
http://repository.nms.ac.uk/1528

Deposited on: 9 December 2015
Managing Industrial & Cultural Heritage: South Georgia in Context

Report on a conference held at Discovery Point, Dundee, 7-9 September 2011
PREFACE

One of the principal aims of the South Georgia Heritage Trust (SGHT) is to preserve, protect and promote an understanding of the historical heritage of South Georgia in relation to the island’s whaling, sealing, scientific and maritime history. The conference held in Dundee, 7th-9th September 2011 brought together a range of perspectives on future options for handling the cultural and industrial heritage of South Georgia, taking forward one of the suggestions made at the 2003 Future of South Georgia conference, organised by the South Georgia Association, that there should be “a meeting to develop proposals for the protection, display and education of the cultural heritage of South Georgia”. A key issue to be discussed was the future of the former whaling stations of South Georgia.

While the current status of research and heritage management on South Georgia formed an important element of the conference, the discussion was set in the wider context of existing research, protection and management strategies for heritage sites elsewhere.

The aims of the conference were to promote a wider awareness of SGHT heritage strategies, stimulate discussion that would inform future cultural heritage management on South Georgia and provide an international forum for the exchange of information and ideas on cultural heritage management in polar and sub-polar regions.

The conference was organised by David Munro, Elaine Shemilt, Bjørn Basberg, Alison Neil and Nici Rymer, with the assistance of the Dundee and Angus Convention Bureau and Dundee Heritage Trust. Invaluable input and support from Professor Frederik Paulsen, the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, the South Georgia Association and The International Committee for the Conservation of Industrial Heritage is particularly acknowledged in planning and hosting the conference.
CONTENTS

KEYNOTE PAPER
Polar Heritage – neglected child becomes international talking point
Dr Susan Barr, President, ICOMOS International Heritage Committee 6

SESSION 1
Managing industrial & cultural heritage: South Georgia in context 16
Polar industrial heritage sites as resources for historical research
Dr Dag Avango and Professor.dr. Louwrens Hacquebord 17
The present condition of the South Georgia whaling stations following an inspection in November 2010
Michael Morrison 33
Of whales and men – details of an industry: reflections on the value of the historical remains found in Prince Olav Harbour, South Georgia
Gustav Rossnes 42
South Georgia’s industrial heritage: a bonus for tourists
David Fletcher 52

SESSION 2
Recording, researching and interpreting heritage sites 56
The South Georgia Museum ex-whalers oral history project: recording the human history of the whaling industry
Elsa Davidson 57
A forgotten heritage: lights and beacons of South Georgia
Robert Burton 63
Surveys of whaling stations in South Georgia from NARE to LASHIPA and beyond
Ulf Gustafsson and Professor Bjørn Basberg 67
Bunavoneader whaling station, North Harris: a whaling station from the Scottish context
Dan Atkinson 78
SESSION 3
Strategies and management of cultural & industrial heritage sites 98

Large Scale Industrial Preservation and Environmental Problems
Stuart B Smith 99

A new vision of preservation: the laser programme of the whaling station at Port-Jeanne d’Arc, Kerguelen.
Dr Nathalie Moreigneaux 108

Managing the industrial and cultural heritage of South Georgia
Dr Martin A Collins and Richard McKee 114

UK Antarctic Heritage Trust – conserving and managing historical sites on the Antarctic Peninsula [abstract only]
Tudor Morgan 122

Ny Ålesund, Svalbard – New uses and cultural heritage [abstract only]
Knut M Ore 123

The David Nicholls Memorial Lecture
Professor Frederik Paulsen 124

SESSION 4
Workshops: 128

1. Cultural heritage management priorities on South Georgia
2. The future of South Georgia’s former whaling stations
3. Cultural heritage research priorities on South Georgia

Closing remarks
Howard Pearce 132
Chairman, South Georgia Heritage Trust

Nigel Haywood
Commissioner for South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands
The South Georgia Museum ex-whalers oral history project: recording the human history of the whaling industry.

ELSA DAVIDSON
Curator, South Georgia Museum

Abstract

Oral History is a remarkable resource for historians of the recent past. It can contribute fascinating human insights to the written record and lead to an enhanced understanding of history. The South Georgia Museum ex-whalers oral history project was established in 2009 to document the lives of those who worked in the whaling industry on and around the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia prior to the cessation of British whaling interests in 1963.

Drawing on a series of interviews with members of the Salvesen Ex-Whalers Club, this paper will provide an overview of the project and the benefits to be gained from the employment of oral history methodology in recording and preserving the industrial heritage of the island. It will also discuss the application of recorded material in a variety of formats, including exhibitions and arts projects, which have increased public interest and generated fresh perspectives on the Antarctic whaling industry.

