

Talking About Sewing Machines¹

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In September 2017, West Dunbartonshire's Heritage Team launched Singer Stories – a project that included a community oral history programme to explore the legacy of the Singer Sewing Machine Factory in Clydebank. Once the largest factory of its kind in the world, employing almost 15,000 workers, the Singer Factory closed in 1980. Its closure, along with the loss of the neighbouring shipyards, transformed Clydebank from a vibrant industrial hub to a post-industrial town struggling to find a new identity. With the factory now closed for almost four decades, there is an increasingly limited window of opportunity to capture former Singer workers' memories and experiences of life in the factory. However, within the local community there is often a reluctance to participate in formal oral history programmes due to a feeling that these stories of everyday working life are not of sufficient historical importance. The Singer Stories project has assembled a network of community oral historians who can collect stories from their peers: the neighbours, friends and family members who worked in the Singer factory. By training volunteer oral historians from within the subject community, Singer Stories has been able to access traditionally 'hard to reach' parts of that community while empowering the community to shape its own history and identity. This article will discuss the challenges facing the development of effective oral history projects in the context of deindustrialisation and the process of developing a peer-to-peer oral history network.

In the summer of 2017, as part of the 'A Stitch in Time' project funded by Museums Galleries Scotland, West Dunbartonshire Council's Heritage Team began developing an oral history project around the Singer factory and the experiences of those who worked in it.²

Earlier that year a three-year project had come to an end, part of which involved a collaboration with Clydebank College students to film interviews with residents of West Dunbartonshire who had worked in the area's various industries: in John Browns, the Dennystown Forge, Polaroid, Dumbarton Distillery, Tullis, Westclox, Burroughs and, of course, Singers. The oral histories were conducted in a typical manner: advertising for participants in the local press and through contacts in the local community. Once an interview was arranged, a member of the Heritage Team would ask the questions while a

¹ This article is a version of a paper given at the Deindustrialisation, Heritage and Memory Network workshop on 28 September 2018 at the University of Strathclyde.

² West Dunbartonshire Council is home to the Sewing Machine Collection and Singer Archive, a collection of national significance as recognised by the Scottish Government. A full catalogue is available at <https://www.west-dunbarton.gov.uk/leisure-parks-events/museums-and-galleries/exhibitions/clydebank-museum-exhibitions/singer-sewing-machines/>.

team of college students would film the encounter. When it worked, it worked well and some excellent material was captured.³ However, there were several problems with this approach.

The main problem was participation: finding willing participants was not easy, for several reasons. First, a feeling that the everyday experience of a cabinet polisher or a secretary is not worth recording, or that no one wants to hear about the day in a life of a driver or a joiner. This is not always the case. The widely celebrated industries, particularly the Clyde shipyards, have a historical status that is widely acknowledged and well understood by the former workforce, particularly the skilled workers. Singer does not quite have the same status. However, the greatest difference is between the skilled tradesmen on the one hand and the unskilled male workers and the skilled and unskilled female workers on the other. The contribution of this second group – the typists, cooks, messenger boys, security guards and so on – to industrial Clydeside is often overlooked, despite being just as crucial as the apprenticed trades. Secondly, a reluctance to be recorded – whether audio or video, but more so video. The prospect of having one’s words fixed for posterity in video or audio is a disconcerting proposal for most people. But an oral history interview is not like an ordinary interview. Most interviews, for jobs, for the TV or radio, are ephemeral things – they do not tend to persist, unless something of particular significance is said. Oral history interviews, on the other hand, persist regardless of what is said. We do them because we want to capture something that can become part of the patchwork of sources in the production of history. People understand this and are, and in many ways are right to be, wary of it. Of course, we offer participants the opportunity to request closure periods or to terminate the process entirely. However, in practice this rarely happens, particularly when the dynamic is between professionals or academics and participants who are less confident about the process. Related to this, the other aspect of this is the position of the interviewer: ‘The man from the council has come to talk to you about your job’ is not necessarily going to be welcomed with open arms. And that is connected to the second problem, which is selection bias; or to be more precise, reporting bias and participation bias.⁴

Taking the latter first, to put it bluntly, is the person who wants to speak to you necessarily the person you want to speak to? It often seems that when we are looking for participants in these kind of projects – projects that involve communities who have experienced deindustrialisation and economic decline

³ <http://www.west-dunbarton.gov.uk/libraries/archives-family-history/oral-history-project/>.

