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Richard Marsden

To cite this article: Richard Marsden (08 Jan 2024): Heritage, identity and the creative arts in the South Wales Valleys, National Identities, DOI: 10.1080/14608944.2023.2299972

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2023.2299972

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Published online: 08 Jan 2024.

Article views: 178

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Richard Marsden

History, Open University UK, Milton Keynes, UK

**ABSTRACT**

The BG REACH project used creative arts methods to support residents of a post-industrial community in the South Wales Valleys to reflect on what the heritage of their local area meant to them. Contrary to expectation, participants did not define their shared identity primarily in relation to the industrial experience. Connections with the pre-industrial past were equally powerful, as were positive views of deindustrialisation as a healing of the landscape. Moreover, the pieces produced drew extensively upon broader motifs of Welshness, suggesting that Welsh identity may not be as terminally fragmented as some scholars have argued.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**

Received 6 August 2023
Revised 7 December 2023
Accepted 22 December 2023

**KEYWORDS**

Heritage; national identity; locality; creative arts; deindustrialisation; Wales

**Introduction**

BG REACH (Blaenau Gwent Residents Engaging in Arts, Culture and Heritage) was a public engagement and research project which connected residents of the Ebbw Fach Valley with the heritage of their local area through creative activities such as writing, musical composition, storytelling and the visual arts. In this way, it sought to explore how conceptions of heritage inform local identities in an area of the South Wales Valleys hard hit by industrial decline since the 1980s. Blaenau Gwent is now one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged parts of Wales (Welsh Government, 2020). This article will consider what the creative pieces produced by participants reveal about how imaginings of the past inform notions of identity, both local and national, in this marginalised post-industrial part of Wales. In so doing, it will challenge some key aspects of how national identity in Wales is understood by scholars. Firstly, that contemporary identities in the South Wales coalfield are shaped primarily by industrialisation. Secondly, that this industrial version of Welshness remains distinct from and inimical to the rural and Welsh-speaking form dominant in the north and west of the country (Brooks, 2017; Mann & Fenton, 2017; Morgan, 1971; Williams, 1985). This article will also discuss the virtues of arts-based approaches to heritage, both for the communities involved and as a means of questioning accepted wisdom about Welsh identity.

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Methodological and conceptual underpinnings

The BG REACH project was a collaboration between the Open University (OU), Linc Cymru Housing Association and Aberbeeg Community Group. It was funded through a grant from UK Research and Innovation. The project focused on the Ebbw Fach Valley in the county of Blaenau Gwent in southeast Wales. Despite the COVID 19 pandemic, by autumn 2021 REACH had worked with 43 residents of the Ebbw Fach Valley who between them produced 66 creative reflections on the history of Blaenau Gwent. A physical exhibition, co-designed with participants, was hosted from April to July 2022 at St Fagans National Museum of History in Cardiff. Elements were also toured around public venues in Blaenau Gwent during summer 2022. The pieces discussed in this article are freely available in an online exhibition, including the paintings in Figure 1 which express the sense of liberation felt by one participant upon escaping a life in the mines. The project had four aims:

- To contribute to participant wellbeing through the acquisition of new creative skills and the reactivation of old ones, and the facilitation of social interactions between neighbours.
- To enhance community cohesion by engaging residents in collective endeavours and shared journeys of discovery relating to the history and heritage that has shaped their communities.
- To amplify through exhibition the voices of people with little cultural influence, whose outlooks and experiences are often marginalised in debates about how cultural and natural heritage should be represented.
- To learn more about the intersections between heritage and identity in a post-industrial community, in order to better understand the complex and heterogeneous nature of modern-day Welshness.

Project outcomes relating to that final goal, on the relationship between heritage and identity, are the main preoccupation of this article. It is important to note, however, that

Figure 1. Two of three paintings by Raymond Mason.
the findings that address that issue were generated by the arts-based participatory activities which enabled the other three. Participants were recruited informally, through leaflets and word-of-mouth publicity. This was coordinated by Linc Cymru Housing Association, who own a significant amount of housing stock in the Ebbw Fach valley, and Aberbeeg Community Group, who acted as champions for the project ‘on the ground’. Residents were invited to attend a range of workshops during spring and summer 2020, initially in person at Aberbeeg Community Centre in the heart of the Ebbw Fach Valley, and subsequently online due to the global pandemic. Participants could dip in and out of this programme, attending or missing sessions as and when they chose. Activities were grouped around four themes: creative writing, music, storytelling and visual arts. Attendees were supported by expert facilitators to create artworks or stories that in some way reflected on or responded to the heritage of the local area. The project also trained secondary school pupils to work with older residents, assisting them to record their experiences through visual art and digital stories. Within those broad steers, participants were free to create whatever they chose in terms of both form and content. The results present Blaenau Gwent’s heritage from a grassroots perspective; intangible significance made corporeal through art.

