

THE HIGGINS BEDFORD

Title of project/activity

Brickworks Memories Rediscovered

Partners

Invisible Folk, Greensand Country Festival

Funding

Share East, The Higgins (in kind staff and volunteer time), Greensand Country Festival (HLF Funded, assistance with promotion and marketing)

Background

There was an opportunity alongside the loan exhibition from John Bunyan Museum running April to September 2019 to run a project to re-interpret, digitise our photographic archive and repack photographs relating to Bedfordshire Brickworks. This was part of an effort to better document and interpret our collection items and ask our audience for some additional information about the images, with some meaningful captions and their oral history connections with the brickworks heritage of the area to uncover some of their hidden histories. This heritage closely links to the development of Bedford's current broad ethnic diversity of its community, created through people from many different countries arriving and being invited to work at the Brickworks following the Second World War.

Key Objectives

- To collect further stories and oral history from the community about their experiences from the post-war era coming to and working at the Brickworks – the European Voluntary Workers, the Italian community, the Indian, Pakistani and Caribbean communities who all contributed to the labour force and production of millions of bricks.
- We aimed to use the exhibition The Journey from Bunyan to the Brickworks, which is an exhibition and film held in partnership with John Bunyan Museum and The Bedford Chronicles, which was Heritage Lottery Funded and exhibited for 2 weeks at the Basement@Bunyan in 2017, with additional material from The Higgins Bedford's collection being incorporated for this new version. The exhibition provided us with a way of opening a conversation with our communities and collecting their stories for the archive and historical record at the museum during the exhibition's 6 month run from April 2019.
- To take the opportunity to do a full inventory and document on our database, scan and photograph, and re-pack our Brickworks archive material for which we have a backlog in our collection.
- Once the photographic archive has been digitised to ask our communities for their contribution to interpret these images more richly through 'crowd documentation' and caption creation in the gallery through a selection of images being provided for their participation.
- To capture some of these hidden histories for posterity while our community participants are still with us to share them and so the younger generation understand the sacrifice made by the older generation – their struggles and successes to build a better future for their children.

Which of the CCD evidence areas does the activity address:

- Engaging a diverse range of people in developing/ delivering programmes
- Supporting diverse practitioners
- Integrating diversity in the museum's programme

- Collections are viewed from diverse perspectives and tell untold stories
- Self-evaluation & sharing best practice

Process – stages of implementation – Any challenges?

Preparation for event. Some images from the collection were selected and reproduced in files for visitors to comment on during the Brickworks Memories Day. Invisible Folk contacted 10 local musicians to play folk music to be performed and recorded on the day to encourage people in to the museum from a different audience. A Question and Answer session was arranged with 2 previous Managing Directors of London Brick Company to encourage people to come in and share their own memories and stories – this session was supported with a selection of images from the collection for people to comment on.

In the gallery there was music and filming/ photography of visitors who were encouraged to bring their Brickworks objects and share their memories, or offer their contact details on the Share your story postcards to be followed up for future interview/ discussion.

Greensand Country Festival helped to publicise the event through their own Festival publicity. The challenge was that many people were busy as it was the May Bank Holiday, but we did succeed in reaching 286 people who visited The Higgins on the day. Overall the numbers for the exhibition during the 6 months as a whole were over 24,000 visitors. The digitisation project ran alongside the exhibition and is now complete with several volunteers being dedicated to this project for many months, adding records to the database over 400 records have been created and the backlog of this particular collection of images now tackled so visitors and researchers will have better access to this part of the collection in future.

It was difficult to encourage in our harder to reach more diverse audiences to engage with the project – the event did reach some individuals, but not as many as we had hoped. Better marketing would have helped, but more targeted at local community places such as village halls and places of worship for our diverse communities might have assisted with a broader reach. Many people although happy to talk about the images in the gallery with a member of staff or volunteer were reluctant to



write down their stories in the folders or write their contact details down without being directly encouraged to do so – and often those who did write down their details were not from the less represented parts of the community we were focussed on trying to reach.

In hindsight it may have been more successful to have more volunteer presence in the gallery and for them to approach people directly to perhaps record voxpops about the images on audio equipment. We did have some good engagement with people on the Brickworks day due to volunteer discussions with visitors and have some new interviews from members of the workforce, often with generations of family working at the Brickworks.

Also going out with the images to specific locations in the community would potentially provide additional and richer engagement with the collection – we are looking at this using the materials from the project for a future outreach project with our local parish councils.

Outcome

We reached over 286 people on the Brickworks Day who enjoyed listening to the Brickworks themed music by 10 local folk groups, the additional objects on display for the day and the Question and answer session with 2 previous Managing Directors of the Brickworks. From the Brickworks Day we have 2 films that were created a short overview film that captures a synopsis of the day that we can use for future promotion and encouragement of people sharing their stories online, as well as an indepth film which provided an overview edited version of the Question and answer session contributions.