⁴ These terms are borrowed from the world of clinical trials but the general concept is widely discussed in the literature. For example, Anna Bryson has written about the ‘dangers of a lazy reliance on self-selection’ in the context of the conflict in Northern Ireland: A. Bryson, ‘Victims, Violence and Voice: Transitional Justice, Oral History and Dealing with the Past’, *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review*, 39, no. 2 (2016), 299–353, 334.

– there is a tendency to attract participants who have fond memories of their working lives, sometimes as a result of nostalgia and sentimentality,⁵ sometimes because they genuinely enjoyed their jobs. Intuitively, it makes sense that those who enjoyed their time working at John Browns or Westclox are more inclined to talk about it, particularly in the context of an oral history interview. If we take Singer as an example, the former workers interviewed during the course of the West Dunbartonshire Council interview were disproportionately, and by a significant margin, people who worked in the office rather than on the factory floor. There are obviously numerous reasons for this. Almost all of the office workers we interviewed were female so it seems reasonable to say that the combination of the higher life expectancy for women over men and the lower life expectancy of manual workers compared with non-manual workers can account for this to some extent. But given the number of people that members of the council's Heritage Team have encountered over the years who could give a different account of working life in the factory, but are reluctant to do so, it seems that the demographics are not the whole story.

Another issue is the way in which heritage is promoted in a local authority context. In order to protect museum and archive services from the perpetual rounds of cuts, there is increasingly a need to link heritage with quantifiable outcomes, particularly ideas such as well-being. As a result, there is an implicit assumption that industrial heritage, particularly recent industrial heritage, is something to be celebrated, to be used to promote community cohesion and local pride. In that context, it is no surprise that most participants see it as their role to reinforce the general air of celebration by coming to the interview with their fondest recollections.

This brings us to the question of reporting bias. Bias not only occurs in terms of who participates but also in terms of what they say. This is an obvious point but can be illustrated with a brief example that is particularly striking. One of the oral history interviewees, who was well known to the Heritage Team, was giving an interview on camera about his experience working in Singer. He was asked about his first day on the job and said, 'When I walked into Singers I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.' He continued to talk about how much he loved his work and the factory, and would not hear a bad word said about it. After the camera was switched off he was asked if he had been exaggerating. He replied, 'No, it's true – I loved every minute of it' and went on to explain that the nature of his job meant he was free to travel from department to department in the factory. This was ideal, he said, for someone who had a side-business in selling black-market cigarettes. There are countless instances of people giving the interviewer what they think the interviewer wants to hear – 'it was wonderful',

⁵ Or, as Claire Robertson notes in her reflections on life history methodologies, a tendency for participants to idealise their behaviour and present 'flattering self-images' both to themselves and the interviewer: C. Robertson, 'In Pursuit of Life Histories: The Problem of Bias', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 7, no. 2 (1983), 63–9.

'I loved my work', 'it was a tragedy when it closed down' – only for the real story to emerge once the tape recorder is switched off. The danger in this is obvious, as it is only what makes it on to a recording that persists.

A final point is that the interviewer has obvious bias too. My interests are in the nature of work situated in a context of class struggle. As an interviewer I am much more inclined to pursue lines of questioning about how strikes came about, or disciplinary methods of the management, or the alienating, atomising mechanics of piecework – and not necessarily how great the canteen lunches were, or how much fun the summer outing was. But these things are just as important. Of course, one can argue that the great lunches and summer outings are the other side of the coin of management discipline, but the fact is that there were aspects of people's work that they did enjoy: the camaraderie, the sense of purpose, the pride in what they were involved in producing, whether it was ships, clocks or sewing machines. The relationship between subjective and objective is not one way: we cannot simply say that the objective reality of life as a worker is as an exploited, alienated, dehumanised being forced to exchange their labour power, their status as a creative human subject, for their means of subsistence, and that any reported subjective experience that does not reflect that is the result of a 'false consciousness'.⁶ Both subject and object condition one another, reality – and indeed history – is created through the dialectical relationship between the two. The sewing machine is an instrument of liberation as well and at the same time as being a tool of oppression; the Singer worker's labour produces both use and exchange value; the memorialisation of the Singer factory is both an act of resistance and acquiescence.