Introduction

Oral history is a remarkable resource for historians of the recent past. It can contribute fascinating human insights to the written record and lead to a deeper understanding of history, “oral history should be a way to get to a better history, a more critical history, a more conscious history...” (Grele: 1991 xvi). The South Georgia Museum ex-whalers oral history project was established in 2009 and was designed to record the history of people who had worked in the whaling industry on and around the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia prior to the cessation of British whaling interests in 1963. Throughout the project it was hoped that we could interview people from a range of backgrounds within the whaling industry in order to generate a diverse human voice for the industrial collections of the South Georgia Museum.
The practice of oral history has reoriented itself considerably since its popular inception in the 1970s when it was primarily used as a means of tapping into the history of those generally side-lined in the historical record including women, workers and ethnic minorities. Oral history researchers have replaced a standardised questioning approach with an increasingly open interview structure which allows the interviewee the opportunity to develop a personal narrative throughout. Many oral history projects in the 1970s and 1980s relate primarily to names, places, dates and hours of work in relation to the recording of working lives. Accessing such audio records offers the researcher little more than could be procured with relative ease from the written record.

Allowing the interviewee to become the narrator of their own history can offer the listener a unique opportunity to explore a personal view of the past. In order to encourage discussion, and further opportunities for engagement, the ex-whalers project adopted a semi-structured interview approach. The interviews focused on the period in the interviewee's life when they were employed in the whaling industry but also opened up opportunities to explore their lives as ex-whalers and their continued interests in the island of South Georgia and its rich heritage. A range of core questions were devised by the South Georgia Heritage Trust in collaboration with the Salvesen Ex-Whalers Club in order to target key areas of historical, social and technical interest. This process allowed potential candidates to influence the direction of the interviews by helping to ascertain which areas of South Georgia’s whaling history should be recorded. This process also enhanced the relationship between the South Georgia Museum and the Salvesen Ex-Whalers Club which was of considerable benefit to the project (Figure 1).

Salvesen Ex-Whalers Club interviews

It was in 2007 that we first met with members of the Salvesen Ex-Whalers Club in Edinburgh. The Salvesen Club are a group of men who worked for Christian Salvesen & Co in the company’s Antarctic whaling operations prior to Salvesen’s move away from the industry in 1963. The group meet for social events around five times a year, catching up with friends and reminiscing about their time in the whaling industry. They have a keen interest in whaling and maritime history and also travel to Norway to meet with a related group in Tønsberg, Vestfold (G. Cummings, personal communication, 2010). On meeting the group several times it was clear that there was considerable support for an oral history project and the strong consensus that it should be conducted sooner rather than later due to the aging nature of the ex-whaling community. Members of the group were involved in the project from an early stage and acted as an entry point for access to the wider ex-whaling community across the United Kingdom (UK), Falkland Islands and Norway. The first interviews were conducted in February 2010 lasting between one and three hours in length with an opportunity to follow up related discussion at a later date. All of the interviews in the UK have been filmed in order to open up the records to the largest number of possible engagement applications. (Figures 2, 3, 4)
ties, which may not be so widely explored in official records. As well as generating information about the whaling stations and vessels the interviews have also explored topics such as skiing competitions, the creation of a dark room for the development of photographs at Leith Harbour, the printing of newspapers on board pelagic factory ships, and illicit brewing at the whaling stations.

Figure 5: Cinema ticket from Grytviken Kino, 1950-51. Photo: South Georgia Museum

Recording personal testaments can also enhance the written record and improve understanding of the technical and economic data generated by the industry. It can offer human perspectives to whaling station plans and industrial archaeology which can in turn enhance engagement opportunities with the public. Personal recordings can also add poignancy to certain events such as the loss of a vessel or the journey to South Georgia by providing a voice for the industry. A number of candidates recounted the loss of the whale-catcher Simbra during the 1947 whaling season. This compact narrative successfully conveys the danger inherent in the industry and although most of the interviewees did not know the men involved the emotion with which this narrative was recalled suggested they felt connected in a vital way. Oral history can also challenge common preconceptions of the industry such as the poor living and working conditions of Leith Harbour whaling station as highlighted by Robertson in Of Whales and Men (1954). Although most of our candidates admitted that the work was tough the common view was that the stations were well set up with good facilities, excellent supplies and adequate living and working conditions.

