'They're still fighting the fight on Facebook': the landscape of social media remembering the British coal industry

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by Grace Millar, Ben Curtis, Keith Gildart and Andrew Perchard

Abstract: Facebook has become a critical location for discussions of the past and part of the cultural circuit in which oral history interviews take place. Despite this, oral historians' discussion of social media has focussed on recruitment and dissemination. This article uses oral history interviews to explore Facebook remembering of the British coal industry: from groups with thousands of members to conversations between two people. Our interviewees referred to Facebook and those discussions of Facebook posts form the evidence base of this article. We show that Facebook memory practices influence how coal mining is remembered offline and use the metaphor of a landscape to demonstrate their complexity. We conclude that attention to social media's impact on cultural circuits is a matter of urgency for oral historians.

Keywords: social media; coal; mining; memory

In January 2021, the 'On Behalf of the People: Work, Community, and Class in the British Coal Industry 1947-1994' project sent out paper copies of an exhibition to interviewees. We had intended to tour an exhibit to each of the eight communities that had been case-study pits for the project, but the pandemic made such events impossible. Instead, we created an online and paper version of the exhibition. A few weeks later, a photo of the paper exhibition, quoting two women canteen workers being interviewed by Radio 1 in 1979, appeared on one of our researcher's Facebook feed. An interviewee had received a copy of the exhibition, taken a photo of it and posted it to the 'Keeping Prince of Wales Colliery & Workers' Memory Alive' Facebook group. In response, group members discussed who the women were. Some of the conversations we had hoped would take place at our events took place on Facebook instead. Even before the pandemic, Facebook was a key site for remembering the British coal industry. This article uses the metaphor of a landscape to explore the complexities of remembering coal mining on Facebook. It also argues that understanding the impact of social media on memory and the cultural circuit, within which our interviewees' memories are formed, should be an urgent project for oral historians.

The response received by the 'On Behalf of the People' team reinforced earlier indications of the importance of Facebook memory. The 'On Behalf of the People' project examined the economic, political and social history of the British coal industry from nationalisation in 1947 to privatisation in 1994. The project used eight case-study pits to explore the industry and communities around it: Annesley/Bentinck Colliery (Nottinghamshire, England, 1865-2000), Barony Colliery (Ayrshire, Scotland, 1910-1989), Bickershaw Colliery (Lancashire, England, 1830-

Prince of Wales

In 1870, John Rhodes received a lease to mine coal underneath Pontefract Park and mining at Prince of Wales Colliery began two years later. Prince of Wales changed hands to Pontefract Collieries Ltd and was then nationalised in 1947.

In 1977, a new drift mine was built at Prince of Wales. This redevelopment gave the colliery a much longer projected life. The booklet from the opening of the drift optimistically stated: "Energy Experts agreed that coal provide the 'lion's share' of Britain's energy needs to the end of this century well into the next". The colliery became a 'receiver pit' – miners whose pit had closed were transferred from as far away as Scotland and Wales. In 1995, British Coal sold Prince of Wales to RJB Mining and it was closed in 2002.

Sinking the new drift at Prince of Wales Colliery, c. 1980 (Reproduced by kind permission of West Yorkshire Archive Service, Wakefield, finding number WYW186/2/18/1/100).

Educated for and at the pit

Raymond Roberts described his schooling: "So we were educated for the pit weren't we? We were basically cannon fodder".

But once miners started work, the NCB and NUM provided free further education. He went to night school, became an apprentice welder and eventually ended up teaching mining apprentices:

"I left school with nothing, but I'd gone to the Coal Board [...] I went back to college then and joined the day release class for welding and fab[rication]. I had to do one day and one night. I were turned on to welding and fabrication. I weren't turned on to education, but one thing lead to another doesn't it?"

(Raymond Roberts, ex-miner and welding instructor, interview 22 November 2018)

An NCB image of new recruits arriving for training at Prince of Wales after nationalisation – they probably didn't look this enthusiastic when the camera wasn't on them! (COAL magazine, March 1948, p. 6, Crown Copyright)

Radio One broadcast live from Prince of Wales

On 30 March 1979, Simon Bates and John Peel broadcast a Radio One show live from the colliery. The first song they played was 'Shaft', requested by Peter Smith, an apprentice fitter.

Simon Bates interviewed two canteen workers, Betty and Margaret. Both of their husbands also worked at the pit. Betty talked about what foods were most popular down the pit: Cornish pasties, sausage rolls and bacon sandwiches. Simon Bates asked Margaret if she ever had problems with the men and she replied: "Well no, not really – we take them as they come. And they take us."

By the 1980s, computers were used to monitor the pit (NCB, Drift Opening Programme, p.8, Crown copyright)

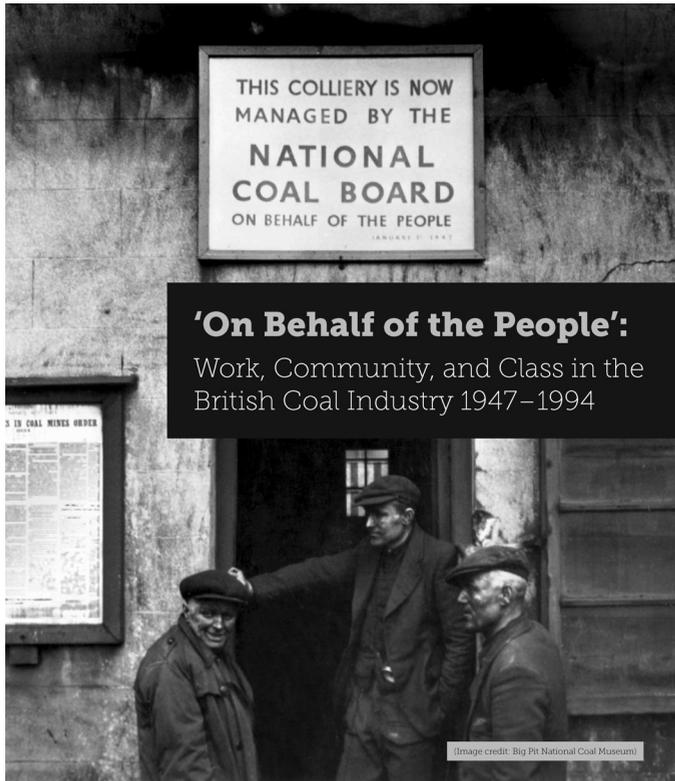Designed By: Modern Print & Design | www.modernprint.co.uk

A member of the 'On Behalf of the People' team saw a scanned image of their exhibition posted to a Prince of Wales Facebook team.

