

## Investigating Oral Histories of the Barbican Building on St. Mary's Street, Lincoln

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### *Abstract*

*This project was funded by the University of Lincoln Undergraduate Research Opportunity Scheme (UROS) providing undergraduate students with the opportunity to work alongside academics on research projects to help develop their scholarly and employability skills. The history of the Barbican building (formerly known as the Albion hotel) on St Mary's Street, opposite Lincoln's railway station, transitions into a community asset. The Lincolnshire co-op and the University of Lincoln are now working in partnership on the building, which will be transformed into the Barbican creative hub to launch in spring 2024. Therefore, the project seeks to explore and uncover the voices of individuals who might not appear in more conventional histories, whilst tracking the relationship between ordinary lives and the built environment. Specifically, oral history techniques have been utilised to understand the importance of the building in the post-war period. Interestingly, the research revealed the Barbican fostered a sense of belonging and social change, which became an important element of nostalgia within the community. The appraisal further concludes the Barbican situates Lincoln into the larger cultural and historical contexts.*

*Keywords: Community, ordinary lives, Pub Culture, built environment, oral history, social change.*

### **Introduction**

In 2023 Lincolnshire Co-op and the University of Lincoln announced a partnership to transform the Barbican Building in central Lincoln into a Creative Hub. Sited adjacent to the recently completed bus station and on the edge of the Cornhill Quarter regeneration scheme, and itself the subject of several attempts at rejuvenation in the last decade, the Barbican is symbolic of the changing fortunes of Lincoln and urban Britain since the Second World War. This project - supported by the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme (UROS), exemplifying 'Student as Producer' principle that drives the 'Lincoln approach to teaching and learning' (University of Lincoln, 2023) – is a unique piece of student-led research based on community engagement that addresses contemporary issues of heritage, place, and identity (Neary et al, 2014, 5). By collecting oral histories of ordinary people who know of or visited the Barbican, this project reveals how notions of belonging, local identity and social change are attached to the built environment. In doing so, it expands areas of

research associated with leisure and pastimes, such as music and pub going, and investigates the importance of these activities' locations in people's lives.

## **Project Background**

The Barbican in Lincoln opened in 1867 and was known as a gentleman's club before being renamed the Club House (George, 84). In July 1876, the name was changed to the Albion Hotel (George, 84). Following a long and varied history, the Albion Hotel was renamed the Barbican in 1983, and is currently closed for renovations (George, 86). Mervyn Davies and Terry Higgins took over the Barbican three months before the 1983 opening, in which they had extensive experience with pub houses prior to the space (No author, 1983). The 'Hispano-Moresque' style of the building was designed by local architects Messrs W Watkins and Son. (George, 84) Lincolnshire Co-op and the University of Lincoln collaboration is turning the building into a new Creative Hub to launch in 2024, thus representing an opportune moment to use the interest generated in the building's history, future, and place in the city to conduct a project so reliant on public engagement. I have particular interest in the building due to the local human engagement with the space, which relates to my studies in social and oral histories.

## **Literature Review**

Oral history was chosen as a method for this project to both showcase individual lives that have been underrepresented in broader histories, and to reveal the relationship between identity and the built environment. Oral history can be both a 'scholarly and activist' endeavour, contributing to community empowerment and societal transformation (Armitage and Gluck, 1998; Leavy, 2011, 5). This allows interviewees to reflect on, rebuild, and construct meaning from their past experiences in the present (Leavy, 23). Furthermore, oral history allows scholars to analyse 'people's subjective experiences of shifting historical periods', and how occurrences develop over time (Leavy, 23). Crucially, for this project - in which questions about the present and future of both the Barbican building and Lincoln as a lived city were as central as the recovery of information about the past - oral histories represent an act of historical production that reflects the contemporary concerns and opinions of those who produce it (Abrams, 2016).

Heritage, place, memory, and identity is significant to consider in relation to the Barbican. 'Place identity' has been established by the 'physical form of the built environment and its ensemble of symbols, icons and embodied values which lend meaning to a place because of the connections with layers of history' (Kermani et al, 406). This development is mirrored with the Barbican in which the building itself is associated with Lincoln's local past. Alongside this, cultural landscapes can be public buildings and 'without memory, a sense of self, identity, culture and heritage is lost' (McDowell, 40-42). The functions and meanings of heritage is connected to the 'potential of landscapes', specifically expressing 'not only relationships in the present but also a society's changing relationship to its past' (McDowell, 49). In combination

with memory, place, heritage and identity, the Barbican is positioned within Lincoln as an interchangeable space with a multitude of local memories. These elements provide a sense of belonging in Lincoln's local histories, providing a nexus in the broader narratives of community and nostalgia.

Pub and music culture in the post-war period is often particularly associated with memories and recollections of periods of social change, and the stories participants associated with the Barbican show how recalling music and leisure at the site enhanced wider cultural narratives. Notably, pubs alongside their culture are part of 'everyday social practices of leisure and sociability' and are where significant 'life events such as birthdays, weddings, and retirements' are celebrated or memorialised (Thurnell-Read, 4). The 'everyday matters' in pub spaces offer the 'opportunity to link the smallest story to the largest social transformation', and everyday practices allow us to view social change as 'something resulting from the 'ordinary activities by which people 'negotiate their way through or around social structures' (Thurnell-Read, 4). Customer attachment to hospitality spaces has been widely considered, raising awareness of customer roles in the pub community (Sandiford et al, 273). This enables people to develop relationships with places, such as the Barbican, to understand their sense of belonging and social change.

## **Methodology**

The results of this project were based on an analysis of the interviews conducted by the researcher, Olivia Hennessy. Specifically, these interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams or a recording device specialised for interviews, and then transferred onto a transcript using Otter.ai before being proofread to ensure that the transcript is accurate. Each participant was provided with a participant information sheet to read prior to completing a consent form. The completed consent forms alongside the recordings and transcripts were stored securely in OneDrive with access only available to the research team. To induce participants to take part in this research endeavour, a flyer and participant recruitment text were developed. The participants were made aware of the opportunity through the utilisation of email advertising.

The questions were a typical oral history schedule with open-ended questions for the interviewee to narrate their own story. The student researcher firstly provided questions about the interviewee's personal life such as 'when and where were you born?' and 'what kind of place was X when you were growing up?'. The primary aim of these types of general, but open-ended questions are to allow the participant to formulate their own experiences and sense of self against the subject (the Barbican) at hand without too great an amount of intervention from the interviewer (Ritchie, 92-94). More specific questions arose from the interviews, but also from themes discovered in the British Newspaper Archive in articles about the Barbican and its history, which were then used to inform both the interviews and contextualise the analysis of the transcripts (No author, 1983; No author, 1983).

## Results

The data from the transcripts was analysed using qualitative research (Baggott, 2023; Bramwell, 2023; Orner, 2023; Paterson, 2023; Stanlifield, 2023) and participant's responses were considered against two central questions: first, how is the subject articulating notions of community and why and second, how are they narrating their own life events through the building? The results are shown below:

### *The Barbican as a space and place through narration*

The project first demonstrates how the participants narrated their own life events, such as childhood, through the Barbican. Sue, who was a teenager at the time, recalled her mother working as a barmaid at the Barbican, with Sue occasionally helping. She also stated that the Barbican is a significant part of her memory. Notably, Sue remembered her mother behind the bar with a 'big grin on her face ... 'having a natter and banter with everybody.' (Paterson, 2023). These attitudes contribute to the bar's and the Barbican's sense of belonging.

### *Community*

Indeed, community and its formation were a central feature of many of the participants' stories, illustrating their desire to showcase Lincoln's overlooked history by situating the building both as a historical asset and a locus of community during their childhood. Roderick, for example, argued that the Barbican 'stood as a symbol of otherness' in the 'downhill' section of Lincoln, in which he perceived a distinct socio-economic divide between 'uphill' and 'downhill' (Orner, 2023). This specifically demonstrates the social class identity and positioning within the city.

Another participant, Katy, considered the nature of Lincoln's community when she expressed a desire that many city centre pubs that had closed were an 'important part of the fabric of the city', locating a sense of nostalgia within a Lincoln community organised around pubs and sociability (Baggott, 2023). The loss of that part of the city allows us to explore the possibility of preserving the Barbican building, which is positioned in a prominent part of Lincoln. This is in correspondence to Roderick's testimony on uphill and downhill Lincoln. The Barbican faded away in history as it declined, which is why preserving this building and displaying its historical significance is becoming increasingly important for communities.

### *Pub and Music Culture*

The project also revealed a sense of belonging within pub culture, integrating these memories into greater cultural narratives. For instance, Clive narrated his own life events through his weekly routines with his father within the pub and how the Barbican evolved as he grew up. Clive recalled how he and his father used to go to the Barbican every Saturday for lunch, generally a chip butty and a couple of 'pints', evoking a certain pub culture that was distinct in his generation, primarily from the

late 1970s to the 1990s (Stanliff, 2023). According to Clive's perspective, the Barbican was a popular pub among the locals, as evidenced by several newspaper articles from the Lincolnshire Echo. Notably, one article in August 1983 claimed that the Barbican was the 'first lager bar in the country' (No author, 1983).

Music was also key to pub experience in the period. Paul remembered that he was part of 'the Northern Soul, sort of Mod' and 'a lot of Mods and Northern Soul fanatics used to meet up at the Barbican'. Paul and his friends began using this area as a meeting point, especially during the Northern Soul socials (Bramwell, 2023). Compared to those who remembered the Barbican as typical of working-class family and community formation, Paul remembered it as a place where a sub-culture, primarily appealing to the young, flourished, situating both Paul and Lincoln in wider narratives of musical history through his memories of the Barbican. All these recollections provide interesting leads into hidden histories of the local past that form starting points for future work as the Barbican project is completed.

### **UROS Experience**

Whilst working on my UROS project, I was able to acquire an array of skills, including effective communication, time management, and IT skills such as working with Microsoft Teams. This experience has been extremely useful to help me prepare for my Master's in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. This project has allowed me to prepare more effectively and understand how to conduct research proposals and data collection while also obtaining ethical approval. These insights will be particularly beneficial to my Master's dissertation and advantageous for future employment alongside further study for a PhD. Working with my supervisor through the ethical and research process has allowed me to become more familiar with the procedure in my future studies. My supervisor has been communicative and supportive, specifically providing me with research advice for my future studies. We have also discussed how this research will enable me to develop my confidence while managing my time in a more intensive working environment.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, this project highlights the significance of the built environment in relation to social change and a sense of belonging. Social change in relation to the Barbican is perceived through the changing landscape of Lincoln and ordinary people – by losing the part of the city's pub life, there is the opportunity to preserve the Barbican. This research demonstrates there is a larger cultural and historical context that separates Lincoln, but the Barbican is positioned as a nexus to situate the city within much broader narratives of community, leisure, and the uses of nostalgia in twenty-first century Britain. Utilizing ordinary people's oral testimonies connects their stories to greater cultural narratives. Therefore, the future of the Barbican, alongside a more general study of heritage and life story research, could contribute to pertinent discourses of heritage and local placemaking.

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