Initially the project sought to collect background data on participants; age, gender, ethnicity, employment history, family history etc. The intention was to use this contextual information to inform analysis of the artworks and stories created for the project. However, requesting such detailed information quickly proved to be disconcerting for many potential participants, and consequently had a negative impact on attendance at project activities. In response, the project team moved to an ‘open house’ approach through which residents were able to attend workshops without formally revealing anything about themselves. Only if they wanted the pieces they made to be showcased by the project did they need to provide any such information, and even then only the minimum required to provide consent to exhibit. That said, some attendees did volunteer information about themselves as well as testimony to accompany their creations, and these are used where appropriate to support the discussion in later sections of this article. The creators of all the pieces discussed in this article or shared through physical and online exhibitions, as well as the testimony that accompanies some of them, gave informed consent for their work to be used in those ways. This was gained through the use of information sheets and signed consent forms; an approach that was reviewed by, and received a favourable opinion from, the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (reference HREC/3472). Whilst participants have not commented on this article, they were asked to feedback on and approve the interpretation accompanying their work on the BG REACH exhibition. These commentaries contain in embryonic form much of the analysis of individual pieces found in this paper.

REACH was thus a piece of participatory action research, seeking to benefit participants as well as learn from them. The means of achieving that was heritage. It is important to note, therefore, that scholars and practitioners of heritage largely reject the notion of a self-evident canon of innately historical objects and places. Rather, the term ‘heritage’ refers to the meanings that people attach to things they perceive as being of particular historical significance. In many cases heritage, as an expression of the elements of the past deemed worthy of remembrance, helps to define identities (Smith, 2007a). Oral
historian Elizabeth Tonkin (1992, p. 217) asserts that, ‘memory makes us’, referring not just to our own recollections but also the collective memories of our communities. From that perspective, the past becomes a complex pattern of competing meanings reflecting a diversity of contemporary concerns. Heritage is less about the past itself than the way people think about the past in the present.

The implications of this for national identities, when expressed through official and high-status sites, is well understood (MacDonald, 2015). But less attention has been paid to the connections between heritage and identity at the unofficial, grassroots level. Since the 1990s, ‘heritage from below’ has been recognised as a bulwark against the cultural homogenisation associated with globalisation, and a necessary antidote to official versions of the past (Samuel, 1994; Walsh, 1992). Of course, this kind of community-focused or grassroots heritage is not, in and of itself, more authentic than what Smith labels the ‘Authorised Heritage Discourse’ that is created by experts (Smith, 2007a). The ways in which ordinary people think about local history are frequently shaped by official representations of the past at national or even global levels (Muzaini & Minca, 2018). Nevertheless, community heritage can offer new and different perspectives from people whose outlooks often go unnoticed. It is worthy of study not because it is intrinsically more valid than officially sanctioned representations, but simply because it is less recognised. The concept of ‘community’ itself, meanwhile, is also open to criticism, not least because of the term’s ideological baggage and lack of definitional specificity (Berger et al., 2020). Yet the concept has an undeniable currency, particularly in former mining settlements such as the one discussed in this article (Gilbert, 1995; Pitchford, 2001). Ultimately, communities exist because their members believe that they do; they are given reality by the fact that individuals self-identify as members of them.

REACH was consciously framed as a project exploring community identities through grassroots approaches to heritage. It proceeded from the assumption that a sense of shared historical experience is a key element of such identities. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996) highlighted the importance of popular historical knowledge to what he terms the ‘production of locality’, i.e. the habits, routines and interactions through which local communities define themselves in relation to where they live. From there, scholarly recognition of the connections between grassroots heritage and local identities has flourished. Simultaneously, the past has become better recognised as a resource through which economically deprived and culturally stigmatised communities can empower themselves (Graham et al., 2000; Schofield & Szymanski, 2010). This is what Denis Byrne (2008) calls ‘heritage as social action’ and what Johnston and Marwood refer to as ‘action heritage’ (2017). Yes, REACH was a research project exploring the connections between heritage and identity. But it also sought to use heritage as a basis for collective benefit to a community located in one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas of Wales.

