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## Activating the Archive: rethinking the role of traditional archives for local activist projects

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### Abstract:

This article explores the way archival material has the potential to become a core component of activism, through an evaluation of an AHRC-funded collaborative research project on the histories and futures of local food in Liverpool. "Memories of Mr Seel's Garden: exploring past and future food systems in Liverpool" is a collaboration between four academics, two arts/heritage professionals and three community groups, around the theme of local food. The community groups were brought together by their mutual interest in exploring how historical work might contribute to the developing local food movement. The project aimed to undertake research into the history of local food systems, using three different methods: archival research, map research and oral history, in order to develop deeper understanding of food systems, both historically and geographically and to explore what this understanding might contribute to future community activism. The project examined whether undertaking the research changed participants' awareness of the value of historical research (including the value of different methods); their understandings of the local environment and local food issues, or provided new perspectives on the possibility of future change and their role within it. In short, could historical research assist local activism? The article will describe the methods used and the research findings, which suggest that even 'traditional' archival materials, neither created nor selected for activist purposes, have the potential to be valuable resources for activist projects, both for challenging simplistic activist narratives about the past and for empowering members of activist communities to develop new narratives for change and communicate these to wider society

## Introduction

The focus of this article is a community-led research project, which took place in Liverpool, UK from 2012-2013. Its aim was to open up imaginative possibilities for the future via an exploration of local histories of food production. Entitled “Memories of Mr Seel’s Garden: exploring past and future food systems in Liverpool,” this project brought together three community groups to work with four academics and two arts/heritage professionals in constructing a multi-layered account of the local food heritage of Liverpool. This was then shared creatively with city residents in order to support wider discussion around the future of local food in the city. The project utilized three different historical methods in order to do this: archival research, map research and oral history. Since Liverpool does not house any archival collections focused on food activism, and with the Liverpool Record Office closed for refurbishment during the period of the project, collections that might seem somewhat tangential to the project’s focus were utilized. Importantly, these collections nonetheless contributed to the activist aims of the project and were found to be beneficial by the project participants. In order to understand why this was the case, we will first outline the project itself and then set out some of the core debates around archives as activist resources, as well as more specific literatures on the uses of archival research in local food contexts. We then develop an analysis of the participants’ changing perceptions of archives and particularly the interplay between their experiences of doing research and their interests in supporting stronger local food cultures in Liverpool. In developing an understanding of their experiences, however, it was necessary to rethink the analytical frameworks currently available. Frameworks exist for analyzing archival user expertise, historical expertise (including the use of primary sources) and learning and social outcomes. However none of these seemed adequate for understanding the multiple ways in which the participants benefited from the project, particularly since the general focus of these frameworks on learning and competency ran counter to the imaginative and creative uses the project fostered and which were believed to be especially valuable from an activist perspective. We therefore propose a number of frames which emerged from our project, which highlight emotional, ethical and experiential responses among others. This tool is put forwards as an initial step towards a more effective framework for the understanding of activist use of archives; future research may evaluate its validity for other users and uses. This article thus not only suggests that traditional archives can be effective resources for activist projects, but that in order for this to be more evident there is a need to shift from seeing archives as purely informational repositories, to a wider understanding of users’ relationships to records, in particular the affective contours of this relationship.

### Memories of Mr Seel’s Garden

The aim of the “Memories of Mr Seel’s Garden” project was to explore the potential for bringing together community-based heritage research with sustainability activism, which is more often seen as future-oriented. Often activism can appear as the polar opposite to historical research. When the emphasis is on acting now in order to produce better futures, dwelling on the past can seem like a distraction from getting the job done. In contrast to this, however, this project was inspired in part by methods developed within Transition Towns, a movement which supports community-led responses to resource depletion (e.g. peak oil), climate change and economic instabilities. Their approach challenges assumptions about the time of activism, suggesting that opportunities for creating local visions of a sustainable future can actually be benefited by closer engagements with local pasts (Hopkins 2008). Perhaps in looking back activists might see innovative ways of intervening in the present. For the three community groups involved, the Friends of Everton Park, the Friends of Sudley Estate, and Transition

Liverpool, intertwining the past and future in an activist project promised to respond to a number of their key concerns. First, all three were involved in developing practical growing projects and so learning more about what had been grown locally and where, could potentially feed into future developments. Second, each also sought to develop communities around these projects and were conscious of a lack of diversity, particularly in terms of age groups. Combining food growing, heritage research and sustainability activism promised to bring in new participants with different interests and experiences. Third, a further shared interest was in raising the profile of local food issues in Liverpool more generally and given the groups' previous experience of success with history focused projects the approach taken here seemed to be potentially very fruitful for engaging wider audiences.

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 of the area around Seel and Hanover streets. The plaque indicates that on a site now occupied by a chain supermarket, there was once a growing space, owned by the slave trader Mr Thomas Seel. Inspired by the uncanny juxtaposition of modern and historic food systems produced by this plaque, the project sought to develop a multi-layered account of the varying local food heritage across Liverpool, embedding research skills in the process, as well as inviting discussion around the research with the wider community. The project addressed a wide range of issues such as skills acquisition, public outreach, creative engagement with historical materials, research questions around time, locative media (GIS-based apps), community history projects, archival affect to name only some of the most prominent.<sup>1</sup> However, for the purposes of this article, the remaining discussion will focus particularly on the role of archival research within the project.

During the development of the bid, each of the community groups had identified a range of issues they wanted to explore as well as the research methods in which they wanted more expertise. This led to the development of three research strands, which included archives as well as historic maps and oral history. "Archives" were broadly defined to include institutional archives (specifically business records), manuscripts (including manuscript recipe books), pamphlets and rare books. Five of the fifteen project workshops were dedicated specifically to archive research, with a core team of twelve volunteers participating across the three methods.