1992), Easington Colliery (Durham, England, 1899-1993), Markham Colliery (Derbyshire, England, 1882-1993), Point of Ayr Colliery (Flintshire, Wales, 1890-1996), Prince of Wales Colliery (Yorkshire, England, 1860-2002), and Tower Colliery (Cynon Valley, Wales, 1864-2008). The four researchers involved in this project examined surviving records from the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the National Coal Board (NCB) in local record offices and the National Archives, and they interviewed a wide range of people at each pit, including those who worked there and members of the wider community.

This article uses oral history research methods as a starting point for understanding the importance of Facebook to memories of the coal industry. During the project we completed ninety-seven interviews, using a semi-structured life-story method. Social media was not part of the interview schedule, but the way the coal industry had been remembered was. Towards the end of each interview, the researcher usually asked about how the interviewee remembered the coal industry now. Some interviewees brought up Facebook spontaneously and others mentioned Facebook in response to questions about how they remembered the industry. In total, twenty-three of our interviewees mentioned Facebook in their interview. No other social media sites were mentioned. We did not deliberately set out to interview people about social media, but these interviews provided rich information about Facebook and interviewees' memory.[1]

In this article, we discuss how people understand and make sense of their social media presence, rather than considering the text they create on such platforms. The decision not to analyse the sites themselves was a result of both the richness of the data we already had and the ethical and methodological challenges involved in researching the way people talk about the past on Facebook. The first high-profile academic social media ethics controversy involved Facebook.[2] Experts in the field of ethics and social media have long emphasised that just because data are accessible, it does not follow that all scholarly activity involving that data is ethical.[3] For a considerable time, the dominant position in the social sciences has been that Internet research is human subject research and that an ethical framework that relies on anonymisation, privacy and consent should be the basis of such research.[4] Scholars in other disciplines have suggested other models; humanities researchers have been advocates for treating online material as text.[5] However, historians have largely been absent from discussions of the ethics. Models developed in other disciplines are not always easily adaptable to our discipline. Any oral historian who has navigated a university ethics committee knows that oral history's ethical framework differs from other disciplines and a system based on anonymisation and privacy does not fit well with a desire to ensure that stories are archived.[6] The general question of how historians, particularly oral historians, should address the ethics of social media research needs consideration and is beyond the scope of this article. In addition, for this project we could not follow a different disciplinary ethical framework. The case-study pits of our project were named in the grant application, project website and other outputs and therefore it would have been impossible to meaningfully anonymise Facebook posts. Therefore, we focussed on the strength of the evidence we had.

In this article, we analyse the way interviewees talked about Facebook and provide context by discussing key facts about Facebook groups, such as name, number of members and specific focus of the

'On Behalf of the People':
Work, Community, and Class in the British Coal Industry 1947–1994

(Image credit: Big Pit National Coal Museum)

In January 1947, signs were erected at pits around the UK proclaiming "This colliery is now managed by the National Coal Board [NCB] on behalf of the people". The NCB was the largest publicly-owned industry in Britain and had 695,000 employees at 1,400 collieries and other facilities, previously controlled by 800 separate firms.

'On Behalf of the People' is a project which examines the economic, political and social history of the nationalised British coal industry (1947–1994). Through a study of eight collieries located in England, Scotland, and Wales, the project explores the rich and complex history of coal, mining communities, the lives of those who worked in the industry and their families.

The last deep coal mine in Britain, Kellingley, closed in December 2015. Now is an important time to study and preserve the history of the mining industry.

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This article is based on interviews from the 'On Behalf of the People Work, Community and Class in the British Coal Industry 1947-1994' project.

The project
the industry and the coalfields

The 'On Behalf of the People' project takes a new approach to the history of British coal mining between 1947 and 1994. It has used nine case-study pits to explore the industry and its communities: **Annesley/Bentinck Colliery** (Nottinghamshire, England, 1865–2000); **Barony Colliery** (Ayrshire, Scotland, 1910–1989); **Bickershaw Colliery** (Lancashire, England, 1830–1992); **Easington Colliery** (Durham, England, 1899–1993); **Markham Colliery** (Derbyshire, England, 1882–1993); **Point of Ayr Colliery** (Flintshire, Wales, 1890–1996); **Prince of Wales Colliery** (Yorkshire, England, 1860–2002); and **Tower Colliery** (Cynon Valley, Wales, 1864–2008).

The locations of the project's eight case-study collieries

Project researchers have examined a wide range of surviving records, including those of the NCB and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), in local record offices and the National Archives. They have interviewed a wide range of people who worked at these collieries and also members of the wider communities.

The project analyses the profound changes to the nature of mining work and coal communities from the 1940s through to the 1990s. The scale of the transformation was dramatic. In 1960, coal was responsible for 99% of energy produced and 70% of that consumed in the UK, while the NCB still employed 609,000 below and above ground. By privatisation, in 1994, British Coal employed 44,000 and accounted for 27% of the energy produced in the UK.

The research is organised around particular themes:

- The centrality of coal mining and the NCB to coalfield communities
- The contraction of the coal industry and its impact on employment and communities
- Changes in the nature of work and the management of the industry
- The role of the NUM in the industry and in local communities
- Life outside of work, particularly leisure, culture and sport

The project uses the lives and experiences from the eight case-study pits to explore these wider themes relating to the history of the British coal industry.

Cutting a new underground roadway, late 1970s (Crown Copyright)

Historic town of housing, Lumphinnans Colliery, Fife, 1910s (Image credit: National Coal Mining Museum Scotland)

Annesley / Bentinck

Annesley and Bentinck were collieries near Kirkby-in-Ashfield. The sinking of Annesley's shafts commenced in 1865. Bentinck began production in 1896. It was the largest Nottinghamshire colliery between 1967 and 1983. By 1981, the two pits were linked and Annesley's coal was brought to the surface at Bentinck. Most Annesley/Bentinck miners continued to work during the 1984–5 strike and afterwards the Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM) became the dominant union. In 1988 the collieries merged and became known as Annesley-Bentinck. Annesley-Bentinck continued production after the privatisation of the industry in 1994, before closing in January 2000.

