

# 14 LOOKING FOR BOLTON IN THE WORKTOWN ARCHIVE

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In late September 1937 Humphrey Spender returned from photographing a church harvest festival service to Mass Observation's headquarters at 85 Davenport Street in Bolton, Lancashire. He stopped at the junction of Davenport Street and Snowden Street and took two photographs of children playing outside Union Mill. The first photograph showed best friends Bob Harwood and Billy Doeg, playing with two other boys (Figure 14.1).

The exposure was made in a split second, but 75 years later an indexical connection between place and image remains inscribed on the negative. This chapter traces the material performances of this image as it has travelled from, and returned to, the place where it was taken. It is informed by a project undertaken in collaboration with, and facilitated by, Bolton Museum, where the negative is now held in the Worktown Archive since its acquisition in 1994.<sup>1</sup> The research project used photographic methods to document Spender's photographs of Bolton by dating and locating them in the contemporary landscape of the town.

At one level this is the history of a photograph but, as Langford has observed, any 'close reading of a photograph is like a stone dropped in a pond, with its ever expanding inclusions, occlusions, and allusions' (2001: 4). The image of Bob and Billy has neither a singular meaning nor form: photographic meaning proliferates through reproductions and shifts with context. Writing shortly before Spender took the photograph, Walter Benjamin observed that the process of reproduction 'substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced' (1936: 215). The history of this photograph is constituted through the reactivation of multiple instances of the image: unique negative, book reproduction, photocopy, digital file, inkjet print, and archival silver gelatin print. Each material performance of the image has accrued meaning from the context of its reactivation, while still referring back to the unique negative and the corner of Davenport Street where it was taken. As Edwards and Hart have



**FIGURE 14.1** Children play street games on Davenport Street, Bolton. Copyright Bolton Council.

observed ‘photographs are both images *and* physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience’ (2004: 1). By extension the history of the photograph is a history and analysis of the social forces at work upon and within the Worktown Archive.

## Photographing Worktown

The photograph of Bob and Billy is embedded in a complex discursive history. At the moment the negative was exposed the image began to accrue external meaning. I outline the prehistory of the archive in order to reveal how the cultural resonance of the photographs has both framed and enabled museum responses to them. Spender was invited to photograph Bolton as ‘an exploring ethnographer in a foreign country’ by self-styled anthropologist Tom Harrisson (Mellor 1997: 135). In January 1937, Harrisson founded the social research organization Mass Observation<sup>2</sup> (hereafter MO) with poet Charles Madge and surrealist filmmaker Humphrey Jennings. The three young men felt that British society had been forced into crisis by a schism between the elite and the masses. Their experimental response was to recruit trained and untrained participant observers to create an ‘anthropology of ourselves’(Madge and Harrisson 1937: 10). MO wanted the observation of everyone by everyone, including themselves, to empower the

common man through self-knowledge: 'We shall collaborate in building museums of sound, smell, foods, clothes, domestic objects, advertisements, newspapers, etc.' (Madge and Harrison 1937: 35). The project combined art and science through multidisciplinary research methods and has subsequently confounded definition: 'It was an episode that can perhaps be understood as a complex of contemporary forces: populism, statistical social surveys, Surrealism, naïve Realism, anthropology, investigative reportage and Documentary impulses' (Mellor 1997: 134). Initially the organization focused on two research projects; a national panel of volunteer writers and the Worktown study of everyday life in Bolton run by Tom Harrison. Bolton was selected as a site for research primarily because it was 'a town that exists and persists on the basis of industrial work, an anonymous one in the long list of such British towns' (Mass Observation 1987: xiv). The Worktown study did not test a hypothesis: 'Our first concern is to collect data, not to interpret them' (Madge and Harrison 1937: 34). In essence MO produced 'a method not a theory' (Stanley 1981: 264), collecting a micro-level of information on even the most mundane detail of everyday life. This method combined science and art, and classified photography as the former, to be used as an anthropological tool with other 'scientific instruments of precision' (Madge and Harrison 1937: 35).