We had over 24,000 visitors for the duration of the exhibition – which was an increase on last year's visitor figures for the museum during that 6 month exhibition period. Visitors bought £384 of Brickworks related shop stock (we produced some postcards and had related reproduction ephemera on sale).

We had very positive feedback from our visitors about the exhibition and the Brickworks day itself in our visitor book and comments sheets from the day – with one person writing that the exhibition (seen on the day of the event) had shifted their views on immigration to this country (see visitor feedback below).

We had valuable material captured from the filming of the Question and Answer session film for the archive from people from our diverse communities and additional stories captured by interviews after the event.

We had some of our images interpreted by our visitors on the day and meaningful captions shared in the folders in the gallery and with volunteers and staff present as well as leaving these in the gallery for further additions for the duration of the exhibition.

Our backlog of collection items relating to the Brickworks were documented, photographed and digitised and are now accessible on our database for future researchers and use for future displays and outreach.

Key points for effective practice

One of the most important points was that it is not always easy to reach and engage with the audience that you are aiming to reach. Help from community organisations and partnerships with Invisible Folk and Greensand Country Festival helped us to reach new and different audiences. Although we did not have a huge number of visitors on the Brickworks Day the engagements that took place between different generations were meaningful to those who had come to share their stories with us. Volunteer support at these events so that relationships could be built and we did not lose the opportunity to engage with some of our harder to reach audiences was really critical. We recruited a few new volunteers who came through partnerships and interest in the brickworks theme. Follow up has happened with regarding gathering visitor share your story details and doing some further quality interviews was also an important aspect for advancing contributions to the collection.

Digitising and fully documenting the Brickworks collection of items with volunteer help has meant that we can engage with new and different audiences with this material in the future – we also have the materials created for the exhibition gallery that can be used for outreach events in the future and displays at the museum on the subject. We can also have these in our permanent galleries for further additions to the content already collected.

Conclusions/recommendations

The project has been effective in raising awareness to our visitors and the general public that we are widening our interpretation of our collections and wish to collect more stories representative of our communities. We have succeeded in collecting some new oral histories focussing on the Brickworks and digitising collections that are now more accessible for future activities and events on this subject. The discussions at the event and the stories presented in the gallery have helped to educate, but also give people who worked at the Brickworks a sense of recognition that their contribution and hard work has been included in the wider narrative of Bedford's history and heritage.

I recommend looking at 'hidden histories' and identifying where there are deficits in our collections so that we can grow stronger, more representative interpretations of our collections through engaging with our visitors in meaningful ways and capturing their rich experiences for future generations to understand our local heritage better. These can be collected through creative means and inspired through culture, music, open discussion forums, film, audio, photography and material culture being shared with others.

Additional information

See here for full length archive film from Brickworks Day – short trailer for the day will be emailed separately.

<https://my.pcloud.com/publink/show?code=XZp1eFkZ0rdRnxexMu5ncKrsA1LtfQqY1g3y>

'The brickworks exhibition – very interesting. I found the film moving – especially the way in which immigration was vital to the industry. It made me re-think some of my views on immigration' (This comment was recorded on Brickworks Memories Day 25th May 2019)

'Brickworks feature very thought provoking as a school girl I learnt to swim at Stewartby Pool. My Grandfather and Father both worked for the Brickworks LBC. Grandfather in furnace areas. Father delivering the bricks.'

'When my husband was courting me, he presented me with occasional bricks with personal messages that he carved into the green brick before it went into the kiln. I still keep two on my dressing table.'

'Fabulous exhibition, industrial heritage very often overlooked. We owe a great deal to immigrants!'

'Thankyou for another great Higgins' exhibition with an important message.'

'We were taken by bus from Wootton school to swim at Stewartby. The water was freezing. The sun rarely shone the pall from the brickworks. I remember Polish and Ukrainian kids. I though the Marston Vale was Bunyan's Slough of despond.'

'Wonderful exhibition – especially loved the films – something very moving about the migrant stories. Brilliant stuff! Thank you.'

'A fitting reminder of the inspiration provided by John Bunyan to all people.'

'Fascinating exhibition. Loved the film and music. The Higgins is a brilliant place and does wonderful things.'

'Mum worked on the presses also in the canteen. We as children went swimming free as Mum worked at Stewartby and she was able to see us also we had a Christmas Party with a present each, lovely memories. My step-father also worked there where my mother met him. He was Polish, my husband also worked there for 30 years. '

'Worked at Stewartby and Marston 1984 – 2009 – many happy memories'

'Brought back so many memories. My father and myself worked for the company. Provided us with a good life. Thankyou for the exhibition, very dear to my heart.'

'This museum charting the history of the brickworks is incredible. Although I personally have no relationship connected to the works I found it fascinating.'

'Very interesting presentation on some of the history of the brickyards. Have a few contacts with knowledge of the Electricians Dept at Stewartby 1965 – 73.'