Annesley Colliery, February 1994 (Image credit: Nick Haslam)

Workplace conditions

Working conditions varied tremendously between pits – and sometimes even within a single colliery:

"The Black Shale Seam at Bentinck was red hot. In the return gates, because of all the heat from all the machinery, it were 28°. I can remember men having to wring their underwear out because they'd sweat that much. And when we moved from the Black Shale into the Waterloo Seam, if you stood still there for more than ten minutes you used to freeze. I mean, down Waterloo at Bentinck they used to have a place they called the North Pole."

(Steve Parr, ex-miner, interview 11 February 2019)

A scene from the picket line, Bentinck Colliery, summer 1984 (Image credit: Bruce Wilson)

Community tensions during the 1984–5 strike

Daily life within Nottinghamshire mining communities was significantly affected by tensions arising from the 1984–5 strike. As one Bentinck miner recalled,

"I got married in the middle of the strike. My brother, who was on strike, was my best man, before we fell out. And because we were working miners, the room was split in two. Because my brother were on strike and they said that end of the room, and we sat this end of the room and never the twain shall meet, shall we say'. It was an extraordinary wedding, it really was."

(Anonymised ex-miner, interview February 2019)

Integration of collieries

The integration of previously separate collieries could have a major impact on miners' daily experiences of work. An Annesley miner commented:

"One of the massive changes was when Annesley and Bentinck joined up. We'd assimilated a lot of other people from Derbyshire and places like that, amongst ourselves. But when the Bentinck men came they were like an entity on their own. Sort of '80 to '82ish, something like that. And then you were like a stranger at your own pit, because now you were going into working with all these Bentinck men."

(Terry Allen, ex-miner, interview 18 February 2019)

Officials on the last British Coal shift at Annesley-Bentinck Colliery, February 1994 (Image credit: Nick Haslam)

Keith Gildart, Andrew Perchard, Ben Curtis, Grace Millar, 'On Behalf of the People: Work, Community and Class in the British Coal Industry 1947-1994', Exhibition, Electronic Version, 2020.

group's page, although we have not studied the groups themselves. Our focus is on understanding the role of Facebook in the cultural circuit of the British coal industry and therefore exploring its importance for oral historians. Our research is specific to the cohort we interviewed: people who were part of coal-mining communities during the time that the industry was nationalised. The youngest of our interviewees were born in the 1960s and the eldest born in the 1920s. There are many participants in Facebook discussions of the British coal industry whom we would not have interviewed as part of this project. For example, Facebook posts about the experiences of fathers and other relatives are reasonably common. Our research does not attempt to capture the perspective of all participants in Facebook discussions about the British coal industry, but explores the way the cohort we interviewed talked about their experience.

Social media, oral history and other disciplines

Few will be surprised that Alastair Thomson, who has been at the forefront of so many developments in the field, made the first reference to Facebook in an oral history journal.[7] In 2007, *Oral History Review* published Ron Grele's commentary on Thomson's 'Four paradigm transformations in oral history' and Thomson's response.[8] Both authors discussed the possibilities offered by new forms of communication. Grele took a more sceptical approach, emphasising undemocratic practices and inequality. Thomson acknowledged Grele's argument, but emphasised the importance of understanding agency within these frameworks: 'And through this dizzying evolution of new forms of digital communication, individuals and groups all over the world are constantly evolving novel ways of communicating with each other and telling their stories on YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Second Life, and so on.'[9] We are increasingly living with, and having our lives shaped by, the contradictions that both Grele and Thomson grappled with in this discussion, and it was a fitting introduction for Facebook into the annals of academic debate on the methods of oral history.

Thomson outlined the impacts he imagined digital technologies would have on oral historians' work: 'I do think that the medium is part of the message, and that digital technologies are transforming so many aspects of our work as oral historians – and indeed the ways in which people remember and narrate their lives – that they will, over time, also change the way we think about memory and personal narrative, about telling and collecting life stories, and about sharing memories and making histories'.[10] This is prescient, yet oral historians have paid far more attention to the changes social media has made to our work than to its impact on the way people remember and narrate their lives. Discussions of social media and recruitment and dissemination recur in oral history literature. It is now common for reports on current projects within *Oral History* to mention a Facebook page or other social media site.[11]

In 2019, Daniel Warner stated as an aside: 'Following a growing trend in oral history research, more than half of the interviewees were found through a local history group on Facebook (whereas the remainder were approached via more traditional means of snowballing and established contacts)'.[12] Warner's comment, alongside the research notices in *Oral History*, demonstrate that oral historians now use Facebook as a recruitment tool as a matter of routine. Historians have also explored the ways in which the Internet and social media can change the way oral testimonies are used. There is a rich body of work considering the complex issues around digitised oral history and dissemination of both interviews and other research forms on the Internet.[13] This article does not intend to enter that fascinating discussion, but to highlight a noted absence. So far oral historians' discussion of Internet technologies and platforms has focussed on ourselves and how it might change our work. There has not been similar consideration of how interviewees' understanding and engagement with the past might be affected by their social media participation.

A central question for oral historians is: how does digital technology and the social and cultural practices that have developed around it impact on the cultural circuit that interviewees exist in and frame their discussions of the past? The term cultural circuit has its origins in oral historians' long-standing interest in cultures of memory. In the 1980s, the Birmingham Popular Memory Group developed a model of a cultural circuit of ideas where larger cultural discussions of the past could both be shaped by people's memories and shape those memories.[14] Oral historians have discussed and debated these models ever since. Penny Summerfield focussed on the influence that wider cultural scripts, often called public memory, had on how individuals felt able to narrate their past.[15] Partially in response to this approach, Anna Green challenged the emphasis on public influence on individuals' memories, and argued that we should recognise an individual's capacity to remember.[16] These debates are an important starting point for understanding the impact of social media on the cultural circuits of memory.

