they would utilise the skills learned. Overall, the sessions proved very popular, with a desire for more and longer sessions being one of the clearest results from the feedback received. This was addressed through follow-up sessions for all three methods. In all we produced 27 hour long oral history interviews, identified over 600 historical local food locations and created a database of hundreds of selections from our archive research.

In order to develop a shared account of what we had uncovered, we organised a Collaborative Analysis Day inspired in part by the work of Luke Eric Lassiter and Elizabeth Campbell (e.g. Campbell & Lassiter 2010, Lassiter 2005). Participants from across the three strands shared the aspects of their research that most stood out for them and we used affinity mapping techniques to develop an overview of the key issues that had arisen in our research. This analysis was refined and developed further at a second collaborative analysis day that we organised in response to strong interest from the participants.

2. To engage the Liverpool community in issues around local food by communicating and inviting discussion about the data.

Running alongside our first strand and continuing throughout the project, was a dissemination strand which sought to engage Liverpudlians more generally with the stories we were uncovering in our research. Particularly important here was the inclusion of local arts project consultant Frances Downie on the team, who focused on community engagement. We were conscious of the fact that many of those who might be interested in our project were not significant users of online social networks (or even email) and so utilised a range of methods to share what we were doing. This included hosting two public events:

- *Eating in the Archives* 19th May 2012 at Croxteth Hall. Part of the Liverpool University Centre for Archive Studies annual series and including speakers from the North West Film Archive, the Scottish Council on Archives and the National Co-operative Archive (approx. 80 attendees)

- *Mr Seel's Garden Show and Tell* 27th January 2013 at the Bluecoat Gallery. Our final showcase event, which included demonstrations, presentations and a bespoke performance based on our interviews (approx. 120 attendees)

We also took part in a range of events including an interim showcase at Light Night 2012 (around 250 attendees), stalls at Liverpool's Big History Weekend, the Bold Street Festival, the Summer Eco-Market in Toxteth and the Connected Communities Showcase in London. With support from the Edinburgh College of Art we held a further event at Light Night 2013. Bastian was an invited speaker at two local food debates, *Growing Connections* at the Bristol Festival of Nature and *Really Local Food*, part of the Liverpool Food for Real Film Festival which was webcast by FACT Liverpool's community outreach programme TenantSpin.

The project was also covered by a range of local media outlets, including appearing twice on BBC Radio Merseyside and a feature on Bay TV Liverpool. We were nominated as one of the highlights of Light Night by Bido Lito in 2012 and by Seven Streets in 2013 and featured in a range of local blogs and the Transition Free Press.

We also, of course, used a variety of web-based platforms to encourage a wider engagement with the project and our findings. This included our website (2806 unique visitors to date with 11,137 page views), Twitter (currently 342 followers), Facebook (57 likes) and an email list (210 contacts).

More generally the project was guided by an interest in making our data as open as possible, so that it could be embedded in the community more widely and utilised after the official end of the project. The data gathered from our mapping sessions was added to a public Google map (8,477 views to date) and

we have created a data DVD of our Oral History interviews which has been sent to local history societies and deposited in the Liverpool Record Office and the North West Sound Archive. We will also be submitting a selection of our data to the Museum of Liverpool's Interactive Map.

3. To engage creatively with data about the historic food systems in Liverpool in order to develop public engagement projects around temporality and local food issues.

At our final session at the Collaborative Analysis day the team brainstormed ideas for how to share our data via a range of creative mediums. Thus over and above sharing the data itself, the team decided to develop a series of 'food hacking' interventions, an interactive map, a storytelling strand and a postcard set.


The primary method through which the project actively 'hacked' contemporary food items was via the Mr Seel's iPhone App developed by University of Edinburgh PhD candidate Duncan Shingleton. The app lets users discover how food was grown, made and eaten across Liverpool by scanning food products from the present day. The barcodes on all food packaging are linked to a Universal Product Code database that supermarkets use to access details about a product including its price. When users scan a product with the Mr Seel's app the product barcode is hacked and 'haunted' by the past. The code is linked to a database of archive material and stories that were gathered by volunteer researchers. Just as the local food movement is transforming the global food system, our app seeks to transform Universal Product Codes into Local Memory Codes which uncover the local food heritage of Liverpool.
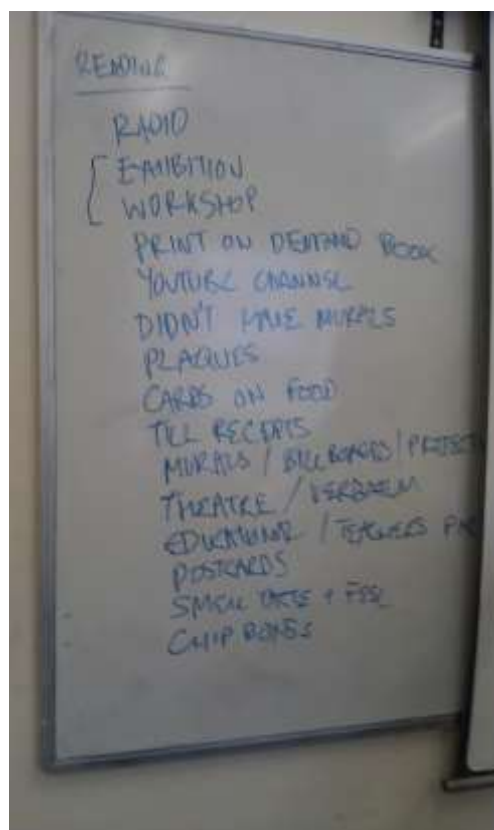
To complement our digital hacking of the contemporary food system, we developed methods of printed hacking. We printed a host of paper bags and napkins to be gifted to local cafes. The well-made bags were emblazoned with our logo but more importantly a reference to recipes found in *the Liverpool School of Cookery Recipe Book* (1911). The aim here was to offer a very local idea of food by offering an old recipe on a bag that contains new food from a place that is just around the corner.