Seeking to address the strong contemporary sense of disconnection between Everton and Sudley (in North and South Liverpool respectively), members of these groups identified an interest in learning more about their shared maritime past, both districts having initially been developed as residential areas for wealthy merchants. This focus also responded to the more common understanding of Liverpool as a port city (as opposed to a more local food-friendly market town), as well as the past and present global food webs intimated by our "Mr Seel's Garden" leitmotif. Further, the focus on maritime records provided an important contrast to the oral history and historical map strands that aimed to identify local food locations and narratives within Liverpool. Looking for materials that would allow novices quick access to relevant information, while also addressing these broader themes, a focus on bills of entry held at the Merseyside Maritime Museum was settled upon (Sessions 1, 2 and 4). These records provided insights into the kinds of foodstuffs that were being imported into and exported from Liverpool, and their variation as shipping destinations and technologies changed. This was complemented by sessions at the University of Liverpool's Special Collections (Sessions 3 and 5), which looked at

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<sup>1</sup> For a full overview, see our final project report which is available from <http://www.mrseelsgarden.org/publications/>

food-related material, including locally-produced recipe books so that participants could develop a sense for how the ingredients identified in the customs records might have been used. All the sessions were designed to include materials whose impact was visual as well as textual, in order to cater for any volunteers with lower literacy skills; in the event, however, no such measures were needed as all the volunteers had high levels of literacy.

The archive workshops themselves were generally around a half-day in length with around six attendees at each one. They served multiple purposes, including familiarizing participants with the location and general set up of the repositories, as well as introducing them to the managing archivists and to the nature of the holdings. Basic protocols for understanding and using archival materials, including discussion of provenance, appraisal, cataloguing and physical handling were also covered. The main aim, however, was to work with the materials themselves, to conduct an open-ended exploration into what might be found, not so much to create a conventional history of food in Liverpool, but to identify items that might spark the imagination, both their own and of the wider community. The data collected on these visits was then fed into the creative outreach strands. This took place in an iterative structure, where once the participants had a sense of what was available, and how this might be used, two further ad hoc sessions were arranged to return and collect intriguing quotations (including recipes). These were then used as part of a local food play, an iPhone app and printed merchandising (paper bags and napkins) in order to share our findings with the wider public. Outreach was also carried out via participation in a variety of local fairs and festivals including Liverpool's "Light Night", the "Hope Street Festival", the "Big History Weekend" and our own "Eating in the Archives" and project completion events.<sup>2</sup>

Data for analysis were collected throughout the project in the following ways: questionnaires for all participants at the beginning and the end of the project; field notes created by the academic researchers; notes about significant materials created by the volunteer researchers, and by a day of focus group discussions, which were recorded and transcribed. Parallel discussions were held around the themes of the affective impact of the project and the resources used (referenced as Focus Groups 1A and 1B), the value of the different methods involved (Focus Groups 2A and 2B) and a whole group discussion about the value of history/the past as an activist resource (Focus Group 3A). An equivalent session was later held for two volunteer researchers who had been unable to attend the main day (Focus Group 1C, 2C and 3B). Data from individual participants are referenced by use of their initials. Other methods of data collection were considered, including the use of research diaries by the volunteer researchers (e.g. Toms and Duff 2002), however we were concerned when designing the project that some members of the community groups might not have the literacy skills required for such an approach (although this concern ultimately proved baseless).

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<sup>2</sup> More details on these events are available from: "Eating in the Archives" <https://news.liv.ac.uk/2012/05/10/eating-in-the-archives/> and project completion event <http://www.mrseelsgarden.org/the-mr-seels-garden-project-show-and-tell/>. Accessed 16 June 2014.

## Traditional archives as resources for local food activists?

In her analysis of the use of references to World War Two (WII) “Dig for Victory” campaigns in contemporary local food activism, cultural theorist Rebecca Bramall makes an intriguing case for broadening understandings of the potential uses of “hegemonic, ‘commonsense’ stories about the past” in the “pursuit of socially progressive demands” (2011 p 80). She argues that the use of historical, state-sanctioned discourses by contemporary activist projects to challenge structures of food inequality and instability suggests that there is a need to “rethink certain longstanding assumptions about the resources to which we might turn in order to construct persuasive narratives that could engage broad constituencies in a politics of environmentalism and anti-consumerism” (2011 pp 83-84). That is, even while there is a strong emphasis within activist circles on developing counter-hegemonic histories, or histories from below, Bramall argues that within the local food movement dominant histories have proven to contain unexpected resources for challenging current structures. Further, she suggests that the very ubiquity of more dominant histories might provide activists with a supportive framework for increasing the reach of their messages and thus building wider systems of support.

Although Bramall is here discussing history more broadly, her approach opens up important questions for discussions around the composition and role of activists’ use of archives. Thus, before analyzing the data produced by the “Memories of Mr Seel’s Garden” project in more detail and setting out a framework for discussing the interplay between users, records and activist aims, some of the core issues in debates around archives as activist resources will be briefly set out. This contextual framing will then be extended to local food activism more generally, where there have been broader calls for a greater focus on the social, cultural and historical aspects of local food. This interest, together with Bramall’s analysis, suggests compelling reasons for seeking to understand the variety of ways that food activists might begin to engage with archival resources in support of their work. However, to date such undertakings have often been limited to researcher-led historical reconstructions of the past, which arguably obscure the wider range of uses to which archives might be put.

At least since Howard Zinn’s argument (1977) against what he saw as the complicity of archives with the interests of those most dominant in society, there has been a strong interest in challenging the supposed neutrality of archives and building a wider range of resources available for current and future use. This has included archiving existing materials from activist movements, supporting wider freedoms of information that open a greater range of materials to the general public and assuming an active role in documenting and record-collecting to ensure that activist movements are better represented in archival collections. There is no need to review the associated literature in full here, except to note that the correlation between activist communities, community archives and activist archives has tended to focus attention on non-traditional or unofficial repositories and archival creation and collection as an activist project. The intention of both of these approaches has been to counter inadequacies in the record as held by more official archives and/or to enable the production of alternative or radical narratives.