Important contributions to understanding social dynamics of memory have come from oral historians who have completed group interviews. Graham Smith used the term transactive memory to describe the memory processes he observed among a group of older Dundee women who met regularly in the 1990s and recorded some of their meetings.[17] He discussed the complex social dynamics involved when the group both reinforced and dissented from each other's memories. Bethan Coupland analysed a group interview of former miners at Big Pit Coal Mining Museum and demonstrated that groups can and do create social memories together. Group interviews are not the only way of understanding the social dynamics of memory. Grace Millar has also argued that some of these dynamics can be heard in individual interviews when people discuss

other times they have remembered their experiences.[18] Each of these authors studied examples of social dynamics of memory developed through long-term relationships of people who had shared the same physical space for extended periods of time. The differences between social media and other forms of social interaction present challenges when relating existing literature to new circumstances.

Oral historians do not have to start from scratch; other disciplines have been examining the effect of social media on people's understanding of the past. Within heritage studies there has been considerable discussion of the impact of social media on museums' work and of social media as a source of knowledge about people's understanding of the past.[19] The growing literature discussing the memory culture of individual Facebook groups, or types of Facebook group, has particular relevance. An early example was Jenny Gregory's 2015 article that examined a group dedicated to posting photos of buildings from Perth, Australia, that were no longer there. Gregory argued that the group created an emotional community that increased its members' engagement with the past.[20] Academics who have looked at Facebook groups that discuss the past have observed, in very different contexts, nostalgia and feelings that the past has been lost.[21] Robin Ekelund examined five Swedish-language history groups and emphasised the importance of nostalgia in their emotional landscape.[22] He argued that there was minimal conflict within these groups as they presented the past as a place of escape, but that this consensus about the past was created by emphasising the differences between the past and the present.[23] This analysis is echoed by Richard McDonald's study of two Facebook groups that were based around sharing photos of Salford. He found two distinct types of memory: the first was specific autobiographical stories and the second was universalising statements of how things used to be which created a 'we' of people who remembered those times and a 'they' of younger people. He links these types of discussion to the destabilising impact of de-industrialisation on working-class neighbourhoods.[24] The work of researchers who have examined nostalgia within Facebook groups engaging with the past provides a useful starting point to understanding the cultural circuits of social media.

Facebook groups whose purpose is to discuss the past provide a way into understanding memory practices on social media, but they are only one small part of the landscape. Fewer scholars have examined memory practices on Facebook outside of groups, but two metaphors are particularly helpful. Lisa Silvestri used the metaphor of a cairn while exploring how memory of the war on Afghanistan has been impacted by social media, referencing the practice of hikers to add a stone to mark a particular point on a trail to make piles of stones (cairns). Silvestri compares Facebook statuses to cairns: when many different people leave a mark in a similar place, it becomes a collective project, even if the people leaving marks never see each other or interact.[25] Ori Schwarz explores the decontextualisation that is central to algorithmic social media. On Facebook, posts are removed from their original context and shown to readers in a personal feed where a wide variety of content sits side by side. Schwarz argued that digitised objects of the past can appear through algorithms in ways that are unpredictable to the user. He suggested using the metaphor of neighbours to understand the way opportunities and experiences are shaped by the locales in which people live.[26] The importance of metaphors in these scholars' work conveys the difficulty of making sense of algorithmic social media and the cultural practices that have developed within and around it.

This article examines Facebook's place in the cultural circuit of memories of the British mining industry from three different angles. The first section discusses the creation of a broad digital miner identity, particularly within Facebook groups. Mining Facebook groups have much in common with the groups other academics have examined in that they discuss a past that participants feel has been lost. The second section focusses on more intimate memory cultures among two people or small social groups. How do the social dynamics of memory online compare to those captured by Smith and Coupland in group interviews? The third section looks at the impact of Facebook discussion on the wider memory culture around the British mining industry and the ways that online and offline memory cultures are already deeply intertwined. Each of these three perspectives adds to existing literature and give a sense of the complexity of the digital cultural circuit.

'Once a miner always a miner': creating a digital miner identity in the absence of mines

Brian Baldwin left mining at Point of Ayr colliery in north Wales when he was forty-three and then worked for many years first in a factory and then at a landfill site. He did not have the same interest in connecting with people in these other industries and was of the view that coal mining and the pit at which he worked were different from his other employment experiences. The interviewer asked about reunions and why people came to reunions, even after they had had a longer working life outside of the mines. Baldwin replied by talking about Facebook: 'Yeah, they're the ones, yeah […] you look on the Facebook now and I've got lots of sites, Facebook sites, where people write in, and we all say the same thing, "once a miner always a miner"'.[27] For Baldwin, decades after he had stopped working in a mine, Facebook played a role in constructing a mining identity. This articulation of the 'archetypal proletarian' myth is no doubt reinforced by the broader cultural presentation of coal as an industry that now belongs to another age. Miners were acutely aware that, as the industry had effectively disappeared, miners themselves were also being erased from the historical record. Such sentiment was a key driver for creating Facebook groups and hosting reunions of former miners across the coalfields.

Interviewees drew connections between being a miner on Facebook and other, older forms of mining community building. Baldwin made an implicit connection between remembering mining on Facebook and in personal memory culture by discussing Facebook when asked about reunions. Baldwin was not alone in linking the strength of mining Facebook groups with a wider memory culture. Cliff Unsworth, a former miner at Bickershaw Colliery in Lancashire, drew comparisons between his experience in nationwide Facebook groups and meeting miners in other contexts. In his interview, he described going on coach tours and meeting former miners from other coalfields. After talking about meeting miners from other places on coach tours, Unsworth immediately transitioned to talking about his experiences on nationwide mining Facebook groups.[28] Both Unsworth and Baldwin implicitly compared their experience on Facebook groups to a wider memory culture around mining that existed in physical spaces such as bus tours and reunions. They connected the strong online memory culture around mining with wider cultural practices in which former miners remained embedded, such as meeting in pubs, clubs and on vacation in the coastal resorts of Lancashire and Yorkshire.