Onion Deli cafe
@oniondeli

@MrSeelsGarden Great to be associated with such an awesome project! Our customers are loving the recipe bags xxxx

4 MONTHS AGO   REPLY   RETWEET   FAVORITE   +

For the interactive map, Chris Barker, also at the University of Edinburgh, worked with Alex Hale to develop an interface to reveal the many food-related sites that peppered Liverpool in the past. In this work we were keen to explore how the past could be made more present and how to evoke a sense of activity across a still map.
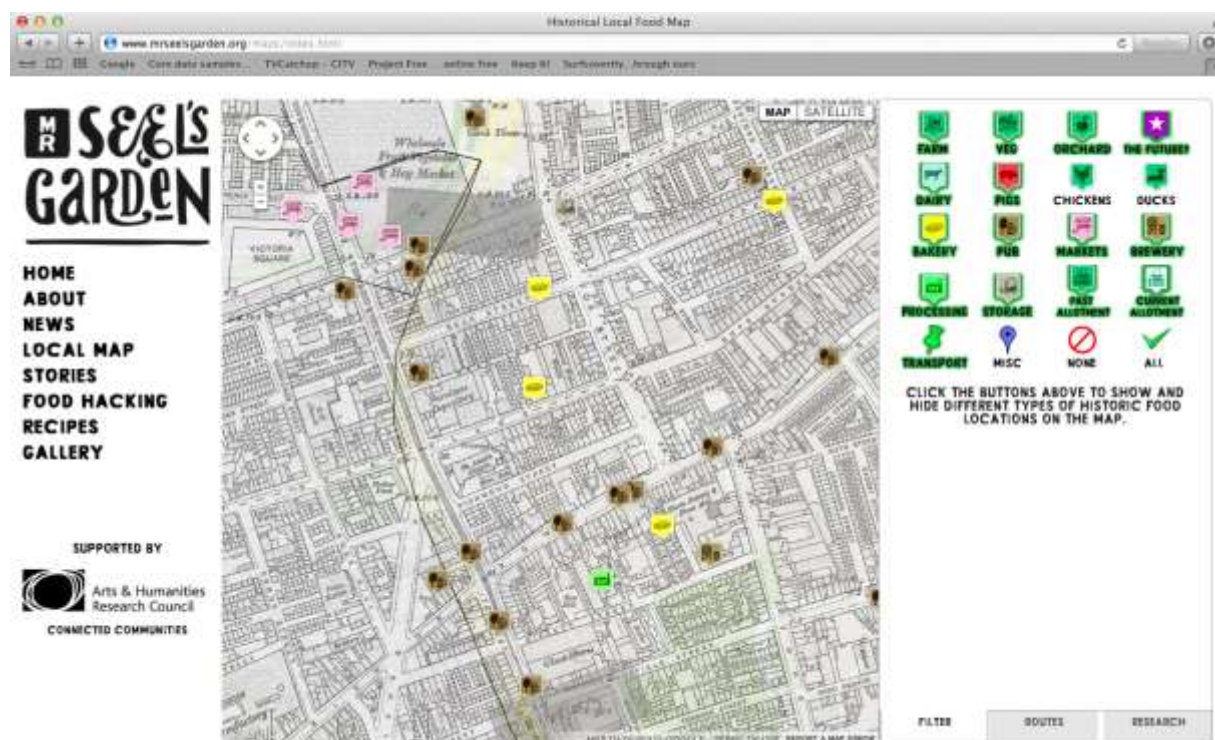
Volunteer researchers had added the location of hundreds of food related establishments, from pubs and markets to orchards and piggeries, to a Google map and Barker developed an easy to use interface to display them. Working with Hale, Barker also geo-referenced five of the Ordnance Survey maps from 1891 to 1954 we had used in our research to provide a further context to the locations. To add more temporal dimensions to the map four routes were recorded with a GPS device. These take the viewer on a walk through the past from the Docks to Mr Seel's Garden, the Railway to Great Nelson Street Markets, from the Canal to Great Nelson Street Markets, and from the Docks to Warehouses and on to pubs. Inhabiting the maps of the past as though they were present was another method used by the project to collapse a linear history of time.

