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“I can do things here that I can’t do in my own life”: The Making of a Civic Archive at the Salford Lads Club

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Introduction

Occupying purpose built Edwardian premises, Salford Lads Club (SLC) in Ordsall, Greater Manchester has served more than 20,000 young members since its establishment. Founded in 1903 by brothers William and James Groves, owners of the nearby Groves and Whitnall Brewery, the club quickly became established within a movement of similar lads clubs (Russell 1905), which offered opportunities to local working class children growing up in the densely populated neighbourhoods surrounding the Manchester Ship Canal, which opened in the 1890s (Davies and Fielding 1992)².



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² Lads’ or Boys’ clubs were predominantly located in the industrial towns and cities of northern England, though Russell (1905) notes a cluster of Jewish Lads’ Clubs in east London at the time of his audit (see also Russell and Rigby 1908). There were also a number of Girls’ Clubs with similar origins and intentions, though these were separate entities. The Salford Lads’ Club became open to boys and girls in 1994, using the same

Citizenship and notions of ‘the civic’ were core concerns of the lads club movement, explicitly raised in the SLC’s own motto “to brighten young lives and make good citizens”, a motto which hangs to this day on a large painted sign for all to see as they pass the threshold into the club’s main entrance hall (Fig. 1). Alongside the provision of gymnastics, football, boxing and a night school, an important part of the wider ethos of moral philanthropy, intervention and ‘improvement’ that such clubs aspired to was the annual camping trip. The first SLC camp took place in Llandulas, Wales, during the Whitsun week of 1904, starting a tradition that has been passed down through many generations of volunteers and young people. In 2011, the arrival of the one hundredth annual camping trip was taken as an opportunity to celebrate this tradition and reflect on its importance in sustaining the wider role that the club has played within its local community (see Dickens and MacDonald, 2014).



Figure 1. The Salford Lads Club motto on display above the main staircase. Source: L. Dickens 2011

Our intended contribution to the Civic Geographies exhibition at the RGS-IBG in Edinburgh emerged out of this moment of collective reflection, which took place during a year-long collaboration between the Club and the Storycircle project run by Goldsmiths, University of London³. Situated within a wider action research project we undertook regular ethnographic contact with the club, recording formal and informal interviews with volunteers, lads and visitors, and capturing photographic and other observational documentation of activity, as well as running storytelling and media production workshops. This research relationship was

building but primarily running on different club nights. The nearby Salford Girls’ Club, including its own collection of records, was irreparably damaged by an incendiary bomb in 1941 and never reopened.

³ See <http://storycircle.co.uk/>

conducted as part of a wider funded project examining emerging forms of digital citizenship and their influence on the cultural politics of narrative exchange, listening and mutual recognition (Couldry et al. 2014a; Couldry et al. 2014b; MacDonald et al. in press).

The centrepiece of the SLC's camping centenary celebrations was a permanent exhibition at the club called 'One Hundred Camps', which consisted of a collection of framed images relating to every year that the club went on camp (Fig.2). Alongside this, our research team supported club members of all ages – from 13 to 93 – through a digital storytelling process that focused on producing short films about their memories of attending the camp, called 'Tales from Camp'. As we discuss below, these exhibited materials, and the reflexive process through which they were produced, displayed and encountered, provides, among other things, an important chance to consider the potency of archives and collections that reside in civic organizations such as the SLC.



Figure 2. Flyer for the One Hundred Camps exhibition, which included the Tales from Camp films. Source: L. Holmes 2012

Our starting point here is a comment made during our research by the club's projects manager, Leslie Holmes, in which he described the value of the photographic, film and other documentary records held at the club as he sees it:

I can do things here that I can't do in my own life. We can trace back people through three generations or we can see what people did [...] when you've got broken families or very poor families there's hardly any pictures. [...] here, it's like 'wow', you know. You can show people a film of them at 17, or their granddad at 17, and I just find that amazing.

(Leslie)

His observation came at the end of a discussion where he had outlined the importance of such materials to those working class families, including his own,

who had lacked the resources to construct, maintain and pass on their own family archives. He had also contrasted the current SLC collections with the fate of the nearby Adelphi Lads Club whose records had been dispersed when the building closed after being badly damaged by an arson attack in 2006. The experience of the Adelphi bears out a point made over thirty years ago, amidst accelerating deindustrialisation in the region, by Linkman and Williams (1979) of the pioneering Manchester Studies initiative, that where civic organisations in working class neighbourhoods do document their histories, these records nonetheless remain extremely precarious, particularly during periods of social and economic upheaval. What Leslie’s comment most forcefully suggested was that it was the durability of the camping records and indeed, the club building itself, as much as the continuity of camping practices, which had served to bind club members in such a sustained sense of collective belonging and identity. Our point of departure then is to give a flavour of how the ‘One Hundred Camps’ project at the SLC might bring to light something of the often neglected role of documenting and archiving in forging a wider, but perhaps more politicised, sense of the civic.