Unsworth and Baldwin referred to national Facebook groups with thousands of members. The largest is Coal Mining Memories UK, which had over 15,000 members in November 2021.[29] There are other national groups with thousands of members: The Pits (over 5,500) and The Miners' Strike 1984-85: 'They Threw the Gauntlet Down, We Picked It Up' (over 3,000).[30] These groups have their own cultures and practices. The largest group can see over a dozen posts a day, with the most popular posts having over a hundred comments. By their size, these national groups are bringing together former miners from a variety of different coalfields and experiences. They all also have many members who were not miners: members of mining communities, people who were children in mining communities and those who are interested in mining heritage. Collectively the members of these groups are creating a digital mining identity that builds on and has much in common with existing mining identities.

Another form of continuity is that the digital mining identities being created in these groups are shaped by the traumatic and rapid closure of the British mining industry and particularly the 1984-1985 national miners' strike. Interviewees sometimes mentioned recent discussions on Facebook to show that those events are still deeply felt. Cliff Unsworth noted how alive and recent the emotions of the strike were: 'Even today. I mean I'm on Facebook pages where, you know, miners, I can't remember what it's called, 'pits and mines' or something or other. […] And anything, any mention of Thatcher and it's just…'.[31] Mick Coombes, a former Bickershaw miner, was asked about how Margaret Thatcher as prime minister and the strike had affected his politics and he replied:

Don't, don't, you don't, don't bring that name in here. I won't even drink that cider me with that name on. Hate the woman.

He followed this up by describing a recent discussion about Facebook:

But it was funny weren't it, because like there was a big, on Facebook the other week, about this bloody statue [of Thatcher]. And I was thinking, well we'll take bets for to see how long it is before it's defaced. And then one once had this capture of all these pigeons waiting, you know what I mean like? I said, 'oh that's mine, that's me'.[32]

Coombes was not the only interviewee to mention that statue, and Facebook discussions of the strike. John and Sue Walton, a couple from the Derbyshire coalfield, were asked if they talked much about the industry now. They replied:

John Walton: Well, if something comes on the television say, you know, and like if it shows you Orgreave or anything like that.

Sue Walton: Or that statue of Maggie Thatcher that they do.

John Walton: And I'm still involved through Facebook and things like that, on different mining support groups, Orgreave veterans and things like that.

Grace Millar: Yeah, which groups are you involved in?

John Walton: Oh I can't remember. Orgreave. Different ones. And I do put comments and political comments on there.[33]

Interviewees showed how deeply felt and decades-old emotions around Thatcher and the strike were continuing within Facebook groups.

Unsworth, Walton and Coombes all regard hatred for Thatcher as a universal and consensual approach within mining communities, both in person and online. However, the landscape of Facebook remembering was not as simple as they presented it. While those who were on strike throughout the dispute present their position as the united solidarity of mining communities, the reality was that a significant minority of miners worked in four of the eight pits that formed part of our study (and a majority of miners in two of them). Peter Field, who was from Nottinghamshire and had worked during the strike, articulated a very different dynamic when he discussed the way the strike was remembered on Facebook. He mentioned that some miners decided to return after several weeks or months on strike. He then said: 'Yeah, but even though they went back to work they're still fighting the fight on Facebook, you know?'[34] Like Unsworth, Field acknowledged how potent discussions of the strike are on social media, but

he also suggested that people were not representing themselves honestly. Facebook groups are sites for disputing the role of the 1984-1985 strike in mining identity. Some groups formally exclude those who worked through the strike while others exclude mention of the strike itself. The battle of 1984-1985 is still being fought through social media.

Large-scale national mining groups on Facebook are now the site of a lot of the work of constructing an image of who miners were and what a mining community was. In the landscape of Facebook remembering, large-scale national groups and the ideas promulgated within them can be compared to landmarks such as mountains and rivers as they are such significant sites of discussion. The appeal of the phrase 'once a miner always a miner' shows how mining is being remembered in the absence of mines. When interviewees mentioned national mining groups on Facebook, they tended to be referring to a universalising image of what a miner was and how they remain as emblems of both a real and imagined past. However, some discussions reveal a paradox in the way mining is remembered. Although interviewees talked about mining as if there was a common image of what a miner was, their comments, and the range of Facebook groups themselves demonstrates, that the image of a British miner is contested as well as created in Facebook groups. The parallel creation and contestation of a universalised mining experience is most obvious when it comes to the 1984-1985 strike. The range of different policies mining groups have towards the strike shows that there is no consensus about the recent past, even though the hatred of Thatcher is often talked about as a universally shared feeling.

Both the creation and contestation of a mining identity on Facebook builds on earlier construction of mining identities, pre- and post-closure. Our interviews show that there is significant continuity between previous construction of mining identity and digital mining identities constructed on Facebook. Learning about interviewees' Facebook use from their interviews draws out the continuity between activity on Facebook and other discussions of the past. These discussions connect with the nostalgia other researchers have identified in Facebook groups about the past. 'Once a miner always a miner' is a nostalgic statement, particularly when there are no longer any working mines, but within the context of the interviews the discussions on Facebook did not seem particularly nostalgic. The interviews discussed an industry that had provided an economic basis for community life that no longer existed. The threads of continuity make it difficult to identify the impact that Facebook conversations may be having on people's memories. However, as has been shown in other areas of life, from politics to vaccination, having the same conversations using new information technology changes the impact of those conversations. In national mining Facebook groups, former miners are creating and contesting their identity on a much larger scale than would have been possible before Facebook. Understanding the impact of these large-scale conversations is a much wider project than attempted in this article and will have to go beyond oral history interviews with former miners.