Oral history may also help to reinstate the importance of whaling history, especially in the UK where it is frequently overlooked due to environmental and political concerns. On meeting many ex-whalers for the first time there appeared to be a need for them to justify their role in the industry before the conversation could go any further. If harnessed appropriately in education projects the oral recordings could inform younger generations about the importance of the industry to the British economy and the considerable reliance on whale products in this country up until the 1960s. Thousands of men were employed in the whaling industry and in areas such as Shetland, Edinburgh and Leith Christian Salvesen offered considerable employment opportunities for young men in the post-Second World War period. The project has also been appreciated by those who have taken part who are generally very happy that their history is being preserved. This has strengthened the link between members of the ex-whaling community and current heritage and environmental projects on the island through the South Georgia Heritage Trust. The museum is also extremely grateful to all the interviewees who have kindly donated supporting images, photographs and artefacts strengthening the oral history project and the related collection at the South Georgia Museum. Expanding this link with the ex-whaling community also enhances the communal significance of the industrial sites on the island by emphasising that although the industry ceased almost 50 years ago there is still a large group of people connected to the modern whaling history of South Georgia.

Oral history is now commonly used as a performance medium included in museum exhibitions, arts projects and even inspiring drama productions. Oral history makes a compelling addition to the contemporary representation of the whaling industry aiding understanding and encouraging further exploration. Audio clips from the whaling interviews have been developed into an audio exhibition at the South Georgia Museum. The display, which also features images of the interviewees and related details of the project, has been warmly welcomed by visitors to the museum who respond well to the personal accounts. For some, it appears as though they find the personalised narratives more accessible in their understanding of the whaling industry than the industrial remains. The existing exhibition will be enhanced with film footage of the interviews including historic photographs and footage of whaling operations which will further enhance understanding of life and work on the island. This is especially welcome when so much of the Grytviken complex has been removed as part of an extensive clean-up operation to combat problems with oil leaks, asbestos, and tin sheeting. A webpage dedicated to the project is now available through the South Georgia Heritage Trust website. The site will continue to develop to improve access to the growing archive of audio material.
Oral history opens up the industrial history of South Georgia to new audiences through a range of mediums. The records were recently harnessed by artist Bridget Steed in her contribution to the annual exhibition of the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh (2011). Her clever design incorporated the voices of ex-whalers from the oral history project in painted whale ear bones similar to those in the collection of the South Georgia Museum (Figure 6). The voices of the candidates were projected through small headphones in the ear bones and visitors to the gallery were invited to engage with the art installation by picking up the ear bones and listening to the voices inside. This was complemented by the artist’s photography of whale bones on the shores of the island and replica scrimshaw which presented the remarkable whaling history of South Georgia to a wide audience. Copies of the recorded material have been transferred to the Celtic and Scottish Studies Archive at the University of Edinburgh which houses a significant oral history collection and related whaling material. We hope that this will increase the research potential of the material and will enhance public and academic opportunities to engage with South Georgia’s industrial past.

![Figure 6: Painted whale ear bones incorporating the oral history recordings. Photo: Bridget Steed](image)

Although oral history is an effective way to record the human elements of the whaling industry it is not without its problems. There are significant practical concerns including the recording, transcription and preservation of records. Specialised equipment is required to ensure high quality recordings and the ability to travel widely to undertake interviews is essential. Such considerations have direct financial implications and the process can also be time-consuming when preparing for and transcribing the interviews. Problems can also arise in the process of interview as the structure of an interview situation does not encourage normal conversation no matter how open or relaxed it might be. It is important to remember that “an oral history narrative is first and foremost a performance of words, a way of speaking separated from ordinary speech, a speech act performed for an audience in a particular context” (Abrams 2010:130). One audible outcome of this can be the scripted nature of certain narratives or the interviewee undertaking the interview as a performance. This is common to all oral history and although generally unavoidable this should be remembered in relation to interpretation and future utilisation of the material.

The concept of memory and how people remember is also of significance as people do not always remember an event or series of events in the same way. In some cases people simply do not wish to be interviewed. The relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is also paramount to the success of an interview. It was clear that a number of candidates relaxed considerably in the knowledge that the interviewer had spent time on South Georgia and had a firm understanding of the modern whaling industry. As soon as this was established the candidates regularly finished their sentences with “. . . you know how it is”. The interview and response process is invariably selective with the interviewer guiding the interview to obtain the information they want and the candidate
choosing how to respond, this should also be kept in mind when making decisions about how best to utilise the material. Ethical issues in relation to copyright and the nature of personal stories should also be monitored carefully throughout the process with official forms developed for copyright and access issues. Finally, with the industry coming to an end almost fifty years ago the related population is inevitably aging. In February 2010 we were due to interview the eldest member of the Salvesen Ex-Whalers Club who first visited South Georgia in the 1930s, he sadly passed away the week before we were due to speak to him.