As Tim Cresswell has argued, archives are constructed through processes of gathering and valuing, with the latter typically constructed around the axes of scarcity and durability (2011, 166-168). The club’s records – particularly its card-index membership records, which include the years each lad attended camp – were the result of the meticulous recordkeeping instilled in the Club by its business men owners, rather than conscious effort to preserve its history. The ‘One Hundred Camps’ project brought the current officers and young members, as well as ex-members and their families, into a conscious encounter with these materials, in order to invest new forms of value in them. In this context, our point here is not to discuss the archive *per se*, but to show the ways an archive began to be produced through an on-going, dynamic and distinctively civic process of sharing experiences, constructing collective knowledge and strengthening collective bonds.

‘The One Hundred Salford Lads’ Club Camps’

The Club’s collection of photographs date back to the first years of the last century (Fig. 3). The annual camp is a privileged subject in this collection, reflecting its importance in the Club year. It took a year to organise and catalogue the photograph collection, and then to select and assemble the one hundred images; a digitised sequence of which was taken to the Edinburgh exhibition.⁴

The task of choosing and dating the photographs was approached as a collective act within the club, and one we suggest, signals an important civic practice in itself. Photographic prints previously kept out of view in ad-hoc albums, scrapbooks and various storage boxes in the Club office or belonging to ex-lads were gathered onto the pool tables in the games room. Sessions were organised in which young Club members, together with older volunteers, donned white cotton

⁴ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqFiU9S4QqA>

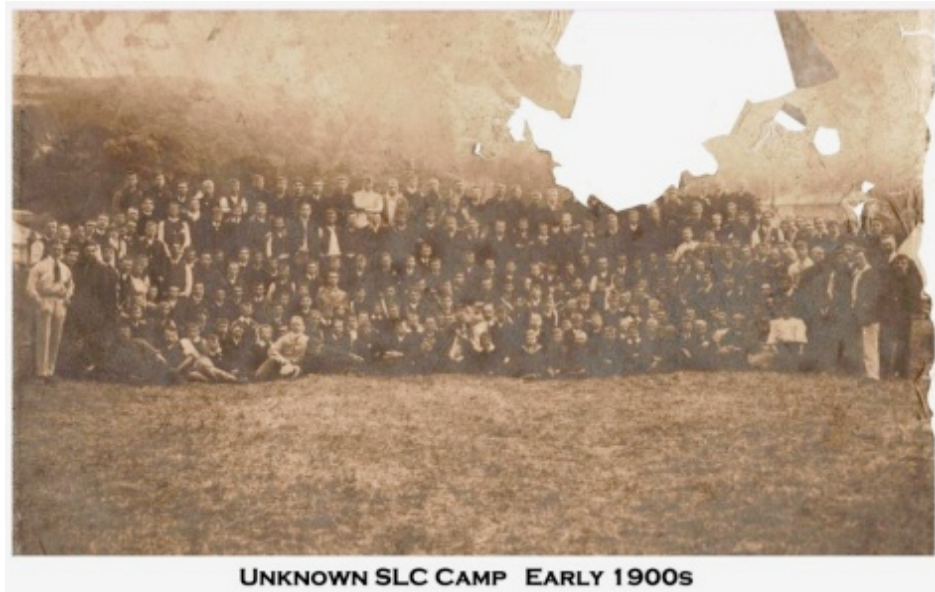


Figure 3. An image from the One Hundred Camps series. Source: Salford Lads Club



Figure 4. Club members helping to put photographs from past camps into an archive folder. Source: Source: L. Holmes 2011



Figure 5. Officers try to identify the campers in the old photos. Source: L. Dickens 2012

gloves to sort through the original photographs and rehouse them in archival-quality photo albums (Fig. 4). Over successive club nights, older volunteers cross-checked the lads featured in the unidentified photographs with the membership records, the scrupulous camping registers and their own memories of where different camp sites were located or who had attended in which years, to establish a consensus on where to place them in the sequence (Fig. 5). Through this process, members engaged in the tangible retrieval of their shared history, musing on the similarities and differences with past generations of campers, their past lives and also re-considering their individual place within this collective tradition. Thus, this