This is not to say that politically activist projects associated with more traditional repositories have been impossible. Indeed by extending collecting policies to include records of previously poorly documented groups, or creating documentation, such as through oral history projects where existing resources are deemed inadequate, many repositories have followed Zinn’s model of the “activist archivist,” adding considerably to historical documentation through so doing. Among numerous similar pro-

jects, a well-documented example in north-west England is the work of Manchester Studies in the 1970s, which involved activist archivists and historians working together to document the trade union movement and local Jewish and working-class communities (Linkman and Williams, 1979; Linkman, 1981). Moreover, activist historians have long been engaged in reading existing resources, often those of traditional institutional archives, “against the grain”. However, even while recognizing these possibilities, it remains the case that there has been little or no research into the value of existing resources as a tool for activism. This was an area our research set out to explore via the use of traditional, rather than activist, archive resources in the “Memories of Mr Seel’s Garden” project. Its results suggest that a case can be made for rethinking assumptions about what resources might support activist work.

Of course, the oral history strand of the “Memories of Mr Seel’s Garden” project was itself focused on producing new resources in a similar way to the activist approaches already identified. However, in line with the overall ethos of sustainability that inheres within local food activism, the project also sought to explore whether and how activists might make use of existing resources and deploy them for alternative ends. From a certain point of view, this is not in itself a radical suggestion, since Schellenberg’s influential definition of archives depends on their “secondary” value for purposes other than those for which they were created (1956, pp 148-52). Archives thus always remain structurally open to being used counter to the purposes one might expect them to be put. Even so, given the lack of literature in this area it remained to be seen how this might play out in concrete cases.

Another gap in the research that this paper responds to is that of *affect* in relation to the archive. This issue is of particular importance for the current discussions of activist archives, given works which argue for the central role of emotion within activism more generally (e.g. Goodwin et al, 2001). If activism is just as much about influencing ideas about what one “ought” to do, as it is about acquiring knowledge of what “is” (or was), then it is important to explore, not just which archives activists might draw upon, but also the affective power of archives and how this might relate to their value as activist tools. Within environmental movements, such as the local food movement, the recognition that knowledge does not in and of itself produce behavior change has led to widespread reflection on tactics and methods. Archives, however, are often understood primarily in terms of their status as repositories of information, seemingly placing them firmly on the “is” (or “was”) side of the is/ought distinction. We go to the archives, not primarily to feel differently, but to know differently. This is clear from existing evaluation tools. Frameworks for assessing the development of historical literacy and consciousness have been developed (Rosa, Blanco and Huertas 1991, Weinburg 1991 and 2001, Leinhardt, Stainton, Virji and Odoroff 1994, Seixas 1996 and 2004, von Borries 1997, Lee, 2005, van Drie and van Boxtel 2008, Wilschut 2011) which have involved, or influenced, archival studies of student interaction with primary source material (Krause 2010a, Krause 2010b, Rockenbach 2011, Bahde and Smedburg 2012, Daniels and Yakel 2013). There are also frameworks for assessing “archival literacy” (Yakel and Torres 2003, Yakel 2004, Duff and Cherry 2008), often aimed at articulating the value of such collections, as well as the former UK Museums, Libraries and Archives Council’s Generic Learning Outcomes (GLO) and Generic Social Outcomes (GSO) frameworks, which can be used in an archival setting (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council 2008). Since our project started, a study of how student users imbue archives with meaning has also been published (Duff, Monks-Leeson and Galey 2012). However activist archives have been differentiated from their more traditional counterparts in terms of providing “an emotional rather than a narrowly intellectual experience” (Cvetkovich 2003 p 241). The current research drew inspiration from the interest in affect found in queer archival activism, for example, as well as accounts that have particularly considered the affective power of

original materials over copies (e.g. Yee 2007). Nevertheless, while there is much anecdotal evidence of the emotive power of archival materials (e.g. Buchanan 2011 pp 51-4) there remains insufficient research into the potential of traditional repositories as affect generators.

A further factor driving our interest in re-examining the potential of the traditional archive and particularly its affective dimensions has been recent concerns over the relative narrowness of current research on local food movements. That is, while activists have turned to local food for a range of reasons (including sustainability, but also social exclusion, health and wellbeing and many others) it has been argued that academic research has not yet reflected this. In their review of research on urban community gardens, for example, Daniela Guitart, Catherine Pickering and Jason Byrne (2012) have noted a strong cluster of work within the social sciences on low-income, ethnically diverse projects based in industrial cities in the US, but a fragmentation in all other areas of local food research. Echoing Guitart et al.'s identification of a dominance of social science approaches, Michael Chappell and Liliana LaValle have argued that a focus on the technical aspects of local food has meant that there has been much less attention to its cultural, philosophical and historical aspects (Chappell 2011 p 18). What work there has been suggests the importance of pursuing questions about: the philosophies of food (Heldke 2006, Kaplan 2012); the embodied and affective aspects of food security (Carolan 2011, DeLind 2006, DeLind and Bingen 2008, Turner 2011); and memory, history and time (Adam 1998, Hegnes 2007, Holtzman 2006, Parkins 2004, Schneider 1997, Sutton 2001). Of particular importance for this study is Laura DeLind and Jim Bingen's argument for "re-situating the campaign for local food within the realm of meaning and memory" (2008 p 127). This suggests the importance of exploring the potential of archival use not only for research on local food movements, but also within the movements themselves via activist (or engaged) research.