Harrison took 'an almost passive stance of pure observation' (Hinton 2013: 31), which privileged the veracity of the visual. He recruited Spender and directed the themes of his photographs, which were to provide a check on written observations. Spender recollected that: 'Tom loaded me up with objectives, too many objectives, and then it was simply up to me' (Spender 1982: 15). Although, as I have noted, MO did not seek to prove a hypothesis, the organization simultaneously admitted the subjective desires of its participants to pursue their own hypothesis: 'it is left to any member of the group to draw his own implications [about the purpose of MO]' (Madge 1937). Harrison, for instance, was interested in drawing parallels between his previous anthropological studies of Sarawak and Vanuatu and everyday life in Bolton. A purely visual analysis of the image of Bob and Billy reflects the intentions of MO, Harrison and Spender. The Worktown study collected information on the theme of children and the play fight may seem to represent Harrison's interest in 'primitive' self-expression. However Spender was consciously resistant to taking photographs 'merely as illustrations' to theories (Spender 1982: 15) although he agreed on the positivist function of his photographs: 'I suppose with a touch of hindsight I can say I was out to expose truths' (1982: 16).

Spender's approach to his task reflected his experience as a professional photographer,<sup>3</sup> and his recollections of the project centre on the practical difficulties of fulfilling this task. Spender saw that people altered their behaviour for the camera and so tried to become an unobserved observer. On a series of short visits to Bolton he developed techniques for taking naturalistic photographs – pretending to photograph something else and then turning around at the last minute, or concealing his camera at waist height underneath a raincoat. He recalled



**FIGURE 14.2** Humphrey Spender's Contax II rangefinder camera. Copyright Caroline Edge.

that 'I had to be an invisible spy – an impossibility which I didn't particularly enjoy trying to achieve' (Spender 1982: 16). His camera, a Contax II rangefinder camera with a Biogon wide-angle lens (Figure 14.2), was the latest technology of the time and fundamental to his process.<sup>4</sup> The innovation of small manoeuvrable 35mm film cameras with fast shutter speeds changed the physical and temporal experience of photography in the 1930s, making the act of photography mirror the physical movement of the photographer and capturing a sequence of moments.

Spender's experience is embodied in the material form of the negative of Bob and Billy. It is fourth in a strip of five negatives (Plate 14.1), taken on a 36 exposure 35 mm Agfa Isopan ISS film. The first two negatives show a church service, the altar decorated with flowers for the harvest. The third shows three children playing with a pile of stones, in the background of the shot the gates of Union Mill are visible behind a small group of people. The next negative is the image of Bob and Billy; Spender has moved into the horizon of the preceding image. The final negative in the sequence is taken a moment later; the eye of the camera has angled to the left following the boys' movement. The little boy in the big shorts is now smilingly aware of the camera and two smaller children are now also in the frame.

Reading the negatives as a sequence reveals not just a transcription of place but of a journey through place. Spender's passage through the split seconds of time traces a visual chain of thought, through the material form of the film. We move with Spender from the surreptitious, shaky photographs of the church's dim

formality to the spontaneity of the children's games outside. You can almost feel him breathe a photographic sigh of relief as he comes into the light and can lift the camera up to his eye to compose. He sees the potential photograph of children playing and pursues it through the next three frames. It is the photograph of Bob and Billy that captures the 'decisive moment' of the sequence, captured in the split second after Billy has thrown something at the boys on the left. His hand is blurred by movement; they are fixed permanently in time dodging towards the edge of the frame.