The ex-whalers project has demonstrated the variety of ways in which oral history can enhance the preservation of the industrial heritage of South Georgia: (1) when faced with considerable collection constraints oral history is perhaps the only way to record certain aspects of the whaling industry; (2) adding personal accounts to the historical record can promote public engagement opportunities while enhancing the written record and industrial surveys; (3) when used in collaboration with related material culture, including the remains of the whaling stations, oral history can help visitors to South Georgia to explore life and work on and around the island; (4) it can also introduce new audiences to the industrial heritage of the island through arts projects, websites and educational applications; (5) it is relatively cost effective to undertake; and (6) ultimately it is a remarkable way to enhance our knowledge about the whaling stations and for the South Georgia Museum to collect the intangible social elements of the island’s industrial heritage.

Conclusions

Now that we have conducted a series of interviews it is important to highlight the next stages of the oral history project: (1) it will be necessary to undertake further detailed analysis of the audio recordings for the interesting detail they can reveal; (2) it would be beneficial to explore ways of remembering, analysing how individual and collective memory operates in the context of this project; (3) a comparative analysis of similar oral history collections should be undertaken including related collections in Norway where there is a long tradition of oral history. Other projects include related work in Shetland where there is a considerable ex-whaling community of around one hundred men; (4) groups such as the British Antarctic Survey and the South Georgia Association are supporting projects to interview people who have lived and worked on South Georgia and it would be interesting to explore accounts of the whaling stations from people outside the industry including scientists, doctors, the military, expedition teams and maintenance personnel; (5) it is hoped that the recordings can be harnessed in education projects through the South Georgia Museum and South Georgia Heritage Trust; and (6) we also hope to build on the exhibition elements of the project by promoting the audio records to increase awareness, develop engagement opportunities and encourage further interviews.

Oral history offers the interpreter the opportunity to engage with layers of history and to harness the past of the whaling industry in a personal context. Adopting oral history as a methodology can lead to what Paul Thomson describes as, “...a history that is not just richer, more vivid and heart rendering but truer” (2000: 117). The South Georgia Museum ex-whalers oral history project has generated fresh perspectives on the whaling industry, highlighting significant events and even correcting parts of the historical record. Performance applications have also afforded thousands of people the opportunity to access the past in an extraordinary way. Oral history is a wonderful resource that is currently overlooked by many historians. It is no more fallible than the majority of written records and should be embraced by researchers of the recent past for the compelling detail it can impart.

Acknowledgements

The South Georgia Heritage Trust is extremely grateful to all of the candidates who have contributed to the oral history project so far. Thanks also to Bridget Steed for the use of her image in this paper. Finally, thank you to Emile Shemilt and Darren McNaney for their invaluable technical support in the filming, transcription and production of the ex-whalers interviews.
References


Basberg, B., 2004 *The Shore Whaling Stations at South Georgia*. Novus Forlag


Fraser, G., 2001 *Shetland’s Whalers Remember* (Gilbert A. Fraser)


Green, A., 2004 Individual remembering and ‘collective memory’: theoretical presuppositions and contemporary debates, *Oral History*, 32; pp. 35-44


Headland, R., 1984 *The Island of South Georgia* Cambridge University Press

Howart, K., 1998 *Oral History*. Sutton


Robertson, R. B., 1954 *Of Whales and Men*. Knopf

Thomson, A., 1994 *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*. Oxford University Press


Celtic and Scottish Studies Archive, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh


British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Scotland *The Scots at Sea*. DVD VB2004.034

Bruce, R. Taped interview with Mr. Scollay, SA1976.243.82

Campbell, K. and Lazzo, J. Taped interview with Mr. Jennings, SA2007.082

South Georgia Museum

Davidson, E. Audio-visual recorded interview with G. Cummings, SGHT.OH.2010.1

Audio-visual recorded interview with D. Lennie, SGHT.OH.2010.2

Audio-visual recorded interview with J. Yorkston, SGHT.OH.2010.3

Audio-visual recorded interview with N. Jamieson, SGHT.OH.2010.4

Audio-visual recorded interview with J. Alexander, SGHT.OH.2010.8

Audio-visual recorded interview with G. Elliot, SGHT.OH.2011.1

Audio-visual recorded interview with G. Smethurst, SGHT.OH.2011.2

Hill, J. Taped interview with H. Jennings, SGHT.OH.2010.6

Taped interview with D. Bonner and J. Smith