However, previous research linking archives and food has primarily been historical, aiming to reconstruct historical diets (what and how much), often adding socio-economic and spatial dimensions to the interpretation in order to identify what different social groups ate in different periods and places (e.g. Billen et al. 2012). More recently, researchers in other disciplines have started to use archives for food-related research (e.g. Msallem 2012) but still in an outcome, rather than process-focused way. While such research is valuable for understanding the historical contours of local food, the question of how the engagement of community activists with the past might affect their work is another important dimension that is in need of exploration. Indeed our study did not set out to create a historically complete representation of the Liverpool diet in past eras. This would not have been possible with the resources available and not necessary to the aims of our project, although we did feel it essential that any statements made about past food practices should be adequately evidenced. More relevant, then, in terms of the social and cultural associations of food and food production, the research methods involved and the Liverpool focus, were projects such as the Liverpool-based "Scouse" and "Love Lane Lives" (Kierans and Haeney 2010, Noon n.d.), which demonstrated the inter-relationships between food and community identity and the influence of a particular foodstuff (cane sugar) on the social and economic relations involved in its production and on the development of Liverpool. At the same time, a number of archival bodies and special collections were developing food-related projects, which appeared to indicate the resonance of this theme for a participatory project. These include the Scottish Council on Archives' "Edible Archive" project, Western Australia's "Eating the Archives" exhibition and NARA's "What's Cooking Uncle Sam?" exhibition. All, however, seemed to have been designed from an outreach perspective, to create awareness of existing resources, rather than encouraging their use for new purposes.



## Experiencing the Archive

Because the project was not designed either to instill or to use participants' historical consciousness or their historical literacy as defined by historical pedagogy, and because self-identification of historical literacy is notoriously suspect, it was decided at the start of the project that, although it was broadly "historical" in nature, it would be impossible to try to establish a baseline; indeed trying to do so might have encouraged participants to think that the types of understanding prioritized by history as an academic discipline were particularly pertinent to the present project. The initial questionnaire therefore focused on trying to assess participants' familiarity with the research methods involved and the nature of their interest in the project. Results showed that archives were at the same time the least and the most familiar research method used by the project. All the volunteer researchers were already aware of oral history and maps as historical resources but two had never previously heard of archives; at the same time maps and oral history had been used explicitly for research by only three participants, whereas seven had personal experience of archive use (but none reported as an expert user).

The questionnaires and focus group discussion were informed by the GLO and GSO (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council 2008) frameworks to try to assess impact. The impact of the project in general, and specifically its archival strand, was clearly evidenced by participants in terms of changes in attitudes and concepts, and behaviors (Baxter, Johnson, Williams 2002, Williams, Wavell, Baxter, MacLennan, Jobson 2005), although further longitudinal study would be necessary to evaluate the durability of these impacts. Changes of attitude were apparent both in relation to archives and to the themes of the project (including conceptual changes identified as developing through exposure to the archival material). Looking first at the archival element, all who were involved in the archive strand expressed an interest in using archives in the future; this was also evident in the feedback responses from those who attended the "Eating in the Archives" event and in comments made by those who were not personally involved in the archives strand but who had been inspired by feedback coming from those who had – in the words of one participant: "And she was talking about the quality and rarity of the materials in the archives, and I said well I'm going to go down there, sounds fascinating, you know" (2B, JB). Indeed two participants, who had not previously used archives, had returned to the Merseyside Maritime Museum independently before the end of the project, although their motivation was genealogical research, rather than anything relating directly to the themes of the "Memories of Mr Seel's Garden" project.

A number of comments suggested that, although all but two of the participants were aware of archives prior to the project, numerous barriers remained, thus supporting previous findings in relation to community archives (Stevens, Flinn and Shepherd 2010 pp 69-72). At least one participant was unaware of access policies ("I didn't realize you could ... just pop in" 2B, RJ) and several suggested that previously they had lacked the confidence to visit an archive (e.g. "Well I was always a bit scared of the archives, I thought what's behind that door and can I cope with what is there?" 2C, CF). Other comments suggest reasons for such misgivings: one participant commented on her preconceptions of the archival search room:

It reminds me of what libraries used to be, when I was a small child. It was a place you went to and treat with reverence. You were very careful what you did. And so you think of archives

where you've got to be...I mean you've got to be careful, obviously, but it is becoming more - [a] much more - welcoming place than I had imagined. (3A, SR)

Nevertheless, the perceived difference from libraries as remembered from childhood, was not invariably welcomed: another participant (in a separate session, therefore independently from the previous comment) made a similar contrast with library memories but in order to express displeasure with the lack of quiet in the modern archive: "Well ... there were people milling round and clicking at machines and all sorts of things", whilst recognizing that her perception might be age-specific: "the youngsters we get today are brought up with all the noise round them" (3B, CF).

The volunteer researchers also suggested methods for overcoming the preconceptions they had held, which emphasized the role of users as advocates. Throughout the project, participants were very positive about the input of the professionals they encountered: as one participant observed, "you kind of know this but it's kind of nice to discover it for real, that there are archives all over the place with archivists who are really enthusiastic about the content and, you know, that they want to share some of their excitement with you" (2B, JB) Nevertheless, he thought that projects such as this had a value beyond the direct encounter with archives and archivists by the participants:

So maybe things like this, in a kind of indirect way are, you know, kind of engaging with opinion formers in the community. There, maybe, I don't know, maybe it's a bit rich to call us opinion formers, but maybe, you know, we'll go away and say to our friends mind you that archive is really fantastic, shall we go back and have a look, you can see where your house is (2B, JB).

Another, negating the suggestion that it had been the encounter with archivists that had changed her perception of archives, stated, "I think it was seeing that other people thought that that was no great barrier, that other people were doing it all the time" (2C, LF).