It seems that all too often oral history practice in the field of industrial history has tended towards either a liberal analysis, which is heritage as celebration or nostalgia, where the work was hard but rewarding and the bosses firm but fair, or a Stalinist analysis, which also basically sees industrial history as a case of

⁶ Not a term ever used by Marx, despite its association with him, and only used once by Engels. For more on this, see Joseph McCarney's *Ideology and False Consciousness* (2005), <http://www.marxists.org/subject/marxmyths/joseph-mccarney/article.htm>. The concept is developed by Georg Lukács most notably in his 1920 *History and Class Consciousness*. Its later use by Herbert Marcuse and Louis Althusser reinforces an elitist relationship between intellectuals and workers; it is also deployed by the Stalinist Communist parties to explain their failure to win over the working class. However, Lukács for his part is clear that 'the dialectical method does not permit us simply to proclaim the "falseness" of this consciousness and to persist in an inflexible confrontation of true and false. On the contrary, it requires us to investigate this "false consciousness" concretely as an aspect of the historical totality and as a stage in the historical process' (Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), 50). This is a more nuanced approach that allows for the concept of 'false consciousness' (always a term that should be placed within inverted commas) without reducing the concept to a means of explaining away the real experiences of human subjects.

celebration or nostalgia, but from the opposite point of view.⁷ The challenge is, can we develop a methodology which is up to the task of adequately capturing the messy, contradictory, ambiguous, insightful, penetrating or sometimes simply confused accounts of people's working lives in industries that are now long gone?

These were just some of the issues we had in mind when we started developing the project which became 'Singer Stories' and what follows is a description of some of the small steps we took in at least acknowledging and working with the challenges described.

'Singer Stories' came about, in part, as a result of a recognition that previous efforts to gather oral history interviews from former factory workers had not been wholly successful, that there were still a significant number of people who had stories to tell about their working lives. Unlike the previous oral history project in West Dunbartonshire, which was open to anyone who worked in any of the industries of Clydebank, Dumbarton or the Vale of Leven, for 'Singer Stories', as the name suggests, the focus was solely on the Singer Sewing Machine Factory in Clydebank.

At its peak, the Singer factory employed almost 16,000 people and, alongside the shipyards, was the principal local industry between 1885 and 1980.⁸ Tens of millions of sewing machines were shipped all over the world from Clydebank in the factory's 95-year history, and it was the scene of the famous strike of 1911 and the Clydebank Blitz. The Singer company itself was one of the world's first truly multinational companies, with its roots in 1850s Boston and flamboyant owner and founder, Isaac Merritt Singer – father of at least 24 children, by five wives (one of whom was allegedly the model for the Statue of Liberty). Everyone in Clydebank had a connection with the company, whether as an employee or as a relative of one, a participant in the annual Singer gala or one of the many Singer recreational clubs, developed in the 1920s as part of the shift to paternalism instituted by the company in response to the 1911 strike.⁹ Indeed, it was not uncommon for people to complain that they – and the town of Clydebank – had been 'Singerized', so dominant was the company both culturally and economically.¹⁰ Some people remember 'Singerization' fondly, while others do not. Yet we ought not to simply view the former as 'dupes' and the latter as 'critical thinkers'; as Jackie Clarke remarks in her work on Molineux, the language of fondness is 'less an internalization of company discourse, than

⁷ This mode of historiography emerged from the Communist Party Historians Group and is generally characterised by a narrow conception of the working class as male, skilled and working in an industrial setting, such as a shipyard or engineering works.

⁸ The most authoritative source on Singer's history in Clydebank is former worker Arthur Dorman's 'History of Singer Co (UK) Ltd' (unpublished, 1973). A copy is held in Glasgow University Archives, GB 248 UGD 121.

⁹ Glasgow Labour History Workshop, *The Singer Strike, Clydebank, 1911* (Glasgow, 1989).

¹⁰ M. Craig, *When the Clyde Ran Red: A Social History of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh, 2018).

a reflection of the extent to which this workplace network stood in for family members who had been lost'.¹¹

Given the centrality of the Singer factory to the town, with 'Singer Stories', while we narrowed the focus in terms of the particular industry we were concentrating on, we widened the scope of participants by also seeking out people whose family – as in mothers, fathers and so on – worked in the factory, along with people who didn't work in the factory but owned and used one of the Singer sewing machines manufactured there. One motivation for this was simply to expand the potential pool of interviewees. But the other aim was to look at how people in the community had already memorialised the factory and the trauma of its closure and passed their experiences of it on to their children – and how those children themselves thought of it and understood its place in Clydebank's history. As Strangleman, Rhodes and Linkon note, 'the focus here is not on the loss or closure of individual plants but on a broader set of questions about what this process means in terms of an industrial culture built on, and out of, the illusion of permanence'.¹²