'In touch on Facebook': memory relationships in new formats

The first section of this article considered the construction and contestation of a mining identity on Facebook, but this was only one of many types of Facebook remembering that our interviewees described. While a few interviewees mentioned national Facebook groups, more discussed interactions on Facebook with people they already knew. Within the landscape of the British coal industry on Facebook, these conversations can be understood as much smaller, local features, more akin to a tree or a corner as opposed to a river or a mountain. Our interviews showed that Facebook had become a key site where interviewees kept in touch with people they knew from their past. Interviewees often mentioned Facebook, in an offhand way, as a method of communicating with former colleagues. Ivan Green said that Facebook was the way he was most likely to have contact with ex-miners.[35] Ian Isaac discussed attending former miners' funerals as a way of keeping in contact with people and then said, 'Yeah, so, you know, I keep in touch with, I mean Facebook today keeps you in touch doesn't it?'[36] In north Wales, John Wiltshire acted as a conduit between deceased miners' families and former workmates in posting funeral times and attending all funerals. He would then post Orders of Service on Facebook, which in turn attracted messages of sympathy. Such messages were often be followed by personal reminiscences and photographs.[37]

Margaret Glover, the wife of a Scottish miner, talked about other people she knew and offered to put the interviewer in touch with them via Facebook: 'Well I'm friends with Ann Greer on Facebook, so I mean if you want I could send her a wee message and say to her what you're doing and if she would like to get in touch with you?'[38] Victor Jolley, a Bickershaw miner, described John Churnside as a co-worker who was particularly funny, and said that the interviewer could find John Churnside on Facebook.[39] Even those who were not on Facebook referred to it. Jenny Williams worked in the Tower canteen. When she discussed keeping in touch with co-workers after the 2008 closure, she said, 'The other girls haven't kept in touch, but I have kept in touch with them as regards, I'm not on Facebook or anything like that, I don't do anything like that, but I go to the meetings, shareholders meetings, and I meet them there'.[40] Tower was unique, because after the mine was closed in 1994 the workers bought it out, hence the reference to shareholder meetings. These examples show two things: how normalised Facebook had become for many interviewees as a way of communicating with people from their past, and how central relationships were to the way people thought about Facebook.

Interviewees often tried to make sense of Facebook in terms of pre-existing social interaction. Terry Allen worked at Annesley Colliery in Nottinghamshire. When asked if he was still in contact with men he had worked with, he replied:

Terry Allen: Yeah, yeah. I wouldn't say [chuckles], funnily enough Facebook, you know, you'll see somebody you haven't seen, you know, I haven't been in touch with for thirty-five year who worked at Annesley. He's on Facebook, all of a sudden you're chatting to him, you know?

Ben Curtis: So it's been, that's quite a useful way of kind of keeping in touch with other, you know, former workmates?

Terry Allen: Yeah. I mean I ain't got his telephone number, I don't see him. He lives Ilkestone way you see. He always lived over there. He were one of them that come from that side of the brook. So I'm never going to bump into him, but I bump into him on Facebook, you know?[41]

Allen described the way that Facebook brought him in contact with people who he would not normally see. He emphasised the difference between other forms of communication and Facebook when he mentioned that he did not see this person. At the same time the language he was using, such as 'bumping into', suggested a parallel between online and offline socialising. Facebook collapsed a distance of twelve miles, which neither party had any reason to travel since the mines closed. Ivan Green made a similar implicit comparison by bringing up Facebook when asked about attending reunions: 'I sometimes go to the one that John Wiltshire has. Facebook is the main point of contact now for ex-miners. And a lot of them are getting too old really'.[42] When discussing reunions, Ivan Green switched subjects to Facebook and back, showing the associations he made between the two. Interviewees mentioned the differences between Facebook and other forms of remembering about the coal industry, but did so in a way that also demonstrated that they connected the two.

Local Facebook groups are a key site where miners may 'bump into each other'. These groups can have multiple purposes: for example, the Point of Ayr Miners Memories group is a forum for heritage activists, the promotion of reunions and notifying members of recent deaths of former work colleagues. There can also be multiple sites of Facebook memory for a single pit. For example, one of our case-study pits was Markham Colliery in Derbyshire, which currently has a very active after-life on Facebook. There is a group called 'Markham Colliery' with over 900 members and regular posts.[43] There is also a Facebook group specifically for the 'Walking Together' memorial project, a public art display that is slowly being built to commemorate those who died in Markham's three mining disasters.[44] This group is less active, but still has several hundred members. As well as the pit-specific Facebook groups, there are also regional groups: Derbyshire Collieries has 2,000 members.[45] In addition to these groups, the space within Facebook that interviewees mentioned most was a page called 'Faces of Markham Colliery', which is run by a former miner and includes photographs of miners from Markham.[46] Glynn Power, a Markham miner, talked with some regret about not seeing his former workmates more often:

It's strange because you used to see people every single day. They were part of your life, a big part. There were some good mates. And now, that day you left, you never saw them hardly again.

He did not have a Facebook account, but he mentioned visiting the 'Faces of Markham Colliery' page: 'And then I go on Markham site and so-and-so's died and so-and-so this'.[47] David Watson also mentioned the 'Faces of Markham Colliery website' and mentioned how much he appreciated the ability to be in contact with people on the site: 'I wished I'd had that during, in the past like but it's excellent, Facebook, because you can just meet up with friends who you haven't seen for years'.[48] Pre-existing personal relationships were central to what people valued about local Facebook groups and were key to coal remembering practices on Facebook more broadly.

Several interviewees described specific conversations that they had had on Facebook. These descriptions were multi-layered; the interviewee told the interviewer the story, mentioned times that they had talked with other community members about that story, and mentioned repeating the in-person conversations on Facebook. Steve Parr described an appearance on the television programme Bullseye, which his workmates would not let him forget:

Steve Parr: I mean like one of the stories, when I went on *Bullseye*, we didn't come first, we come second, but we went for the star prize, 101 in six darts. Lad here went for treble twenty and missed, hit seven with my three darts, five, one and one. And when I went down the pit the next day every powered support they'd wrote the figure seven on [I chuckles], every single one. And I got it for three month after that. Oh they wouldn't leave me alone.

Ben Curtis: Oh dear.

Steve Parr: In fact somebody's put a picture of it on Facebook not so long ago, a picture of me sat with three others. Because I were the question man and *my mate were the dart player.*

Ben Curtis: Right.

Steve Parr: It were interesting. We ended up winning the bus fare home, a fiver, because it were filmed in Nottingham.

Ben Curtis: Right, right.

Steve Parr: We got a fiver. We lost three hundred and thirty-four quid and ended up with a fiver.[49]

Parr had a vivid memory of his performance on *Bullseye*: the darts score he hit, the money he lost and won, and the location of the filming. In his interview he told the story of *Bullseye* and also the layers of remembering of the incident which had happened since. He described both the initial reaction back at work and then the reproduction of that workplace dynamic on Facebook.