Although the project was not primarily intended to develop archival skills (and we did not therefore design methods to assess these), it was hoped that participants would go on to make use of the knowledge and competence developed through the project. As suggested above, the archival workshops succeeded in overcoming initial prejudices and, in the focus group data, it was possible to identify knowledge either acquired or reinforced by the initial workshop, which was designed to familiarize participants with the types of information held by archives; how it gets to the archive, and how it can be accessed and used. Although the project did not aim to create a conventional history of local food, it was nevertheless important that the research methods were employed in an academically rigorous manner, paying due regard to the historical evidence and what interpretations might be historically valid. There were a number of comments on the nature of the historical record, its strengths and limitations, for example, one participant noted of the comparative lack of evidence for periods prior to the eighteenth-century: "It's to do with recording, though isn't it, and ease of collecting and keeping information" (1B, JP) She later added "the things that are recorded maybe in archives as we said in that first initial session which was the only one I went to, it's kind of official documents so a lot of the kind of ethno[graphic] detail wouldn't necessarily be included in that". Our analysis of the responses to the material suggests that frameworks developed for assessing historical expertise were applicable and that activist intentions need not be associated with poor historical practice. As will also be shown, however, some of the "limitations" of the records were also identified as strengths, particularly in terms of their

lack of an obvious “message” and their capacity to spark personal, imaginative and emotional responses.

As well as impacts relating to the understanding and future use of archives, the project shaped participants’ attitudes to the topics addressed through the research: local food and associated activism. More evidence in relation to a changed attitude to the local area will be discussed below, however it was clear that adding a historical dimension to activists’ knowledge produced a richer understanding of the processes of change with which they were engaged (either as advocates or opponents). One said:

So, for example, areas of Liverpool that are currently experiencing quite a lot of change in demolition and renovation and people, that the emotional reaction to those is really interesting for me, not to observe unfeelingly, but you know, to understand the meaning of that. And it, you know, it, you kind of start to engender this feeling of, almost a victimization of people being subject to this change. But when you do step back, from a historical perspective ... and see how many times. For example, by taking one place and looking at it through time, how many times it has changed its physical structure. Suddenly, you’re like, this is more normal. It normalizes the current events and I think that then affects the emotions that you validate around that, those experiences (1B, GJ).

As the volunteer emphasized by her “not ... unfeelingly” interpolation, this comment does not suggest that the project reduced her sympathy with those experiencing change, or promoted a simplistic normalization of trauma. Rather, it served to undermine any equally simplistic nostalgia for a past viewed as unchanging and continuous into the present.

At the same time, the focus on food changed the perceptions of those whose involvement with the project originated more from their interest in local history. One participant said that it had increased her awareness of where food had come from: “that was a big help, because before you just see a cabbage and you bought it, now we always look, try to make out, or find out where it grew” (1C, CF). It had also encouraged her to grow more food in her own garden. Another suggested that the project’s focus had changed her appreciation of what was already a familiar research method and also changed her understanding of her local area: “It was very interesting just looking for one particular aspect to the map, normally you sort of try to just concentrate on different aspects, looking at the lay of the land and things like that. When you’re just looking for one particular thing like food production you start looking at the area in quite a different way” (2C, LF). All the participants felt that the project had given them a more nuanced understanding of the issues involved and that the archival materials and maps used in the project could provide useful ways of drawing more people into local food debates. One reported:

I think it’s always something that sparks people’s imagination as well and if you can get people that don’t necessarily come across those type of ideas and if you can kind of communicate that to them anyway, it’s, well, it’s not surprising how people just kind of go ooh, ooh, at, you know, what used to be there (3A, RJ).

This perception was supported by the enthusiastic reception of the project at non-activist events such as Light Night, “Eating in the Archives”, the Hope Street Festival and the Big History Weekend and by activists, including the community groups to whom some of the outputs were directed. The evi-

dence of social media, particularly Twitter, suggested that the project had captured the imagination of these groups and that they wished to use its resources as hooks for some of their own projects.<sup>3</sup>

## Frameworks for understanding activist use of archives

In order to try to understand what made the “Memories of Mr Seel’s Garden” project engaging, we needed a tool to analyze the data in terms of activism. Our initial analysis was based on coding the data, which we did separately and then compared our codings. We then looked at other potentially applicable frameworks and compared them with our structured data. We found that these frameworks could be applied, and therefore did offer possible means of understanding our data, but since they lacked our activist focus, we felt that we needed to develop a new framework which included concepts informed by existing work, but specific to our activist aims.

Previous studies of archival users have categorized them in terms of their roles and relationships with the records. Shepherd and Yeo (2003 pp 155-6, Yeo 2005 pp 33-4) identified records as having three values for their users: informational, evidential and artefactual. Their approach goes beyond most previous studies of use, which have focused on information-seeking only (Conway 1986, Duff, Johnson 2002). Evidence from the project suggests that participants did relate to the records in the way Shepherd and Yeo suggest. It was clear that the participants were fascinated by the information held in the archives and shared their excitement with participants involved with other strands. Moreover the perception that the archives had evidential value in relation to the past seems to have added to their significance (despite discussion of the limited nature of archival evidence in the introductory session). However, as discussed above, the activist approach of the “Memories of Mr Seel’s Garden” project still highlighted a significant gap in the literature around our understandings of the possible relationships users might have with records. Specifically, data only becomes information or evidence in relation to an object or narrative, either pre-existing or derived from/found in the data. None of the above archive frameworks seek to interrogate the nature of the relationships thus constructed.