The strip of negatives also reveals the traces of its own journey: yellowed tape mending the torn film rebate, the cuts at each end marking precisely its separation from the film. It is unclear precisely when the strip was processed and cut although this material intervention cut the photograph loose from its original context, a physical process arguably reflected in the subsequent theoretical abstraction of the image. When Bolton Museum acquired the Worktown negatives in 1994 they had already been cut into strips, which were thus no longer in their original film sequences. In a letter<sup>5</sup> to the museum (dated 4 October 1994) Spender said that the negatives 'had been in uncut continuous rolls' until they were rediscovered and taken to Sussex in 1973. Memory however is not as precise as photographs and there is evidence to suggest his recollections are incorrect. Some of the films were certainly processed, cut and printed shortly after they were taken since Spender's Worktown photographs were published in *The Bolton Citizen* in March 1938 and *The Geographical Magazine* in April 1938. Although MO planned to publish Spender's photographs in four books on the Worktown study, the onset of World War II intervened. Only one book was published<sup>6</sup> (*The Pub and the People*), and cost prohibited the inclusion of Spender's photos. Spender's photographs were never used as intended to support the data of MO's written observations. By the time they were critically rediscovered by David Alan Mellor in 1973, they had become 'homeless photos unmarried to the statistics' (Mellor 1997: 141).

## Reproduction

The first known reproduction of the photograph of Bob and Billy was in the book *Worktown People* in 1982. The book selected about one hundred of Spender's photographs taken for MO, which were thematically arranged and presented with an introduction, interview with Spender and minimal captions.<sup>7</sup> The book's editor Jeremy Mulford made specific reference to the photograph of Bob and Billy observing: 'Travelling around Bolton you continually come upon bits of Humphrey Spender's photographs; and occasionally, more than just bits. The corner where the boys are running on page 42 is still clearly recognisable (though the mill behind is not a mill now)' (Spender 1995: 10). The selection

and organization presented the photographs as social documentary, but ‘this was a process which constructed Spender’s oeuvre as much as it recorded it, and rendered other aspects invisible’ (Walker 1998: 117). Although Mulford was cautious in his presentation of the images, noting that it would be a ‘major research enterprise’ to document the photographs and warning against an impression of comprehensiveness in a ‘reconstruction of a piece of the past’ (Spender 1982: 9) criticism emerged based wholly on the evidence of the book.<sup>8</sup> The photographs, abstracted from their original contexts, began to function as historical documents, part of a wider trend of ‘rehabilitating old photographs’ in both academic and local histories (Sontag 2002: 71).

Historian Raphael Samuel found evidence in *Worktown People* to prove photographic ‘entrapment’, describing ‘the worried faces of Humphrey Spender’s Worktowners, gazing on life’s meagre chances and going uncomprehendingly about their daily tasks’ (1994: 325). His argument, that the photographs had become iconic visualizations of a false past, placed them within a historiographical context. His analysis privileged the visual content of the images, occluding the subtleties of photographic meaning. In stating a ‘long shot of a woman whitening the doorstep has her face – and that of a watching child – a mere blur’ (Samuel 1994: 331), he suggests the removal of identity but does not appreciate the technological limitations of Spender’s photography. His analysis typifies the dispersal of interpretations as analysis abstracted from the archival object. It is apparent even in the reproduction on page 55 of *Worktown People* that the negative is ‘thin’: in response to low light conditions Spender has had to push the limits of the film emulsion and print on high contrast paper, resulting in an image where the faces are grainy rather than blurred. As Sekula has observed: ‘when photographs are uncritically presented as historical documents, they are transformed into aesthetic objects. Accordingly the pretence to historical understanding remains although that understanding has been replaced by aesthetic experience.’ (2003: 448) As the Worktown photographs were theoretically and materially incised from their original contexts they became illustrations of the past, of art not science. This reclassification began the process that returned them to Bolton, even as it transformed their intended function: ‘The Worktown photographs were taken to provide information. The fact that they have become – particularly the original prints – “art objects” in frames makes me uneasy’ (Spender 1982: 23).

The indexical specificity of the images meant that in Bolton they were not iconic illustrations of a past, but of *the* past, and they were incorporated into local histories. Book shops in the town sold *Worktown People* as a book of ‘old’ photographs – naturally local people were more interested in how the images connected to their own experience than the contextual framework of MO’s activities. The presentation of the photographs in a book gave authority and status to community memories. In an interview in January 2013 a Bolton resident explained how she first saw *Worktown People* after a neighbour brought it to her