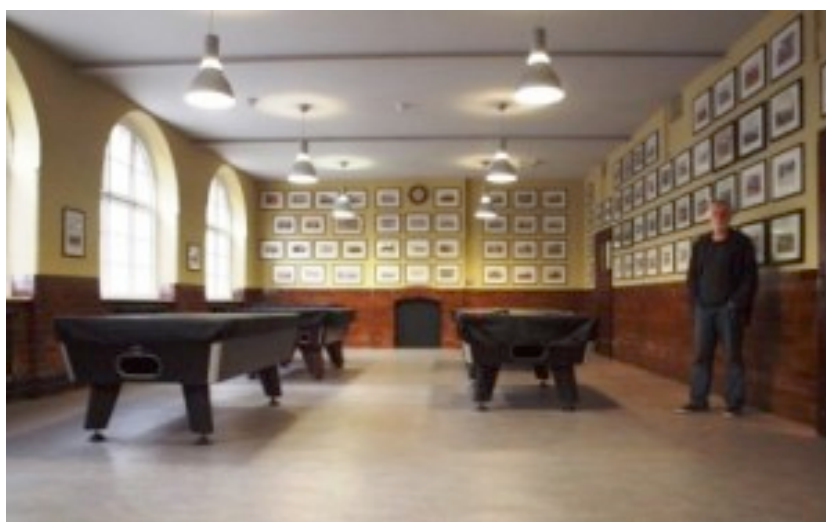


Figure 6. Leslie at the Salford Lads Club with the finished One Hundred Camps exhibition. Source: L. Holmes 2012

active reflection on the value of camping, and the club itself, in forging lasting connections between a community of working class lads and their families, also constituted a civic act, by beginning to construct something identifiable as a ‘civic archive’ that could meaningfully stand in place of the absence of family records or more formal institutional records. The framed images finally selected were mounted in a chronological sequence in the Club’s games room, visibly placing more recent camps into a historical continuum that began in the first decades of the twentieth century (Fig. 6). Holes for mounting the yet to take place 101st camp were pre-drilled, while space was reserved for the anticipated camps to follow, a clear sign of the ways this continuity of camping practices was intended to last.

‘Tales from Camp’

As with the photographic collection, the Club’s rare amateur films testify to the Club’s ability to mobilise technological means of representation well beyond what was affordable to individual households in the area (Fig. 7). Originally the function of these films was promotional, advertising the attractions of camp to the Club’s newest members, encouraging them to earn their place on next year’s camp, conditional as this was on their year-round attendance. With the passage of time a collection of films originally made to be useful (Acland and Wasson 2011), of merely topical interest, acquired value as scarce moving images of a cherished Club ritual.



Figure 7. Filming the Salford lads arriving in Wales, 1977. Source: Salford Lads Club

Shortly after the Club celebrated its one hundredth camp in 2011, the SLC began collaborating with the Storycircle team on the 'Tales from Camp' project, which resulted in a collection of fourteen short videos edited together from the Club’s own film footage and its photographic collection⁵. These were to be displayed on a looped DVD projection at the Edinburgh exhibition, alongside the ‘One Hundred Camps’ sequence.



Figure 8. The Salford Lads telling tales from camp together in a story circle. Source: L. Holmes 2011

The project centred on a multi-layered digital storytelling process. Club members were initially supported in a workshop to undertake a group exchange of stories focused on their memories of camp (Fig. 8). Recording these stories initiated a more fluid process of story gathering led by the Club’s volunteers in the following weeks. Later workshops brought the storytellers back together to illustrate their tales by learning the editing skills necessary to select and combine their narration with digitised film footage and the growing collection of camping photos using basic movie making software.

The emphasis throughout was in stimulating a collective process of ‘memory work’ which Annette Kuhn describes as: “a practice of unearthing and making public untold stories”, stories, she adds, quoting Carolyn Steedman, of “lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for whom the central interpretive devices of the culture don’t quite work” (2002, 9). Memory work, she argues, can be an instrument of critical reflection and learning, of ‘conscientisation’, to adopt Freire’s

⁵ See <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8vzvBxG4B2OrGBNsuaUCiuW-6ad2z3q4>

term (1996), not least because those who engage in it come to recognise that their stories are valued in the world (Ibid.). Therefore, this explicit production of stories, in parallel with those emerging tacitly through engaging with the photographic collections, nurtured a powerful, personal and intergenerational sense of the connections fostered between Salford lads through the shared experiences of camping together over time.

Throughout this process the sense of discovery in the still and moving photographic image was highly personal and emotional. For one former Club member, Mike, being invited to come and see some of the footage in which he appeared meant he came to confront an image of himself preserved within the Club that he didn't know existed (Fig. 9), an experience that moved him deeply:

“I felt as if I wanted to burst into tears... I can remember how I felt, so to add that subconscious knowledge that I already had, always must have had... that visual image was as if I'd jumped into my body and could be nearly sixteen.”