Heather Wood was heavily involved in the women's support group in Easington and her mother, Myrtle McPherson, ran the kitchen. While discussing her mother's experience of cooking for a large number of people, Heather Wood mentioned one recent Facebook interaction:

Brenda Moorland I always remember. She said 'Myrtle make the treacle tart'. She always calls my mum a little treacle tart lady, even to this day. Just a few weeks ago on Facebook she said 'how's my little treacle tart lady?'[50]

Brenda Moorland's memory of Myrtle McPherson was tied to her work during the strike, and Heather Wood and Brenda Moorland continued the memory conversations that they had had in person on Facebook.

In his interview, Garry Foreman described his time as part of the Mines Rescue Service, which involved competitions as well as responding to serious incidents.

That were a good, us practices, we used to have a little motto, and I am in touch on Facebook with one of my old superintendents. Because he got back in touch with me after all these, you know, after years and stuff and he sent on my email. And 'do you remember our old motto for the Prince of Wales team? We're not right good rescue men but we're good'. And he says 'nah', he says, 'you were alright were you lads', he says, 'you never ever let anybody down'. Which, again it's, you're a big family team, you know?[51]

In each of these examples, the interviewee described a particular phrase or event that had been much repeated among a group of people who shared an experience. Steve Parr's workmates talked about his appearance on *Bullseye*, Brenda Moorland described Myrtle McPherson as the little treacle tart lady, Garry Foreman's team described themselves as being better company than rescue men. Each of these events had happened over and over again in person and then that

conversation moved to Facebook because the people involved started communicating on that platform. These examples demonstrate that pre-existing relationships are a key part of coal-mining memories and that there is significant continuity between memory relationships which had existed in person and discussions that were now happening on Facebook.

The interviewees who mentioned interacting on Facebook with someone they had a relationship with, talked about Facebook in generic terms. This memory practice seems to have a lot in common with what Coupland and Smith observed in group interviews. The interviewees are focussed on the person they are interacting with and do not differentiate between different forms of Facebook interaction. Brenda Moorland and Heather Wood could have been talking privately on a Facebook chat or on a Facebook post, and that post could have been posted by an individual, a page or to a Facebook group. Steve Parr indicated that the darts photo was posted publicly, but it could have been posted on an individual's page or a page for a local group. In each of these stories, quite a lot of detail was provided about both the original event, and the recounting of it, but the form in which that discussion took place on Facebook was not mentioned and was not important. The original location at which material was posted on a social media site is often unimportant to those who engage with it. This characteristic is a feature of social media design, where material is often decontextualised from its original post and brought together by an algorithm. Our interviewees talked as if Facebook was a single location, because that was how they experienced it. All parts of the cultural circuit are happening simultaneously on the same social media site and look the same to interviewees. Oral historians face the challenge of understanding the impact that a decontextualised, algorithm-driven stream of material has on interviewees' understanding of the past and the way it brings together large-scale discussions and more intimate conversations.

'It started with four of us': Facebook remembering offline

Further complicating the landscape of social media remembering, some of our interviewees described how conversations on Facebook had influenced other forms of memorialisation. As noted above, many mines and mining communities have regular reunions. Reunions are a quintessential form of remembering mining: a group of miners in a Miners' Welfare talking about their past or a group of workmates sharing a table in a pub frequented by ex-miners. Such reunions are now often advertised, documented and framed by social media. The mining reunions that happen in Leigh, the site of our case-study pit Bickershaw, were started as the result of contact on Facebook. Neal Rigby, a colliery deputy, replied to a question about those reunions by explaining, 'Me and Stewart were in touch on Facebook, and Mick McLaughlin, another one of

Facebook became a key part of the Markham Colliery memorial as funds gathered were used to complete it. Photo: Grace Millar, 'Walking Together Memorial', 2017.

the deputies, and we decided we'd go for a pint. And it started with four of us in Wigan and built up to what you saw that day when it – about twenty odd of us'.[52] Three ex-miners were in touch on Facebook and decided to meet and this became a much wider event. While many miners' reunions predate social media, even those tend to have at least some presence on Facebook. Miners' reunions are advertised in local Facebook groups and some even have Facebook groups themselves. The availability of information about reunions on social media makes knowledge about the events accessible to a different group of people. Who attends miners' reunions in the 2020s, and even in some cases the existence of these reunions, has been and will be facilitated by Facebook.

Public memory and memorialisation of the mining industry has also been influenced by discussion on Facebook. David Watson, who worked at Whitwell Colliery, described conversations that had happened on the Facebook group for that colliery. There were

plans to turn the former pit site into a housing estate, and a local councillor, who was a member of the group, asked about potential names of streets: 'And they wanted to name the streets after the pit. You know, like different areas of where Whitwell pit used to be'.[53] The development has been approved, and discussions on Facebook will influence the way that Whitwell pit is represented in the landscape. However, the role that Facebook discussion played in influencing the naming of the streets will not be apparent to those who read the street names as a public record of the area's mining history.

The Markham memorial 'Walking Together' is an example of the multi-faceted relationship between Facebook remembering and other forms of memorialisation. This memorial marks the 103 men who died in the three largest mining disasters at Markham with a life-sized sculpture of a stylised human figure along a trail from the village of Duckmanton to the former mouth of the pit. The project started in 2013 and the

final group of thirteen figures was installed in October 2022. The individual figures have been sponsored by local businesses, individual people and groups of family members. New figures were unveiled in clusters as they were funded, and these events were attended by scores of people.[54] The online presence of the project has grown in the years since it began, and includes mention on a large-scale heritage project website called Story Mine[55] and a Facebook group where updates are shared and the history of Markham is discussed.[56] This trend towards greater online presence was only exacerbated by Covid-19, when the large-scale figure unveilings were replaced by socially distanced unveilings in person with a video of the event made available to those who could not attend.[57] In addition, in order to fund the last figures, the project turned to crowdfunding.[58] Rather than seek one large donor for each figure, the group asked for small donations to meet the costs. In this case, the speed with which the memorial was able to be completed depended on the way those

involved have navigated Facebook and built support online for their project.