And by also interviewing people who owned and used Singer sewing machines, we began to look at the other side of the factory's legacy in Clydebank: what does it mean to earn your living from a machine made by your neighbour? How do people feel about Singer – and about the wider deindustrialisation of Clydebank – when the activity of that now long-gone factory is embodied in a machine their mother used to sew their Halloween costumes on? In other words, people in Clydebank stand in a multitude of relations to the Clydebank Singer Factory: for almost 100 years their experiences were mediated through the factory and the objects it produced and as the memorialisation – and in some cases mythologisation – of the factory takes on its own agency, the factory and the sewing machine continue to mediate and inform the production of Clydebank as a place.

With the project parameters set, we then looked at the methodology. Rather than persisting with formal, appointment-based interviews, conducted by qualified archivists or curators, we decided to look to the community itself and how we could facilitate the community to record its own stories. Again, this is not groundbreaking but it is the first time it had been attempted in Clydebank, a community which has been the subject of oral history projects since at least 1979. Like elsewhere in the country at the time,¹³ many of these late 1970s

¹¹ J. Clarke, 'Closing Time: Deindustrialization and Nostalgia in Contemporary France', *History Workshop Journal*, 79, no. 1 (2015), 107–25, 115.

¹² T. Strangleman, J. Rhodes and S. Linkon, 'Introduction to Crumbling Cultures: Deindustrialization, Class, and Memory', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 84 (2013), 7–22, 10.

¹³ As noted in A. Bartie and A. McIvor, 'Oral History in Scotland', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 92, no. 234 (2013), 108–36, 117. As part of the wider Singer Stories project, we tracked down and digitised as many of these Clydebank recordings as possible. As this was ongoing, student volunteers helped create summary transcripts of these older

and early 1980s recording were created as part of a local Youth Opportunities Programme. There is a certain incongruity in Margaret Thatcher facilitating intracommunity co-production oral histories; as Thomson wrote, ‘one of the ironies of Thatcherism was that it destroyed the employment base of working-class communities, and then funded their histories’.¹⁴ We decided to recruit a team of community oral historians, people who had links with the area and were interested in its people and its history. Recruiting through Facebook pages such as ‘Call Yersel a Bankie’ – a Clydebank community group with over 20,000 members – and the local libraries, over two sessions between September 2017 and March 2018 we signed up a cohort of volunteers ranging from school students to retired people.

Our volunteers generally came to the role with their own interests and their own understanding of oral history – usually that it involved asking scripted questions and staying very quiet while the interviewee answered. We took the decision to encourage the former and discourage the latter, so the volunteers were encouraged to pursue their own interests in the interviews and to view the event as less of a formal interview and more of a conversation in which they were a full participant. There were two main advantages to this approach. The first was that a peer-to-peer, relaxed, informal interview tended to result in a more relaxed loquacious interviewee with, hopefully, the result that they thought less about what they felt they were supposed to say and more about what they actually thought. The second was that the interviewer, themselves a member of the local community with their own view on and relations to the Singer factory, became a part of the interview. In other words, we were looking to embrace the biases of the interviewer and accept them, even encourage them, as part of an intracommunity conversation. Of course, there is still participation bias and reporting bias – arguably even more so as these questions now apply to the interviewers themselves – but as an archivist it seems much easier to live with when these biases are grounded in the subject community itself, rather than being imposed from the outside.

Our role then as archivists and curators became one of facilitation, of empowering the volunteers through technical training – how to use the handheld recorders, how to fill in the permission forms, the legal and ethical considerations of oral history practice and so on – and through providing a solid grounding in the history of Singer in Clydebank, particularly the key episodes in the company and factory’s history and the years of its decline, the years that many of the interviewees would have lived and worked through. In this second aspect of the training, we encouraged volunteers to explore the history for themselves, again with the freedom to pursue their own interests, providing them with relevant resources from books on local history to access to West Dunbartonshire’s museum and archive collections database. A number of our oral history volunteers also

recordings. This helped to inform our approach to the oral history project, particularly around identifying under-represented voices from the factory.