The facility of heritage to be used as a tool for community development has much in common with the creative arts. The consensus is that the arts, like heritage, can offer social benefits to participants and can thereby contribute to addressing community challenges. At the same time, they can enable people to explore issues of personal interest and relevance, both as individuals and members of communities (Kay, 2000; Matarasso, 1997; Payne & Weedon, 2020). For REACH, that ‘issue of relevance’ is participants’ sense
of connection to the history of where they live. Artist and academic Cora Marshall (2007, p. 7) argues that the arts also offer opportunities to establish emotional connections with the past whilst at same time ‘announc[ing] as well as reinforc[ing] cultural identities’. Ariella Van Luyn and Helen Klaebe (2015) go further, suggesting that acts of artistic creation offer a means of articulating a sense of community that is frequently defined in part in spatial terms. Arts-based approaches can thus provide a neutral surface upon which the production of subjective knowledge about the past can happen. Moreover, they can enable participants to become active shapers of local heritage rather than having historical knowledge imposed upon them. That is a particularly salient point given that heritage is what Bella Dicks (2018) calls a ‘social practice’; meaning that shared understandings of the past are founded upon collective activity in the present.

REACH takes its cue from these perspectives, treating the work created by participants as cultural products which can reveal much about how shared imaginings of the past inform group identities in the present. The methodological hypothesis here is that that poems and drawings, stories and songs, developed and honed by their creators over weeks or months; are both freer and more textured sources of information than answers to a questionnaire or responses to interviews could ever be. The historical accuracy of those representation is irrelevant; what matters is their authenticity in terms of their creators’ sense of personal and collective history.

**Heritage and identity in Blaenau Gwent**

History and heritage are distinct but related. The history of a place provides the materials from which its heritage is constructed (Ashworth, 1994). In order to understand the creative pieces that REACH participants produced, therefore, it is necessary to appreciate the broad contours of the region’s history. The county borough of Blaenau Gwent contains a significant section of the South Wales Valleys to the northeast of the Welsh capital Cardiff (see Figure 2). The region is rich in coal and to a lesser extent iron and is best remembered for its contribution to Wales as an industrial powerhouse during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The area’s first ironworks was founded at Sirhowy in 1778, its first coalmine sunk at Cwmtillery in 1843. By the 1940s there were thirty-eight pits in the area and its population had multiplied tenfold since 1850. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, however, Blaenau Gwent suffered industrial collapse. Its last deep mine closed in 1988 and the Ebbw Vale Steelworks shut in 2002 (Elliot, 2004). By 2010 it was officially recognised as one of the most economically deprived areas in the country, with significantly higher unemployment and lower wages than the averages for Wales (Dolman, 2010).

Public-facing portrayals of the region’s history generally foreground the industrial revolution at the expense of other periods and themes. This is true of the Welsh Tourist Board’s website and the ‘history’ section of Wikipedia’s entry for ‘South Wales’ (Wikipedia, 2021a; Williams, n.d.). The Britannica entry for Blaenau Gwent focuses exclusively on the area’s industrial past (Britannica, 2013). So too does the Wikipedia entry on the ‘South Wales Valleys’ (Wikipedia, 2021b). As Current Archaeology notes ‘the area is rich in archaeology of all periods; but it is, of course, its industrial archaeology that rightly attracts most attention’ (Anon., 2009). This focus on industrial history is driven in part by the ubiquity and monumentality of its physical remains. As Blaenau Gwent Council’s website puts it, ‘the valley bottoms are scattered with pit wheels, commemorations of our mining past, while
higher up the valley sides iron, stone and limestone quarries can be found’ (Blaenau Gwent Council, n.d.a). The imposing remnants of the Sirhowy Ironworks are open to visitors and the site of the Six Bells colliery is marked by a visitor’s centre and a 20-metre statue commemorating those who died in a mining disaster in 1960. The county is also home to five local museums in Abertillery, Blania, Brynmawr, Ebbw Vale and Tredegar. Whilst Aberthillery Museum includes medieval, Roman and prehistoric material in its collections, the other four concentrate primarily on industrial history (Blaenau Gwent Council, n.d.b). With the exception of St Illtyd’s, a thirteenth-century church which has its own page on the Blaenau Gwent Council website, little attention is paid by official bodies to sites and objects associated with the region’s preindustrial past (Blaenau Gwent Council, n.d.c).