In addition, evaluative frameworks associated with historical pedagogy assumed a similar status in our analysis, providing some concepts that could be identified in our case study, but falling short of allowing us to capture the specific experiences of activist engagements with archival records. Nevertheless, these frameworks offered opportunities for analyzing some wider themes that were omitted from the other frameworks designed to analyze archival users’ information-seeking behavior. For example, much of the contextualization by the participants was broadly historical, though with particular emphasis on bringing information about the past into a relationship with the perceived present. Our research also suggested that the activist intentions of the research, which emphasized imaginative and creative approaches to the materials, did not result in practice defined as poor by historical pedagogical models. In these senses, then, the project could usefully be understood in terms of existing pedagogical frameworks. This relevance probably relates to our participants’ previous exposure to historical practice (ev-

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<sup>3</sup> See for example: <https://twitter.com/theonejoshmoore/status/303625249373687808> Others can be found at <https://storify.com/mhbastian/tweets-from-mr-seel-s-garden>.

idenced by the initial questionnaire), or the perception that the sources being used were “historical” because of their date and status as archives.

Even so, the analysis of the use of archives in the “Memories of Mr Seel’s Garden” project suggests a need to move beyond a focus on “history” in order to avoid a problematic narrowing of the potential uses of archival material. The types of historical pedagogy frameworks just mentioned focus specifically on assessing participants’ ability to “do History” as defined by formal educational programs: that is, “the process by which central facts (about events and structures) and concepts (themes) are arranged to build an interpretative historical case” (Leinhardt, Stainton, Virji and Odoroff 1994 p 134). And while formal approaches to history cannot be reduced to constructing a story of “what really happened,” this emphasis on producing a coherent interpretation limits our ability to understand the potential of archival records for developing more poetic and multitudinous accounts of “what might happen.” In particular, in order to support exploratory, future-oriented engagements with the records they were not presented as “historical sources” but as information objects in their own right, with the trajectories of where this information might lead the participants left unspecified. Indeed, the role of history in constructing possible futures, although it has been identified as an operator in historical consciousness (von Borries 1997 p 213), has yet to be researched in practical terms within archival studies.

Thus despite the utility of records- and pedagogical- focused frameworks, in order to understand our participants’ responses to the archive material fully, they also needed to be analyzed in terms of how the information gathered from the material was understood in relation to their interest in local food activism and in their local environment more broadly. This analysis suggested three broad frames that also need to be taken into account in order to more fully account for the effects of engaging with archival materials in an activist context. These include: (1) developing complex, partial & situated understandings of time and transformation; (2) rebuilding understandings of everyday localities; and (3) explicitly engaging with the emotional and embodied elements of archival research. Each of these frames seemed essential to the ability of the broadly historical work to feed into activist concerns and will be discussed in more detail below. However a caveat is necessary since they have been developed purely in relation to the data associated with the “Memories of Mr Seel’s Garden” project. They should not therefore be transferred to other projects without further consideration. Nevertheless it is hoped that these frames may provide a helpful starting point for other activist projects, and even for those without an explicit activist focus, but still seeking to analyze other less “historical” uses of the archive for personal or community purposes, such as genealogy, art or creative writing.

*(1) Developing complex, partial & situated understandings of time and transformation*

**a. Re-evaluating the relevance of the past**

Progressivist accounts of the past as that which is eternally superseded and made redundant by the flow of time are arguably antithetical to archival material being seen as relevant to activist concerns. It was notable, therefore, that some of the most vivid experiences came from reading materials that challenged participants’ expectations of what happened in the past, what people in the past’s concerns were and what issues they faced. The significance of particular findings were often expressed in emotional terms, the most common probably being that of surprise, which suggests recognition of a different way of understanding. These responses were particularly interesting given that participants had already explicitly claimed that the past could have value for current activist projects, for in the responses to the opening questionnaire all felt it could provide lessons for the present. Moreover, they did not go to

the archives trying to find particular information and therefore were open to the possibility of their existing understandings being challenged and finding that the past might have more to offer than was originally assumed.

Social comments were prevalent, including:

- references to technology (e.g. surprise at noting a refrigerator being imported in the 1860s, (Session 1, RF))
- references to diet (e.g. recognition that oysters were a cheap food source in the nineteenth-century, (Session 1, general comments))
- surprise that coffee appeared to be more frequently imported than tea in the early nineteenth-century, which contrasted with expectations derived from an understanding of the importance of tea-drinking at the period (Session 1, CF)
- awareness of historical corn processing practices and how these might relate to a text supporting the growing of maize in England (Session 2, MH-S))
- and references to social structures (e.g. comments about the gender and class politics implied by newspaper coverage of the Liverpool Cookery School (Session 2, general comments)).

Items identified as being of significance often led to reflection, which demonstrated the impact of the project on participants' understandings. For example, one participant said:

When we were looking at the archives and we were looking at the range of goods ... I was thinking how sophisticated we were now about the range of foods that we had, but actually [laughs] there was a huge range of food coming in. Maybe not for everyone, maybe it was a different strata, maybe we've become more democratic in our food, but I was, and I thought, oh my gosh, these people were eating interesting foods [laughs] from all round the world, even you know, a hundred years ago, or whatever and so it was, I did feel, oh yes, it did bring it home that people were, you know, doing interesting things and not just... (1A, SR).

- b. Building on this was **the identification of specific practices that were relevant to the present** in some way. At a basic level, relevance was articulated in terms of analogy, drawing parallels between one event and other in a different time-frame. Within this mode, many of the comments were not driven by a desire to understand the past in its own terms (arguably the primary aim of History), but used findings from the past as a springboard to conversations about the present (and future). For example, information about cookery classes in Liverpool in the 1880s (Session 2) led to comments about modern diet and the need for cookery classes in schools today, likewise discovery of information about historical arguments against inhumane animal husbandry techniques (Session 2) led to discussion of modern animal rights campaigns and the unexpected similarity in their approaches. In line with the nature of the project and its participants, the comments were largely political or activist in nature. In many cases, the comments made suggested that the volunteer researchers viewed the new information derived from the sources as giving the present a newly-acquired historical dimension (but, as above, this did not usually involve decontextualising the past). Rather than this dimension situating the present as the pinnacle of progress, there was often a great deal of surprise expressed when finding evidence that what had previously been perceived as typical of modernity had historical precedent (e.g. importing of pasta, cookery lessons for the

working classes). Whether viewed as historical validation or simply as an interesting finding, it was clear that events from the past with analogies in the present could spark rich conversations and, at our external events, provided a means of engaging with others, including those with no commitment to the activist aims of the participants.