house.<sup>9</sup> She immediately recognized herself and younger brother as the children sitting on the election cart in the photograph on page 99. She was pleased to see the photograph despite remembering nothing of the event and joked that the book brought her: 'Fame at last!' Her account reveals how the 'return' of the Worktown photographs to Bolton, even in the mediated form of reproductions in a book, enabled their function outside of institutional discourses. The photographs were absorbed into local domestic histories by social processes embodied in the material performance of sharing and viewing the book. As Edwards and Hart have observed the materiality of photographs informs their function as 'socially salient objects, as active and reciprocal rather than simply implications of authority, control and passive consumption on the one hand, or of aesthetic discourses and the supremacy of individual vision on the other' (2004: 15). The shifting role of the image, from historical document to family photograph, was physically embodied: as the local resident had few photographs from her childhood, she copied the image of her brother and herself from *Worktown People* and put it in a frame at her bedside. The subsequent assimilation of the photographs in to the Worktown archive enabled the museum to mediate between academic and local narratives.

## Return

In 1994 the negative of Bob and Billy followed the shadow of its reproduction back to Bolton through the museum's acquisition of the Worktown negatives (and intellectual rights) from Spender. Bolton Council, the local authority, planned to open a museum dedicated to the town's industrial heritage in which Spender's photographs would be exhibited alongside early industrial artefacts. The rationale for the acquisition however reiterated the aesthetic performance of the photographs, defining them as art works of local interest. The institutional classification of the negatives was reinforced through a material intervention; the negative of Bob and Billy was catalogued, copied and placed in an archival sheet in a solander box in a temperature-controlled fine art store. Bolton Museum sought to preserve local history by incorporating the negative into the creation of the Worktown Archive. Yet this process may be also understood as evidence of 'the ways in which photographs are understood and institutionalized as 'history' and as 'documents' within discourses of information, documentation, authentication and representation, rather than as historical objects in their own right' (Edwards 2012: 253). Edwards has argued that institutions are in many ways complicit in restricting the potential meanings of photographs (2012: 254): in the creation of the Worktown Archive original contexts were restored, yet obscured. For example, the archive also contains art works produced during the Worktown study; a sketchbook by artist Graham Bell holds drawings of some of the same locations

photographed by Spender. The reclassification of Spender's photographs as art, alongside the sketchbook, privileged their visual and historical interpretation, concealing the original scientific intention of the photographs and the potential of their purpose within MO's collaborative museum.

The project of documentation nevertheless sought to re-establish the original contexts of the Worktown images by enabling their performance as photographic objects rather than aesthetic or historical documents. This process responded to the intrinsic materiality of the photographs and their unique indexicality by reconstructing the negatives back into film sequences and relocating the photographs in the landscape of Bolton. Sekula has observed that 'photographic archives by their very structure maintain a hidden connection between knowledge and power' (2003: 447): Could this process reactivate the ideological power of MO's collaborative museum within the institutional restraints of the museum?

As I have noted the shifting meanings ascribed to the Worktown photographs were reflected in the physical disorder of the negatives. The negatives were acquired by Bolton Museum in 25 archival sheets, accompanied by a handlist written by Spender, based on his memory of what the images depicted. The negative strip that held the image of Bob and Billy was in sheet 20 and was notated as 'Street Games', like the two other photographs of children playing in the sequence. The material details of the negative revealed clues of its original context – the exposure number and film type on the rebate, the unique cuts in the film. The negative of Bob and Billy was reconstituted into one of 33 separate films. Each negative was then given a new accession number. The photograph of Bob and Billy became number 1999.83.08.35, and part of film 8. The process revealed some negatives to be missing, while others, from unrelated projects, had become absorbed into the Worktown Archive. The physical reconstruction of the films restored temporal relationships within the archive. The negatives became part of sequences of time, making each productive of information about the others. Some sequences linked the end of one film to the start of another, so we could work out which order some films were taken in; for example the last photograph of film 3 and the first photograph of film 12 are almost identical, both were taken in St Peter and St Paul's Church.