¹⁴ Cited in Bartie and McIvor, ‘Oral History in Scotland’, 117.

helped with a parallel volunteering programme that involved digitising the Singer photographic collection. The knowledge gained from their work in their archive could be directly applied in their role as oral historians and they were encouraged to use digitised images to start conversations and prompt memories during their interviews.

Once trained, we paired our volunteers into teams of two – usually trying to combine technical ability with conversational confidence, often resulting in a young/old partnership. Each team picked a two-and-a-half-hour slot through the week and were then allowed the freedom of Clydebank Town Hall. The Town Hall hosts Clydebank Museum and Art Gallery, a café and a number of function rooms that host all manner of meetings and events. The result is a space busy with local people, the ideal base for our volunteers. The sessions were advertised online and in local libraries but the majority of those who were interviewed were in the Town Hall for something else and just happened to be approached by one of the volunteers. In this way, across two eight-week blocks, we gathered 24 recordings with 46 interviewees – 61 if you include our volunteers – and a total of 498 minutes of recordings. In addition, we took volunteers out to several local care homes to record interviews with residents who had worked in the factory. This brought its own set of challenges as we were often speaking with people who were suffering from various stages of dementia and in most cases these sessions became more akin to therapeutic reminiscence sessions rather than oral history recording exercises.¹⁵

In terms of evaluating the success of the project, we had certainly managed to record more interviews than in any previous project, albeit with considerably more people collecting recordings in a more time-intensive period. Listening back to the interviews, the recordings were of good enough quality and the interviews themselves were, for the most part, wide-ranging, organic explorations of people's past and their memories. Each interviewer had a distinct style and the result is a somewhat eclectic collection of oral history recordings. Of course, one could argue that some of the interviews are better than others, in terms of the questions asked, the technique and to what extent their 'agendas' had been shed.¹⁶ One volunteer in particular had a habit of asking leading questions and occasionally talking over the answers. However, these interviews are telling in themselves as they demonstrate the kind of stories about Singer that have been internalised by members of the community who are then – in their role as oral historian – surprised when these stories are challenged by people who worked in the factory. We never supervised interviews, for fear of inhibiting either interviewee or interviewer, but were always on hand to provide help and advice. Yet, listening back you can, as a professional used to doing these things

¹⁵ The therapeutic value of oral history has long been established. See, for example, John Adams' paper on using oral history to restore personal history: J. Adams, 'Anamnesis in Dementia: Restoring a Personal History', *Oral History*, 17, no. 2 (1989), 62–3.

¹⁶ K. Anderson and D. C. Jack, 'Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analysis', in (ed.) R. Perks and A. Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998), 157–71.

yourself, experience a degree of frustration, as in, ‘Why didn’t you ask them this?’ or ‘Why didn’t you follow up that?’ However, there were too many instances to count when our volunteers asked a question that would never have occurred to a member of staff and they were able to have conversations that we would never have been able to have in the first place.¹⁷

Participation was still a problem as is evident from the figures – seven teams collecting 24 recordings between them works out as about three and a half recordings each. Each volunteer spent 2½ hours a week for eight weeks volunteering – even counting the volunteers as pairs equates to 140 hours of volunteering for just over eight hours of recordings. However, for the most part – and it cannot be denied that there was a degree of boredom for our volunteers on particularly quiet days – these 132 non-recording hours were not wasted. This time was used by volunteers to learn more about Singer, about the museum and archive collections, and more importantly to have all the conversations in the Town Hall that led to the recorded interviews.

Oral history is by its very nature performative – the role of the interviewee and the interviewer, the presence of the microphone, the signing of the permission forms – all these things construct a social event where a certain kind of performance is expected from each actor. Hilary Young notes ‘how memories have been shaped by prevailing ideas of gender-appropriate behaviour and values’.¹⁸ Geography and class play a similar role. But it is not simply a question of memory that has been shaped in the past, sculpted into a stable form to be recollected at a later date – memory is shaped in the act of remembering, and continues to be shaped and reshaped with each act of remembering. In other words, the gender-appropriate behaviour is just as significant now as it was then as it shapes the character of the performance of remembering in an oral history context. As Strangleman writes:

History, the past, is too often deployed as a mere context, a background for present events. What this leads to is a vision of the unstable ‘now’ juxtaposed to a stable ‘past’. This does violence to a more sensitive understanding of the flow of history and the presence of the past in the present.¹⁹

Prior to the 1970s there existed a certain wariness of oral history as a reliable source, particularly those oral histories conducted by enthusiasts and amateurs.²⁰

¹⁷ As Perks and Thomson note, the radical potential of oral history is often undermined by ‘the unequal relationships between professional historians and other participants in oral history projects’: R. Perks and A. Thomson, ‘Critical Developments: Introduction’, in (ed.) Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 4.