Analogy was not invariably treated in terms of using the past to inform the present, but some findings were perceived as significant because they were similar and could be learned from or emulated, or because they were different (either better or worse and so to be learned from or avoided). In terms of positive findings, the discovery that lettuce had once been perceived as a wild ingredient (Session 2) provoked discussion of the potential of foraging as a source for local food in the present day. There was also a recognition that some of our categories, such as cultivated/wild, edible/inedible are historically contingent and therefore mutable. More negative findings, such as TB in cows and overcrowding in houses (Session 2 and oral histories) and the general sense that many practices initially perceived as good models for the future, in the past were enforced responses to poverty rather than free choices for ideological reasons, prevented nostalgic interpretations of the past. Importantly, these findings were felt by participants to be inspiring and useful even though they were partial accounts that were never woven into an all-encompassing history of Liverpool's local food heritage.

- c. Volunteer researchers also **developed a more nuanced sense of change, which was both historicized and localized**. An engagement with the historical maps in particular prompted participants to consider how change happened in Liverpool specifically and how prolonged the city's periods of radical change had been. For example one participant noted:

We've had the foot on the accelerator for 500 years, say. And just looking at the maps and the extreme changes on the maps really brought that home. "Wow it was really happening in the 19th century" and "wow, it was really happening in the 18th century" (1A, JB).

This deeper understanding of change as situated and specific was particularly important for people's understandings of how they might contribute to these changes in the present. In particular the broader historical sense of the local context provided by the maps allowed challenges to public perceptions of Liverpool as resistant to change. For example, stories of a city that had fallen from grace and become mired in the aftermath of deindustrialization were shifted to a longer sense of cycles of improvement and decline:

In your imagination if Liverpool's history starts then [in the mercantile heyday] you're gonna feel then that you're always catching up to that. And that has massive repercussions in terms of how [...] you feel about the city [...]. Whereas if you realize that it was, it's like, history's more like that [gesture suggesting a wave moving up and down] and that there are times when[...] you're less productive and then you get more productive [...] It's not just like you're always catching up with yourself, which is this kind of big cloud of Liverpool being a place of poverty and deprivation (1B, GJ).

Participants had also been conscious that as a port city, Liverpool does not fit with the imaginary of a local food centre, which is more often based around the model of a market town. However, the sense of Liverpool as a place of continual transformation allowed for a more fluid sense of its identity.

[Liverpool] never really had a kind of pastoral origin, necessarily. I mean it's had food, as we've discovered, in it. But we're not talking about a market town, or something which had that. I mean, ever since it's developed, it's just made itself up as it goes along [laughs]. Which is one of the things I love about the place. There is no real authentic, Liverpool, in a way. That's why you kind of create one, all the time it seems...(1B, ER).

Such narratives of change itself being a constant are, in Liverpool, often identified with the types of development frequently resisted by activists. For example, the *Liverpool Waters Heritage Impact Assessment*, sponsored by developers, Peel Holdings, included "historical" arguments in favor of large-scale redevelopment of the northern docks area:

Liverpool's economic success was built on a spirit of optimism and innovation, and being bold has been a tradition for the city, willing to test new ideas and pioneer new technology (de Figueiredo, 2011, p.14).

The volunteer researchers involved with "Memories of Mr Seel's Garden" could have critiqued this analysis (the economic success of Mr Seel was arguably based as much on the slave trade as "optimism") but, as in the previous quotation, were inspired by the association of change with creativity rather than merely trauma. This recognition of human ingenuity in response to the forces of change affected another participant's attitude towards the future:

I think it makes me feel more positive actually, because I think that what we have looked at are things changing really drastically over a short period of time, so that the kind of intractable things today, you think, oh nothing, there's never going to be any kind of solution to this. Actually then if you look back then there were all kinds of radical solutions to all kinds of things that just happened at a pace that nobody anticipated, or could expect. And so that's kind of cheering isn't it (1A, FD).

A broader historical sense of the city was also thought to be useful in supporting the potential for future change via counter-factual thinking that opened up ways of imagining "what if?" or "what might have been?":

But I think in this particular thing about food I think if more people knew that in their area there were market gardens or even private gardens growing food that there might be more of a connection, a sense of ownership about what people can expect. That the massive Tesco that's just gone up in [Toxteth], that's not the only way. Because it's there people don't have to use it and that there is an alternative, because there used to be an alternative... (3A, SR).

This quotation also emphasizes that at every historical juncture choices have to be made and that there are some choices (or possibilities of resistance) open to all, not merely the most powerful. Engaging in projects like "Memories of Mr Seel's Garden" was thought of as potentially supporting more careful approaches to these choices and approaches to activism more generally:

And I think if you're more considered and you have, obviously, more understanding of how things have been developed, their place, their purpose and so



on, you're much more, hopefully, going to be more considered about any changes you recommend, or any changes you accept or any developments. Which doesn't mean to say you're gonna be resistant to it... (1B, JP).