In our 'storytelling strand' Eleanor Rees, who took part as a volunteer interviewer, used the experience of oral history research as the basis of some of her PhD research on the idea of the 'local poet'. Poems inspired by the research were shared at our final Show and Tell event. Some of our interviewees also worked with Manchester-based theatre maker Liz Postlethwaite to craft their stories into a public performance that was also presented at our Show and Tell. Both of these performances can be viewed on our YouTube channel.

Finally, to further play with the idea of 'excavating the future' of local food, the team decided to develop a series of postcards. Using a selection of locations identified in our research, as well as suggestions for future locations from attendees at our exhibition at Light Night 2012, the postcards used current photos, but identified these as if the past and future food locations they represented existed in the 'present' of the postcard. In order to allow the postcards to serve multiple needs each one included the contact information of a nearby local food group as well as our own and were gifted to these groups to use as free promotional material. This helped to further support the development of local food projects in Liverpool, as well as disseminating information about our project amongst new networks.

4. To identify impacts of the project and to communicate general insights, lessons and policy implications for using historical research to engage stakeholders with contemporary issues

As part of identifying the impacts of the *Memories of Mr Seel's Garden* project, volunteers completed questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of the project. They also participated in focus group discussions that explored their experiences of using new research methods, the affective elements of the research process and their understandings of whether and in what ways historical research can be used to address contemporary issues. The academic team also kept observational notes throughout the process.

This data is currently being analysed by the research team, who are developing a handbook to provide advice for other groups who may be interested in doing their own 'Excavating the Future' project. As part of this we will be soliciting feedback from our project partners to capture further insights into the benefits or drawbacks of our approach.

Interim findings include:

- There was a strong feeling that the high level research involvement made for a more interesting and engaging community project. As one volunteer stated "I'm used to doing projects where there's more broad brush and you perhaps don't go into the details so much… it was really nice working with experts and always learning about the [methods]"

- Our project challenged the received notion that community research projects work best when they focus on local 'heroes' or 'high points' in a community's history. The materials we used had been deliberately selected to represent a broad range of possible sources, which did not predicate particular findings, because it was important to the project that the volunteer researchers should shape the research and its outputs. The researchers were asked to reflect on this in our feedback session and they were unanimous in agreeing that they preferred what they perceived to be a more 'neutral' approach.

- The importance of using non-digital mediums was also an important finding. In regard to maps in particular, in a context where paper map libraries are being superseded by interactive online sources, we found that our paper maps engaged our volunteer researchers and members of the wider public for a longer time and in a deeper way than we had initially expected.

- The appetite for being involved throughout the whole research process was also evidenced, particularly in our oral history analysis session. This additional workshop brought core volunteers and new volunteers together to get a sense for the process of analysing interviews once they had been completed. There were around 20 participants including some of the original interviewers and interviewees.

5. To extend academic research on the interconnections between time and community by engaging philosophically with the case study data arising from this project.

The multi-layered character of this project has meant that it has provided material to support contributions to debates in multiple disciplines. This will include areas such as community archaeology, archive studies, digital media, food studies and work on the relations between time and community. These contributions are in the process of being written up and submitted to a range of venues including *Leonardo*, *Archival Science* and *Time and Society*.

To give just one example of the kinds of debates the project will respond to, Speed has suggested that the Mr Seel app makes an important intervention into debates around the benefits of 'ubiquity' (e.g. Greenfield 2006). The app has extended Speed's interest in 'territorial clouds', offering a critique of the ubiquity promised by smart phones. Manufacturers of these phones suggest that users can reach data about anyone, anywhere at anytime. By contrast the Mr Seel app allows anybody with an iPhone to receive historical information through the channel of a barcode upon any food product but *only* within 20 miles of Everton, Liverpool City centre and Sudley House in Mossley Hill. This is an important intervention that argues for the need to recognise that some knowledge is meaningful because it is connected to particular contexts, and that data, although fluid and liable to leak everywhere, requires architectures to retain the meaningful qualities of this knowledge.

Where to next?

Another aspect of the permaculture model we adopted was an openness to keeping the project flexible and responsive to the energy and interests of those involved. This allowed us to develop further workshops, to move to creating a performance rather than a local food walk, as originally planned, and to engage with other interested organisations and groups as the project progressed.

We will maintain this approach following the official end of the project and seek ways to allow both the data and method developed in the project to travel in unexpected directions. One element of this is the handbook mentioned above. An article about the project, which will announce the launch of the handbook will be published in the next edition of the Transition Free Press and will help spread word about the project to this international network.

One of the volunteers from the project has initiated discussions about developing a 'Son of Seel' project with her organisation, which will potentially allow us to further develop and refine our methodology. At least two current academic funding bids around local place-making will also be drawing on the processes we have developed.

References and external links

References

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External Links

Project Website: http://www.mrseelsgarden.org

Google Map: http://goo.gl/maps/27C20

The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

> "*to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.*"

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx