

Quay Voices in Glasgow Museums: An Oral History of Glasgow Dock Workers

In the early months of 2009 Glasgow Museums began an oral history project about those who had earned their living working at Glasgow's docks. A total of 17 men selected as suitable for this project but in the end only 12 participated, with some becoming ill and others unavailable for interview. Although a smaller cohort was used than originally intended it did provide a representative sample of workers who had experience of most of the docks that operated along the Upper Clyde at Glasgow and its environs. Furthermore, apart from the Dockers', the group also had experience of many of the jobs undertaken such as electrician, plan maker and superintendent stevedore, plater, winch operator, checker, and crane driver. One additional respondent was interviewed who had never worked at the docks but had lived at Shiels Farm and had witnessed the opening of the still operational King George V dock in 1931. The average age of those interviewed was 72 with birth dates ranging from 1926 through to 1947. All of the interviews were conducted at the respondent's home with one exception which was conducted at the Scottish Oral History Centre based at the University of Strathclyde. In line with best practice the respondents were informed beforehand of the purpose of the interviews and documents were sent to their homes in advance of the visit and interview. These informed them formally of the aims of the study, their rights as respondents and how their testimony might be used in the future.

The interviews were semi-structured in style which allowed the respondents to talk beyond their working lives. Hence the testimonies provide evidence of the daily work and conditions in which this was undertaken but they also touch on other aspects of their lives, including family relationships, early job opportunities, and trade union activities. The respondents were not only generous in donating their memories but also in providing photographic images which help illustrate the people interviewed, the types of ships that they worked on, buildings now demolished, and tasks undertaken such as handling large steel slabs, grain, coal, or scrap iron. Although each interview was conducted separately there was some overlap in the recollections mainly due to the fact that many of the men knew each other as workmates and inevitably they were exposed to similar events in their careers. For example, most discussed the process of becoming a dock worker which usually required them to have a family connection with the dock. More often fathers vouched for sons to make sure that they were admitted to the union which in turn provided them with the necessary papers needed to jostle for work at the morning 'call.' Owen McIntyre, who began his career in the docks in 1965, witnessed this process:

Everybody amalgamated in the stance in the morning before 8 o'clock...I think it was quarter to 8...and then when the gaffer went up on the stance they all used tae jump on top o' one another and everything so that they [gaffers] would take their card....there was one guy at the dock they called him the 'friendly doo' [friendly pigeon] 'cause he was always jumping on people's shooders tae get a job

(laughter)...thank goodness I was not in this situation. I was employed by the Renfrew Stevedoring as a checker.

Specialist knowledge of the trade was also forthcoming such as that provided by a former superintendent stevedore. The man, now aged 83, wished to remain anonymous but recalled the duties that he had to undertake in great detail:

You had to draw a cargo plan up with the cargo that was loaded on to the ship. Usually you were assigned a ship to work on...sometimes you were doing two or three ships at the one time. You might have to go to Queen's Dock at the same time as loading say rope on a ship in Queen's Dock and then back to City Line in Prince's Dock. We went through the tunnel, the pedestrian tunnel, and the job of a plan maker was to follow the ship, follow the gangs, maybe have 5 different gangs working in the different hatches and the job at the end of the day was to produce a plan of where the cargo went. The foreman was in charge of 15 men and the foremen knew where to put the cargo...used to go to the lockers and see how they'd stowed the cargo. Really, at the same time as doing your job you learned stevedoring which was sometimes a bit scary when they hauled those giant Caterpillar tractors in over the bin with a bull rope...very dangerous work for the dockers.

That type of work may have had an obvious danger associated with it but a more insidious threat lay in the holds of the ships carrying jute sacks filled with asbestos fibres. A study of the Scottish asbestos industry (R. Johnston and A. McIvor, *Lethal Work*, (East Linton 2000)) has amply demonstrated that even although the dangers of handling this material were well known amongst the asbestos manufacturers this knowledge was not relayed to the workers. Thus, James McGrath, or 'Jaff' as he was more commonly known, could recall unloading asbestos sacks between the late 1940s to the 1970s thus:

...you could see all the silver particles if it was sunny. Ye didnae know that was going intae yer lung. Pint o' milk ye took. But anyway...see I never drunk nor smoked and maybe that's how I've got so long 'cause a lot of my pals are gone. But I was diagnosed I think in 1980 or just about the late...ye know, and that was it. But then there was nothing ye could dae about it ye just had tae live with it.

Indeed, 'living with it' is exactly what 'Jaff' had to do and today he waits with interest to see what political and legal decisions will be reached in connection with pleural plaques, a symptom he was diagnosed with in 1980. This, and the other interviews were digitally recorded and the data has now been added to Glasgow Museums oral history collection which is stored at Glasgow Museums Resource Centre.

The University of Strathclyde and Glasgow Museums are working together on an Arts and Humanities research Council funded project on 'The Voice in the Museums: personal oral narratives and social identities in public history (with particular reference to work and workplace cultures).' Work on transcribing the dockers' oral history material is still ongoing. It can be accessed by appointment at

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