Following the reconstitution of the films digital surrogates were created for each negative: jpeg files with the same accession numbers. The original negatives were fragile, and while enlarged copy negatives had been created shortly after the acquisition of the archive, digital scans were far easier to view, much more productive of information and did not have to stay in the archival store at the museum. Sassoon has cautioned that the digital translation of images is a 'profoundly transforming' act: 'This digital shadow obscures the carefully documented balance of power between materiality and context that is critical to the determination of photographic meaning' (2004: 199). Yet arguably digital photographs have 'their own sets of embodied relations with a material culture' (Edwards 2005:



35). The experience of zooming into or panning across a photograph is reflected in an intuitive movement of the hand, and the sense of being almost inside the photograph. The process revealed details such as street signs, imperceptible in the small scale of a negative, which helped us identify where the photographs had been taken. Although the photographs had been digitized their referent of place was in no way diminished, for they continued to foster close connections.

The negatives were not, of course, only referents of place, but also of the context of their production, linking to written texts in the MO Archive. Spender made written observations to accompany at least four of his sequences of photographs, which were dated.<sup>10</sup> These observations enrich the photographs, revealing Spender's completely subjective and often humorous responses to situations and people, as for example in his comments on a performance of *Madame Butterfly*, which reveal his awareness of the visual construction of cultural representations.

Poor playing by orchestra. Singing quite good but no idea of acting. Scenery suitably Japanese, ex-aggerated. Slit-eyed make up and European idea of tiny steps taken by Japanese women. Coiffure as in Japanese prints. Emphasis on WHITE characters (see plot) obtained by men in white ducks (semi-naval & uniform) and Lews European wife in white cotton dress (pre-war slinky), parasol, white cotton stockings, broad brimmed red hat, white high heeled shoes, hideous horse-like face.<sup>7</sup>[sic]<sup>11</sup>

There were also texts written by other observers, for example, an observation of a funeral that Spender photographed, and artefacts, like Spender's ticket and programme for *Madame Butterfly*. Both Spender's 930 photographs and the MO Archive provided an abundance of detail reflecting MO's methods and formed a network of both direct and oblique connections between and within the archives. For example, we were able to date the photograph of Bob and Billy from the Bolton Girl Guide's annual report for 1937–38. The report described the formation of a human Union Jack for a Coronation rally on Saturday, 25 September 1937, an event recorded on negative 19 of film 8. Checking the local newspaper archives for that day enabled us to identify the preceding sequence as a football match between Bolton Wanderers and Wolverhampton Wanderers on the same day. As we had dated another film to 27 September, the moment that Spender photographed Bob and Billy could be placed within a short time period.

This photographic detective work was a compelling activity, which pulled people deep into the detail of the images. Many colleagues at Bolton Museum were drawn into the process, and it became obvious that local knowledge was the key to identifying where the photographs were taken. In 2012 a low-resolution copy of the digitally scanned negative of Bob and Billy was placed in an album on Bolton Museum's Facebook page. The museum initiated a campaign entitled *Lost Locations*, which asked the museum's followers to help identify the locations of Spender's

photographs through leaving comments on them, in a process of collaborative documentation. We visited suggested sites physically or virtually using Google Streetview depending on their proximity to the museum. As I have noted, digital photographs retain an emanation of place and may be seen to have their own materiality. Although we were travelling in a digital simulation to check a digital surrogate the process still gave an embodied account of Spender's experience: following sequences of images we retraced his paths through the virtual town and reconnected the photographs within the physical landscape of Bolton. I extended this re-embodiment by taking digital prints of around 50 of Spender's photographs back to the locations where they were taken and rephotographed them in their original context (Plate 14.2). Tinkler (2013: 138) has observed that rephotography is a process that explores social and cultural change over time. But while the resulting photographs were documents of 75 years of change in Bolton, the process of taking them was performative, reiterating the original act of photography. Holding up the photograph and aligning it within the physical landscape reconstructed Spender's viewpoint. This showed that he had predominantly held the camera up to his eye to compose, revealing the conception of him as a spy with a concealed camera to be somewhat of an imagined and theoretically derived trope.

Annette Kuhn has suggested 'memory work can create new understandings of both past and present, whilst refusing a nostalgia which embalms the past in a perfect irretrievable moment' (2002: 10). As an applied process and form of community engagement, the *Lost Locations* campaign was very effective – we have now identified the locations of around 90 per cent of Spender's photographs. But, as we have seen, each reactivation of the photographs produced new meaning from the context in which it occurred. The photograph of Bob and Billy, while still functioning as both an index and a historical document, was transformed by the process into a family photograph. The image was quickly located as the corner of Union Mill by two comments on Facebook. One commenter recalled that he 'used to use the gates as goals'. This identification was followed by a comment from Norman King who said his uncle Bob Harwood was the 'lad on the ledge'. Norman provided a photograph of Bob and his best friend Billy Doeg who were easily recognizable from Spender's image. Through this identification the photograph was activated in a process of remembering, destabilizing its theorized function as an iconic visualization of poverty.

This reactivation suggested a practical response to Macpherson's question: 'Can we return to those images and reorder their economy?' (1997: 148). We invited Norman and his brother Dennis to participate in an interview about the photograph at Bolton Museum (Figure 14.3).<sup>12</sup> Banks has suggested photographs used in interviews may 'exercise agency, causing people to do and think things they had forgotten' (2007: 70): looking at the photograph of their Uncle prompted both memories of him, and of their own experiences growing up on Davenport Street. Bob was redefined as an individual with a life outside



**FIGURE 14.3** Norman King and Dennis Pilling look at copy negatives from the Worktown Archive during an interview at Bolton Museum. Copyright Caroline Edge.

the photographic moment. The brothers could not identify the other children in the photograph but Norman remarked: 'if I knew who they were I probably would know them'. As they looked at the photograph the brothers' response took on the form of a conversation, confirming each other's memories: 'everyone used to play on that one didn't they? On that step.' Langford has argued that such conversations are central to the meaning and form of family photo albums and that 'the separation of the album from its community casts it into an unnatural silence' (2006: 224). Even though Spender took the photograph of Bob and Billy with archival intent, it could be simultaneously articulated as family photograph and historical document through Norman and Dennis's conversation. For example, Norman suggested that residents in Davenport Street had not been aware of MO's project. The first time Bob's widow had seen the photograph was after Norman had identified it on Facebook, and their grandparents had never mentioned it – 'because who would, this man just walked about taking photographs'. This reflects Edwards' proposition that orality forms part of the wider practices of embodiment – 'the active sensory, experiential reiterations of history-telling' – enabling the understanding of the Worktown photographs as relational and social objects (2005: 38). Through this understanding the photographs may be moved 'away from the form of visual analysis in which photographs are simply the result of abstract concepts vested in power relations or semiotic codes' (Edwards 2005: 29).

## Dissemination

How could the understandings engendered by the process of documentation inform the subsequent role of the Worktown Archive within Bolton Museum? Could the material understanding of the images inform a more subtly inflected use of the archive enabling them to function as relational objects? Since the photograph of Bob and Billy was identified it has been reactivated by the museum within two new contexts. In 2012 the photograph was produced as an archival silver gelatin print for the Worktown 75th Birthday exhibition and was made digitally available through the Bolton Worktown website. Both material performances sought to promote community engagement with the archive but were necessarily mediated through the institutional protocols of the museum. In both instances, the photographs were thematically organized, recalling the structure of *Worktown People* and similarly constructing meaning while seeking to enable accessibility.

This imposition of order was visually reiterated through the presentation of the photographs in the exhibition: photographic prints were displayed in standard black frames using grid formations in a white cube space. This curatorial approach was primarily informed by cost and institutional procedure. The photographs had to be protected by frames, and since many were already in standard 20×16 inch black frames, it made sense to frame the others in this way too. This uniformity was an asset in that it reflected the original function of the photographs as information, privileging no image over another. The exhibition aimed to suggest multiple meanings, using information discovered in the process of documentation to present local histories evoked by the photographs and recontextualizing them against other texts and artworks produced by MO. A print of the photograph of Bob and Billy was specially made for the show and presented in a set of six street photographs near a display case containing Spender's camera and lens. The caption explained how the photograph had been identified and invited visitors to help identify other photographs. At a listening post, visitors could hear Norman and Dennis talk about the photograph of their uncle or Spender talk about photographing Bolton. While this presentation sought to enable alternate modes of engagement with the photograph, through, for example, the sensory mode of the audio or by inviting viewers to interact with the archive by sharing their own memories and knowledge, it nevertheless reinforced the aesthetic function of the photograph.

In contrast the Bolton Worktown website ([www.boltonworktown.co.uk](http://www.boltonworktown.co.uk)) presents a more fluid encounter. The 'multi-linear' nature of websites means that the 'researcher's account no longer has privileged status' (Murdock and Pink 2005: 159). Hyperlinks facilitate multiple interconnections allowing the viewer to shape their own interpretations and enabling the performance of photographic archives outside the physical boundaries of the museum. However as Tinkler has observed

digital photographic archives are still mediated through institutional processes of selection, description, presentation, and navigation (2013: 117–19). The design of the Bolton Worktown website sought to respond to the issues raised by the process of documentation, enabling multiple and collaborative methods of viewing and contextualizing the photographs. As Pink has suggested, new media technologies may encode reflexivity in both the creation and use of hypermedia (2007: 191). The website presents all of the digitized photographs taken by Spender during the Worktown study. The photograph of Bob and Billy is titled ‘Children play street games on Davenport St’ and captioned with information about the location and the identification of Billy and Bob. The photograph is presented visually within the ‘Street’ theme but tagging connects it to photographs depicting ‘play’ and ‘children’ or taken in the same location. Viewers are able to comment on the photographs, and share alternate individual histories of the images. A hyperlinked blog post gives expanded information about the image. Other photographs are linked to scans of documents from the MO archive, and the ongoing development of the site intends to link in other images and texts. Yet the presentation of the photographs is still mediated through the museum’s policies and the necessity of policing comments to prevent spam, which could potentially crash the website. The logical extension of Harrisson’s original methods suggests that he would have seen comments promoting porn websites to be just as valid in terms of factual data as personal memories.

The photograph of Bob and Billy is also geo-tagged so that it can be viewed on Google Maps or Streetview, connecting it to contemporary Bolton. This function reflects a growing awareness of the value of sensory experience in museum practices, which has been facilitated through the development of new media technologies. For example, The Museum of London’s free ‘Streetmuseum’ application overlays historical images when the phone camera is held up to the present-day location, embodying the photographs within the physical experience of the city. As Edwards (2005: 41) has noted the emotional desire to materially experience a photograph, remains, even in the digital age. The final material performance of the photograph of Bob and Billy in this present history of the image was shown to me by Dennis, who had printed all the photographs that connected to his family history, and all the photographs which he had identified from the website and used them to create his own Worktown album.

## Conclusion

The photograph of the children playing on Davenport Street has acquired meaning on its journey through time and physical space, revealing a history of cultural and theoretical concerns that have shaped its existence as a museum

object. Although Spender's photographs have been theoretically mired in issues of representation, their status as a 'museum collection' has restored other narratives. The use of visual methods has enabled the documentation of the archive, revealing alternate domestic histories, which developed outside the institutional constraints of the archive. The practical project of documentation has been successful, confirming the validity of visual research grounded in material context. But while the use of collaborative methods sought to respond to theoretical concerns the outputs of research – the website and exhibition – are still mediated through the authority of the institution. The question remains whether these photographs can 'only ever be sources for nostalgia?' (Evans 1997: 146). How is it possible to go beyond representation and reactivate the archive?

Alternative readings of MO have suggested a possible solution lies within the project's interdisciplinary, surreal methods. In his influential but unpublished thesis, Nick Stanley found that the MO archive refused 'the fiction of a complete account' and observed the potential of an ethnomethodology of the everyday, 'experienced by actors, not abstracted by professionals' (Stanley 1981: 273). This notion of a plural text was given anthropological credence through James Clifford's suggestion of surrealist ethnography. His proposed collage of voices and found evidence would incorporate data and 'leave manifest the constructivist procedures of ethnographic knowledge' (1991: 563). As the museum's documentation project progressed the voices of the local community emerged through the material experience of the photographs. But while the Bolton Worktown website has enabled both access to the Worktown photographs and these local narratives, the potential of MO's collaborative museum remains, as yet, unfulfilled. Hubble has suggested that the internet may enable a surrealist ethnography through which 'everyone will be both "native" and "ethnographer" and in possession of a poetic kind of thinking powerful enough to change reality in order to meet their collective social needs' (2006: 229). In order to fulfil this potential, the community must be actively involved in the reconstruction of the archive.

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## Notes

- 1 The Worktown Archive holds 930 negatives taken by Humphrey Spender for MO's Worktown project, including films taken in Blackpool and Ashington and two films taken during the production of the Granada Television film *Return Journey* in the early 1980s. The archive also incorporates vintage and modern prints of Spender's Worktown photographs and a small collection of photographs and artworks created by Humphrey Jennings, Julian Trevelyan and Graham Bell during the Worktown Study.
- 2 The MO project was still active into the 1950s. In 1949 it was registered as a company specializing in market research. The MO archive is now held at the University of Sussex following its donation in 1970. In 1981 the project was revived and continues today through a national panel of volunteer writers. It has attracted a significant body of literature; Hinton (2013) and Hubble (2006) in particular present useful overviews of the Worktown project.
- 3 Spender was working for the *Daily Mirror* under the name 'Lensman' when he joined the MO project, and became a staff photographer at *Picture Post* shortly afterwards, in October 1938 (Frizzell 1997; Spender 1982 and 1987).
- 4 Rangefinder cameras and 35mm film became commercially available in the 1930s. Spender's Contax camera was released in 1936 and was the first camera to combine a rangefinder and viewer in a single window. While the camera offered a shutter speed of up to 1/1250 of a second the potential to freeze movement was limited by the film technology. Agfa Isopan was considered a fast film in 1937 but is now classed as slow, equivalent to ISO 100. This means it is difficult to achieve fast enough shutter speeds to freeze movement except in very bright conditions. The difficulty can be seen in Spender's photographs of Bolton pubs where the movement of domino players' hands has registered as a white blur of movement on the film.
- 5 Humphrey Spender (letter to David Morris, Senior Keeper of Art, Bolton Museum. 4 October 1994).
- 6 In addition to *The Pub and the People*, MO planned to publish books on leisure, politics and the non-voter, and religion informed by the Worktown study (Madge and Harrison 1938: 24). These themes are well represented in Spender's negatives and inflect subsequent presentations of them for the example in the book *Worktown People and the Bolton Worktown website* ([www.boltonworktown.co.uk](http://www.boltonworktown.co.uk)).
- 7 These captions were based on the recollections of Spender and a local MO observer Harry Gordon and were placed at the back of the book, in order to restrict the seeming 'authority of a document' (Sontag 2002: 74).
- 8 Bolton Museum's documentation of the Worktown photographs has revealed numerous factual inaccuracies in *Worktown People*: for example, the caption to the photograph of Bob and Billy relates to the image on the opposite page, and another photograph is identified as having been taken from the roof of Bolton parish church, when it was actually taken in Chorley, 11 miles away.
- 9 Interview conducted by Caroline Edge and Ian Trumble with a local resident at her home in Bolton on 22 January 2013.

- 10 The MO anthology *Speak for Yourself* (Calder and Sheridan 1984) included two observations written by Spender, and the process of documentation revealed two more. He wrote accounts of photographing a performance of *Madame Butterfly*, a 'quack medicine stall', Conservative club rooms and an argument with a pub landlord who caught him taking surreptitious photos.
- 11 Spender's written observation of *Madame Butterfly* is in the MO archive, where it has been wrongly ascribed to Brian Barefoot (TC Live Entertainment, 16/A, 'Madame Butterfly' report, ticket & programme [Brian Barefoot] 22.9.37). Reproduced with permission of Curtis Brown Group Ltd, London on behalf of The Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive. Copyright © The Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive.
- 12 Interview conducted by Caroline Edge and Ian Trumble with Norman King and Dennis Pilling at Bolton Museum on 16 September 2012.

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