¹⁸ H. Young, ‘Hard Man, New Man: Re/composing Masculinities in Glasgow, c.1950–2000’, *Oral History*, 35, no. 1 (2007), 71–81, 72.

¹⁹ T. Strangleman, ‘Deindustrialisation and the Historical Sociological Imagination: Making Sense of Work and Industrial Change’, *Sociology*, 51, no. 2 (2017), 466–82, 478.

²⁰ For more on oral history as the domain of the amateur historian, see S. Caunce, *Oral History and the Local Historian* (New York, 1994).

Perhaps historians and archivists only came to embrace the field when they themselves began being the ones to conduct or orchestrate the interviews; when the discipline was transferred from the folklorists to the professionals with the concomitant development of methodologies, professional standards and so on, brought about, at least in part, by historiography's linguistic turn and shift in focus from facts to semiotics;²¹ a shift reflected in oral history as the move from the 'reconstructive mode' to the 'interpretive mode'.²² Anthropologists have always been more comfortable with oral history, perhaps because there is an element of truth in the idea that oral history recordings tell us more about the *now* of the recording than the *then* of what is being remembered and discussed.²³ This was particularly true of the 'Singer Stories' project.

Finally, there is the issue of the oral history as archival object. We were determined to put our interviews to use immediately – partly to demonstrate to volunteers and participants how valued the recordings are. To that end, we worked with a student from the University of Glasgow to make a series of short films where excerpts from the interviews were organised thematically and set to images that had been digitised by volunteers. These films were available to view during a three-day 'Singer Stories' festival held in May 2018, and thereafter were included in the 'Sew Revolutionary: Women and the sewing revolution' exhibition in Clydebank Museum. The long-term challenges for oral history in archive terms are well known.²⁴ We were rigorous in our collection of relevant permissions from participants, so access should not be an issue; but there are still questions on how to provide meaningful, sensitive access to such a rich resource.²⁵

²¹ For a comprehensive overview of oral history practice in Britain, see Graham Smith, the Institute of Historical Research, *The Making of Oral History*, http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/oral_history.html.

²² Bartie and McIvor, 'Oral History in Scotland', 109.

²³ In a similar vein, Helgren argues that nostalgia serves as a tool to critique the present: J. Helgren, 'A "Very Innocent Time": Oral History Narratives, Nostalgia and Girls' Safety in the 1950s and 1960s', *The Oral History Review*, 42, no. 1 (2015), 50–69.

²⁴ Challenges include dealing with rights transfer, anonymity and disclosure, as addressed in A. Leh, 'Problems of Archiving Oral History Interviews: The Example of the Archive "German Memory"', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1, no. 3 (2000), <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1025>. The technical challenge of dealing with born-digital sound archives is also very much a live question in the archive sector. For example, see S. Brylawski, 'Preservation of Digitally Recorded Sound', in *Building a National Strategy for Digital Preservation: Issues in Digital Media Archiving* (Washington, DC, 2002), 52–66. The British Library and the National Library of Scotland are currently running a project titled 'Unlocking Our Sound Heritage' to establish a network of archives, libraries and museums with existing sound collections in an effort to address these questions: <http://www.nls.uk/news/press/2017/04/sound-project-launch>.

²⁵ Sadly, I will not be involved in addressing these challenges with this particular collection, having left West Dunbartonshire Council to become Business Archives Surveying Officer for Scotland in June 2018.

Ultimately, what is of key value, in my opinion, in capturing these voices is that they invoke everything that is unique and ubiquitous about the Singer story. Deindustrialisation was not peculiar to Clydebank, yet Singers was. The tension between the global and local, universal and particular, the actual effect of systemic economic changes on everyday life and how people resist and how that resistance fails and sometime succeeds, all of this can be brought to life by the testimony of those who worked through this period. With Singers, we can blame the American management, the lack of investment, the market forces particular to sewing machine manufacturers – and many do – but unless we place all of this in its proper context, the wholesale transfer of industry out of the west and the decline of capitalism, we are destined to only ever view industrial history in terms of celebration and nostalgia, which would be a great disservice to the very people whose voices and stories bring industrial history to life.