(Mike)



Figure 9. Mike on the SLC camp film in 1963. Source: Salford Lads' Club

For others, it was showing the Tales from Camp videos in the Club during the exhibition that prompted responses. This had the effect of reaching beyond the immediate relationships of current members, to a wider and rather more dispersed constituency of ex-lads and their families who were invited to return to see the exhibition. For example, one visitor attending with his wife was captivated by the sudden appearance of his friend in the footage:

Woman: Ah, that was you! That was your coat, that was you getting on the bus before...

Man: Wow! ...That might be me there, just on the left... Oh, there’s John [his friend]! Yeah, that was me, there’s me lounging!

Woman: Oh bless you!

Man: I think I’ve still got the same shirt on! I think I probably wore it for the entire time.

Woman: I remember seeing that and thinking ‘oh that looked like you!’ Plus you look so like our son as well! When he was that age... ahhh! Ah how fabulous!

In many such cases, visitors noted how the lads at the time were probably not aware they were being filmed, or that their every activity and progress on the camps was documented by the officers. Caught up in the moment few lads would have conceived of camp as an opportunity to capture images for posterity. These (dis)embodied and (dis)placed but nonetheless intimate encounters further complicate the ways that past lives of children might be experienced through the archive (Mills 2012). As such, the sudden and heightened emotional responses on seeing these images for the first time attest to the renewed and charged significance of these materials being achieved through the emerging formation of the club’s ‘civic archive’.

The SLC’s efforts to take its exhibition beyond the club and its immediate community⁶, as well as producing an online version of the materials⁷, sought to bring an outside audience into contact with the history of camping in the lads’ club movement, raising the prospect of a wider public recognition of this important alternative history of working class lives. Within this, the contribution to the Civic Geographies exhibition in Edinburgh was intended to reflect the efforts at the heart of this project to speak across academic boundaries, demonstrating where action research might be used to meaningfully contribute to the production of knowledge located within community organisations in building wider forms of civic engagement.

A civic archive in the making

The ‘One Hundred Camps’ exhibition and accompanying ‘Tales from Camp’ films present an extraordinary visual record of the Club’s history, and of the rituals that bind people together and preserve continuity when all about is change. Indeed, it is hard to overstate the significance of this living history in a wider context so heavily impacted by repeated rounds of demolition and regeneration, and the

⁶ The images and films produced for the exhibition have featured in a range of other contexts, including the BBC ‘big screens’ in the Manchester Arndale Centre and the MediaCityUK site on Salford Quays, and on screens inside the Salford Quays shuttle buses.

⁷ See <http://salfordladsclub.org.uk/camping/> and <http://salfordladsclub.org.uk/camping/100-camps-timeline/>

attendant historical amnesia, that has been experienced in this and many other working class areas of Salford and Greater Manchester over past decades. This record has built up organically from a localised civic culture within the club, for its members and current volunteers, who have used it to seek connections to a more dispersed group of ex-lads whose lives at one time or another had been touched by the work of the club, and tentatively, reach out beyond these often circumscribed working class geographies to a far wider public.

In part what is discussed here has highlighted the on-going importance of working class civic practices. An annual camping trip was common among many youth groups established at the turn of the last century, yet surprisingly little of this history is documented. This Heritage Lottery funded project has enabled the club to celebrate its own remarkable camping history, and more fully examine the importance of these displaced encounters with the working class city that underpin the club's wider longevity (see Dickens and MacDonald 2014). But our point here is also to highlight how the civic is configured through the ways this practice has been documented, and how this unusual record has come to be re-valued after surviving significant periods of decline within the club. It is the inter-related practices of camping, and engaging with the documentation of such practices, which together constitute this particular form of civic enactment discussed here.

As such, this intervention centres on the importance of potential archival materials held by civic institutions broadly defined. We suggest that engagement with such records can be a vital element in building a culture of civic consciousness, enabling forms of recognition and value to emerge within community organisations, and establishing a sense of their place within wider civil society (Couldry et al. 2014a). But this is not a given. What is significant and unusual about the SLC case is its long-term existence as an autonomous, self-sustaining working class civic space, one which predates the welfare state and largely remains outside its influence. Moreover, the One Hundred Camps exhibition is just the most recent example of creative efforts by the SLC to mobilise its distinct status as a site of 'living' local history in Salford in order to encourage local participation and raise awareness⁸. Nonetheless, the marginal or suppressed status of working class histories within local authority archives and national collections serves to emphasise the valuable role of similar clubs and societies as independent civic organisations, and potentially, archival institutions in their own right.

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⁸ Alongside a growing collection of photographs and memorabilia of music fans in the 'Smiths Room' opened by the club in 2004, similar projects have included: 'Ghost Camp' (2005), 'Quaker Girl Bazaar' (2006), 'Street of a thousand children' (2007), 'Swedish Drill' (2009) and the 'Big Draw Musical Tour' (2013).

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