'When I see the photo of the swimming pool I feel the cold water and rough knitted swimming costume. But that was where I learnt to swim in lessons from Bedford Road Junior School, Kempston'

'Happy childhood memories cycling as a child fom Kempston to enjoy the pool (Dawn Adamovkis)'

'As a child growing up in Stewartby in the 1950s and early 60s I remember this roundabout at the top of the hill well. It always looked beautiful and Mr Fletcher from Churchill Close used to help maintaining the flower beds in the village. E Clare.'



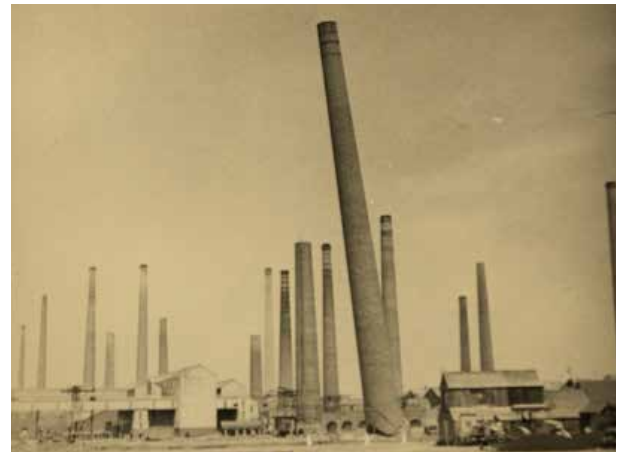
Above: Ken White – photograph of Ken standing in front of the London Brick Company Lorries

Below: Roger Clay's Father Claude Clay meeting the Duke of Edinburgh at LBC works visit 1964

Below right: Chimney being demolished at LBC.

Bottom: Roger Clay Father's images Inspection of flooded pit.

Roger shared some of his family story in the filming on the Brickworks Day.



Sicurello Family Story

'When he was twenty-six years old, in 1952, my father, Gerlando Sicurello, left his native village, S. Angelo Muxaro in the province of Agrigento in Sicily, to emigrate to Bedfordshire to work for Ridgmont Brickworks. He was part of the first small group to leave his village to go and work in the Marston Vale where he lived in a hostel belonging to the brickworks. Gerlando worked in what were called "the chambers". These, I believe, were sections of the kiln in which the bricks were baked. When the chambers were still quite hot he would go in to extract the bricks, load them onto a wheelbarrow to transport them to lorries and load them by hand. I heard that the reason why the brickworks recruited men from the south of Italy was because these men were used to hot weather so, therefore, they would not suffer the heat too much.

In 1955 Gerlando went back to S. Angelo Muxaro to marry my mother Angela Alessi. He brought her over to Bedford and they went to live in a rented room in the house of an English woman in Honey Hill Road. I was born in 1956 and when I was three years old, they bought a house: 57 Willow Road, just off London Road in Bedford. A few years later they bought an Austin Cambridge. Occasionally, on Sundays, he would drive our family to Marston Vale to see the site where he worked. I remember the lakes there, most probably formed from the excavation of material to make bricks.

My mother went to work for Meltis, the confectionery factory, in Miller Road. By then, more Sicilian men had emigrated from S. Angelo Muxaro to work for the brickworks. A lot of their wives went to work for Meltis along with women from other southern regions of Italy whose husbands were also working for the brickworks.

These Italian migrants contributed to financing the building of St Francesca Italian Church in Woburn Road. I remember that as a young child some people came to our house to ask for a contribution towards the purchase of a statue of Saint Angelo, the patron saint of my parents' village. By then there were 90 families in Bedford from S. Angelo. I believe that the statue of Saint Angelo still stands in the Church. I was the first child of the S. Angelo community to be born in Bedford. My brother, Giuseppe, was born much later. By then lots of other S. Angelo descendants had been born in Bedford.

As time went on, my parents were able to leave their original employments and move to less strenuous work. My father went to work on the shop-floor of the engineering factory W. H. Allen in Queens Park as a semi-skilled labourer. My mother went to work for the American electronics firm Texas Instruments where she assembled components.

In the meantime, I went to Parkdene Primary School, Kingsbrook Junior School (now Kings Oak), Silver Jubilee Secondary Girls' School (now demolished) where I became Form Leader and a Prefect. I later obtained a 2.1 degree in English Literature from the University of London, and became a teacher of English. My adult children both have Masters degrees.

Now my parents are deceased and are buried in their native village.'

Story provided by Anna Sicurello in response to project.



Top: Gerlando, Anna and Angela Sicurello in front of their car at London Road, Bedford.

Left: Gerlando and Angela with their baby girl Anna, Anna ready for school a few years on



Top left: Jack and Evelyn Loft on Brickworks Day looking through the Photograph album files

Top Right: Invisible Folk's Jon Bickley performing on Brickworks Day in The Higgins Courtyard.

Bottom Left: R Lombard and son on Brickworks Day colouring in and leaving a message on the 'Wall of inspiration'.

Bottom Right: Performers 'Jack in the Barrel' with special Brickworks tribute song out in The Higgins courtyard.