This emphasis on industry is understandable. Its melancholic remains litter the landscape, the ways of life it created are still within living memory, and the area is currently

suffering the effects of its decline. More broadly, the industrial experience is well recog-
nised as one of the formative influences on Welsh national identity. In research conducted
in the northern Blaenau Gwent during the 1990s, Brian Roberts (1999) found clear evi-
dence of a specifically ‘Valleys’ Welshness based in part on an awareness of the coalfield’s
particular historical experience. This speaks to the fractured nature of Welsh identity. Only
a quarter of the population speak the Welsh language, and only half of those do so fluently (Welsh Government, 2023). Lacking the unifying imperative of language and
setting aside shallow stereotypes of the Welsh as poets, singers and bards, what
remains are two myths of Welshness. On one hand the rural, Nonconformist, Welsh-speaking Gwerin (folk) of the north and west. On the other, the industrialised, politically radical, English-speaking inhabitants of the south (Gruffudd, 1995; Jones, 1992, 2008; Pritchard, 1995). Both draw upon associations with the upland landscapes of the Welsh interior, perceived as a repository of history and an influence on national character (Jones, 2019; Rhodes, 2019). Yet they are ostensibly two distinct ideas about what it means to be Welsh.

Roberts’ work was informed by Denis Balsom’s (1985) influential ‘Three-Wales model’. Basing
his analysis on voting patterns, census data and responses to surveys, Balsom
divided Wales into three zones. These were (1) Y Fro Gymraeg: mainly speaking and identifying as Welsh, (2) British Wales, mainly speaking English and identifying as British, and (3) Welsh Wales: mainly English speaking but identifying as Welsh. Balsom’s third zone, Welsh Wales, was coterminous with the South Wales Valleys. Balsom’s model is sometimes criticised for its conceptual crudity (Evans, 2019; Scully & Wyn-Jones, 2012), yet it is nevertheless frequently invoked in analyses of the ruptured nature of Welsh identity (Carter, 2010; Coupland et al., 2006; Osmond, 2002). Indeed, Balsom’s 1980s take on the Valleys as feeling Welsh but not speaking the language still holds true for Blaenau Gwent. In the 2011 census 72.4 percent of respondents identified as Welsh only (i.e. not British as well), against a Wales-wide average of 57.5 percent. Conversely only 11.5 percent of respondents claimed competence in the Welsh language, as opposed to 26.7 percent nationally (Blaenau Gwent Council, 2012). These low rates of language proficiency might suggest only a weak association with Welsh identity. Yet the overwhelming commitment of Blaenau Gwent residents to Welshness as a primary identity poses a challenge to that view.

If language is not the basis of national identity in the Gwent Valleys, then it must rest on other foundations. Nonconformity, once considered a mainstay of Welshness in the Valleys as well as elsewhere, has undergone a high-speed reversal over the past half century (Morgan, 1999). What remains then is that sense of shared industrial experience which Roberts’ research highlighted. Yet given the nearness of the industrial age, as well as its association with radical labour politics, we might expect that awareness of shared history to play more to narratives of class than nation. In Blaenau Gwent the prevalence of industrial heritage, at Ebbw Vale, Sirhowy and over the Torfaen border at Blaenavon for instance, certainly ensures that class retains considerable influence over popular con-
ceptions of the past (Light, 2000). In addition, the long-standing dominance of the Labour Party in the South Wales coalfield means that the use of voting patterns to
explore Welsh identity also tends to foreground class as an explanatory category (Osmond, 2002; Scully & Wyn-Jones, 2012). Yet even before the turn of the century, Roberts (1999) found that class identities were waning in Blaenau Gwent, eclipsed by a resurgent identification with Welshness. This tallies with more recent research by
Martin Johnes’ (2015) who argues that deindustrialisation in South Wales continues to reduce the cultural purchase of class as a marker of identity whilst reinvigorating associations with nation. As the following sections will show, the creative work produced for REACH sheds new light on the historical resources upon which that resurgence rests.