The metaphor of a cultural circuit is an important one: culture does not stay in one place. The discussions on Facebook about mining are influencing memorials, street names and social events. If a future interviewee talks about the Markham memorial, the street names in Whitwell or a Bickershaw reunion, they may not even know of the role that social media played in the memory culture in which they are participating. The landscape of remembering the mining industry on Facebook is not closed off from other forms of remembering; they are intertwined. Therefore, oral historians have no choice but to face the substantial challenges of understanding how social media is impacting the cultural circuits in which our interviewees remember.

Conclusion

This article has used oral history interviews to show that Facebook has become a crucial site of remembering the British coal industry. In an industry that has been the scene of particularly fraught episodes of industrial conflict and division, Facebook is now part of a broader landscape of remembering where old scores are still being settled and opposing versions of coalfield history are being created, curated, celebrated and critiqued. Facebook remembering does not stay confined to Facebook: social sites of remembering, such as reunions, and public sites of remembering, such as memorials, are all influenced by discussions on Facebook. Understanding any aspect of memory and coalfield communities will increasingly require understanding the context, the politics and memory dynamics of Facebook discussions. While the level of remembering on Facebook related to the British coalmining industry is certainly highly developed and complex, the purpose of this case study is to demonstrate the wider implications for all oral historians.

Using oral history as sources, rather than social media sites themselves, has been productive. As well as demonstrating the importance of social media remembering practices, our methodology has allowed us to draw attention to some important aspects of how participants understand social media. Interviewees often talked about Facebook as a whole, not distinguishing between different groups or types of posts. This observation brings context to existing literature that has examined the cultural practices of particular groups; participants will not necessarily see or understand posts in the context in which they were made. Much can be revealed by studying individual groups, just as much can be revealed by studying a river, but these features also need to be understood in much wider contexts.

Algorithm-driven decontextualisation is a key feature of social media, and is one that creates particular challenges for oral historians trying to understand the cultural circuits in which our interviews take place. While oral historians have debated terminology, much work has rested on the idea that there are mass public

representations of the past to which both interviewers and interviewees have access. Historians who have studied the impact of more intimate relationships on memory have understood this as something separate to mass public representations. None of these assumptions are true of discussions of the past on social media, or at least not in the same way. Social media breaks down distinctions between public and private communication, and representations of the past can be seen by large numbers of people but not be accessible to researchers. This article could not, and has not attempted to, resolve questions about social media and the cultural circuits of memory, but it aims to draw oral historians' attention to the extent to which social media disrupts the assumptions on which our existing models are based.

We used the metaphor of a landscape in this article deliberately, following in the footsteps of other scholars in our use of geographical and spatial metaphors. We aimed to communicate how complex and ultimately uncapturable social media remembering is. Perhaps the most important point about any one person's engagement with the past on social media is how much of it will be unknowable to those interviewing them or listening to their oral history. We also cannot know what a landscape looks like from where someone else is standing. Neither a painting nor a map can fully represent the land they depict. This article used the methodological tools most familiar to oral historians but, if we are going to understand the complexities of landscapes of social media remembering, we will need many different approaches and frameworks of analysis. In order to understand the memory landscape we are working in, we will need to further develop both our methodology and our metaphor.

NOTES
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4. Elizabeth Buchanan and Michael Zimmer, 'Internet research ethics', in Edward Zalt (ed) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2018. Accessed online at https://plato. stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/ ethics-internet-research, 16 November 2021.
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7. Alistair Thomson, 'Four paradigm transformations in oral history', *Oral History Review*, vol 34, no 1, 2007a, pp 49-70.
8. Ron Grele, 'Commentary on Alistair Thomson's essay, "Four paradigm transformations in oral history"', *Oral History Review*, vol 34, no 2, 2007, pp 121-23; Alistair Thomson, 'Response to commentary', *Oral History Review*, vol 34, no 2, 2007b, pp 125-28.
9. Thomson, 2007b, p 127.
10. Alistair Thomson, 2007a, p 70.
11. See, for example, 'The Australian Generations Project' in 'International Work', *Oral History*, vol 40, no 2, 2012, pp 33-34.
12. Daniel Warner, 'When two tribes go to war: Orange parades, religious identity and urban space in Liverpool, 1965-1985', *Oral History*, vol 47, no 2, 2019, p 32.
13. See, for example, Douglas Boyd, and Mary Larson, *Oral History and Digital Humanities: Voice, Access, and Engagement*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; Michael Frisch, 'Oral history and the digital revolution', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, second edition, London: Routledge, 2006, pp 102-14; Steven High, 'Telling stories: a reflection on oral history and new

media', *Oral History*, vol 38, no 1, 2010, pp 101-12.
14. The Popular Memory Group, 'Popular memory: theory, politics, method', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp 75-86; Graham Dawson, Soldier *Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinitie*s, London: Routledge, 2013.
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17. Graham Smith, 'Beyond individual/collective memory: women's transactive memories of food, family and conflict', *Oral History,* vol 35, no 2, 2007, pp 77-90.
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31. Interview with Cliff Unsworth; recorded by Keith Gildart, 6 March 2019.

32. Interview with Mick Coombes; recorded by Keith Gildart, 16 February 2019.

33. Interview with John and Sue Walton; recorded by Grace Millar, 7 March 2019.

34. Interview with Peter Field; recorded by Ben Curtis, 9 April 2019.

35. Interview with Ivan Green; recorded by Keith Gildart, 2 March 2020.

36. Interview with Ian Isaac; recorded by Ben Curtis, 8 April 2019.

37. Interview with John Wiltshire; recorded by Keith Gildart, 10 February 2018.

38. Interview with Margaret Glover; recorded by Andrew Perchard, 26 March 2019.

39. Interview with Victor Jolley; recorded by Keith Gildart, 6 December 2018.

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49. Interview with Steve Parr; recorded by Ben Curtis, 11 February 2019.

50. Interview with Heather Wood; recorded by Grace Millar, 7 February 2019.

51. Interview with Garry Foreman; recorded by Grace Millar, 10 November 2018.

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