*(2) Rebuilding understandings of everyday localities*

**a. Bringing “history” closer to home**

A common technique used to make the past meaningful to a wider public is the identification of particular individuals who might serve to illustrate a particular issue or context. However, in identifying archival materials for use in this project, a deliberate decision was made not to select those that might be felt to encourage the production of “hero narratives”. Rather we were interested in exploring the perceived value of less emotive resources of the kind often held to be typical of traditional archives. Intriguingly, the reaction of participants to this approach was highly positive precisely because it enabled a more personal relationship with the histories being explored. As one said:

... I think history is too much about heroes so I think the fact that it kind of came down and was like everybody's history and nobody's history, [...] I think that if the kind of object of the project, broadly, aim of the project is to reignite people's imagination, then it's more important that it was accessible and I think sometimes if history and stories of history are connected to different people, specifically, like this idea of heroes. It can actually create a detachment because you see it as somebody else's history. Whereas if you can just quite neutrally [...] imagine how things were you can see yourself in it much more easily and therefore you can, you can, like, transfer that over to a future-facing idea (1B, GJ).

While another stated:

I really liked the neutral perspective from the beginning. I wanted to be able to go in it where I wanted or where you know it wanted to go, and I didn't want it to be defined by [...] somebody from a specific background, probably from their point of view, I like the fact that you gave us that opportunity (1B, JP).

This desire to explore the material from one's own point of view, based on one's own background and how one's curiosity was piqued was evident in wide range of ways. For example, one participant showed particular interest in the location of one of the Liverpool cookery schools because her school had later occupied the same site. Ironically, as with the site of Mr Seel's Garden, this area had now also become the site of a Tesco supermarket, illustrating that political dimensions could arise from this strategy. The approach of using one's own experiences to engage with the materials was particularly evident in the map sessions, where volunteer researchers could choose which maps to explore and most often chose to focus on the area they identified as “home”.

The archive materials, while relevant to the locality, were not directly associated with particular sites in Liverpool. However participants still utilized other ways of going into the material where they wanted to go. Indeed, even when the perception of personal relevance was known to be false, it could make some information more prominent, for example, in Session 1, one re-

searcher noticed an importer with his own name mentioned in the bills of entry, whom he then began to trace through the records. This was not for genealogical reasons (the researcher observed that the individual might have been an ancestor, but did not identify him as such), it seemed simply to be a strategy for dealing with the quantity of information available; the same researcher employed a similar strategy in isolating butter as an import of interest and tracing this through successive records. This shows how volunteer researchers can introduce a quasi-genealogical dimension even to resources with which they have no inherent connection.

**b. “Home” becoming historical**

The resources also triggered an imaginative response, particularly in relation to the locality, enabling volunteer researchers to visualize the past dimension of present locations. This was clearly a very powerful affect, referred to by several participants:

I thought right from the start the whole thing was a revelation to me. The Seel Garden, I mean I’ve walked down Seel Street a thousand and one times but never, ever related it to any gardens till you pointed out the map at the bottom of Seel Street and showed me where the gardens were. And then you begin to think about the Bluecoat and how the children must have been involved with that garden and if any of the food from there, that they grew on that site went into the orphanage... (2C,CF)

Another participant had noticed that: “when I walk down Bury Lane I can see fields instead and I’ve taken that from it [the map workshops]. I can add into my vision of where I live these other sort of little bits of history and time” (2A, ER) This effect of experiencing place as no longer firmly located in the present, but flickering between newly discovered pasts and possible futures, was thought to be of particular importance for supporting new imaginings of the city. As a result, a desire to extend this experience of disorientation to others who might engage with the project was influential in the development of outputs that engaged wider publics in Liverpool, in particular the iPhone app, the online map and the project postcards.

*(3) explicitly engaging with the emotional and embodied elements of archival research.*

As may have already been evident in the above analysis, a key aspect of the participants’ engagements with archival records was the various affective and embodied experiences elicited by the material. The significance of particular findings were often expressed in emotional terms with, the most common probably being that of surprise. Other emotions were also triggered, including nostalgia, disgust, sympathy and wonder. At the same time, however, participants were wary of their emotional responses: “it did make me feel a quite, sort of... false nostalgia almost, because you’re thinking back when this was all countryside, but I never knew Liverpool when it was all countryside” (1A, SR).

Further, records were identified as of value, not simply for the information that they contained, or the evidence they provided, but because of how they directly affected participants. Perhaps against expectation, these direct effects did not appear to be related specifically to the experience of handling a historical artifact; it was notable that the photocopied maps were just as effective in generating vivid and emotional experiences as the apparently more evocative original materials from the archives. Instead they were more often related to the process of interpreta-

tion. For example, although less forbidding than expected, several volunteer researchers commented on the nature of the archival research process, which took time and effort. As one researcher put it:

Well you need a lot of time with the archives. With the map you can jump from one thing to the other, the archives you can't do that, you've got to find out what you're talking about and what you're thinking about and then find out where you can get the next lot of information, that way (2C, CF).

Nevertheless, another researcher found that this need for contextual understanding helped to prompt more questions; the nature of the project, too, seems to have enhanced its affective potential: as a third researcher suggested: "I think this kind of project [...] slows you down a bit as well, doesn't it" (1B, JP)

## Conclusions

Our research therefore suggests that archives can be powerful resources for activists, including those which were not created for activist purposes nor presented according to an activist narrative. Traditional archives helped to develop a more nuanced understanding of the area of the activists' focus and provided resources for sharing their message with others. Whilst it is important that activists can find resources that might be pertinent to their interests (and therefore studies of information-seeking behavior remain essential), too narrow a focus on useful information potentially narrows the kinds of activism, and activists, that repositories can support and work with. Our project found that the power of these resources lies not simply in the information they can provide but in the emotional response they can generate. This coincides with recent analyses of activism that emphasize the imaginative and emotional side of the activist endeavor. Archivists need to be aware of the temporal, spatial and affective power of archives and, in evaluating the impact of archives, we need to look not simply at changes in skills, knowledge and attitude but at the experiences of users defined in affective terms, not simply in terms of "success/failure" at finding information and using it according to pedagogical models. The framework developed by our project provided us with a useful tool for analyzing these experiences in an activist context and we hope that other projects will find it useful and develop it further to take into account other types of resource and other types of activism.

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