Creative reflections on the heritage of Blaenau Gwent

Industrial history is one of the most obvious themes in the work produced by project participants. This chimes with the scholarly wisdom, noted in the previous section, that identity in this part of Wales is bounded up with the industrial experience. The BG REACH collage (Figure 3), a patchwork of tiles by multiple participants brought together to represent the collective endeavour of the community, demonstrates this. Many tiles depict physical manifestations of industrialisation such as colliery buildings, terraced houses, railway viaducts etc. The tiles spelling out ‘Aberbeeg’ also evoke industry, presenting each letter in a darkened form reminiscent of iron or coal-blackened wood. Collectively these tiles speak to the traction that the industrial era has in the minds of their creators. Some, however, present that era in stark terms. One by Valerie Ashdown depicts a blackened bed of coal underneath rows of terraces with three miners trapped beneath. Another by Raymond Mason juxtaposes the ingenuity of industry against its human cost, referencing the Six Bells Colliery disaster in 1960 and the Aberfan disaster of 1966 (Curtis, 2013).

Angharad Jones’s watercolour ‘Jim and Angharad’ (Figure 4), embodies similar attitudes. It shows Angharad as a child with her father looking down on the Six Bells colliery, which closed in 1988. The browns and greys evoke a melancholy air, perhaps alluding to the pollution caused by the pit. Angharad dedicates the picture to ‘the men in our family who went far too soon, and the strong women left to carry on’. There is nostalgia here, but also loss. Meanwhile a collage by Mark Burns (Figure 5), depicts the Six Bells Guardian, a twenty-metre memorial to the forty-five men who died in the Six Bells Disaster which occurred when Mark was four. The monument itself is hollow and latticed, standing in parkland on the site of the old colliery (Blakely & Moles, 2019). But Mark’s Guardian is solid and black, dominating the image and framed with fiery colours which call to mind the tragic explosion that the statue commemorates. It is an unequivocal comment on the price that industry can enact, on individuals and on communities.

Katharine Marquis’s lyric poem ‘The Welsh Miner’s wife’ addresses a different kind of loss. It begins as follows:

It’s raining again
Sheets clean and bare
Pegged on a washing line
Billowing fair
The Atlantic is wayward
Coal dust in the air

This is a poignant sketch of a wife and mother trapped in domesticity. It is informed by Katharine’s experiences of living, since the mid-2000s, in a South Walian community where the memories of industrial ways of life live on. The cost of industry in this instance is the loss of choice rather than of life. Raymond Mason’s paintings (see Figure 1, showing two of his three contributions to the project) are informed by a comparable
outlook. They depict exotic plants, bright flowers and stormy seascapes; on the face of it having little to do with industry. In his accompanying testimony, however, Raymond explains that he was a teenage coal miner in the 1960s who ‘escaped death three
times’ and then travelled the world with the RAF. The paintings represent his escape from the confines of a mining life to a wider world. In his own words: ‘maybe there is no link between our bright pictures and verse and our dark industrial past other than to remind us to look forward to a bright and colourful future’.

Taken together, these works represent a downbeat consensus around Blaenau Gwent’s industrial past. There is little nostalgia in these pieces for industrial ways of life in and of themselves; no sense that ‘things were better then’. What does shine through, in many of the other pieces produced for the project, is a positive view of deindustrialisation. Rather than focusing on the economic hardship that accompanied industrial decline, these pieces highlight the return of natural beauty. This ‘greening of the Valleys’ has been a policy of Blaenau Gwent Council’s since the 1990s, with the 16 km Ebbw Fach trail linking no less than fourteen community green spaces, four of which are nature reserves.

Figure 4. Jim and Angharad’ by Angharad Jones.
(Llewellyn et al., 2019). As Raymond puts it, ‘after the dark industrial revolution came the light; the valleys were green once more’.

Barbara Candish’s poem Mar neu O’r Blaen (Then and Now) is a good example of this. In the first verse ‘the skies of Blaenau Gwent were crying’ and ‘the hills and valleys could not breath’; evoking a time that Barbara, born in the 1940s, remembers well. But in the second verse, referring to the present, the skies are smiling, and the hills are breathing once more. That sense of joy in the return of nature comes through in many other submissions. Numerous tiles in the BG REACH collage (Figure 3) highlight the area’s beauty. Woods and fields feature in a lot of them. The image of a hillside rising up to meet the sky is a recurring motif. Life is lived in narrow green valleys between arching peaks. Many tiles also feature sheep, horses and birds, emphasising rurality as opposed to industry. That affinity with nature is central to Susan Davies’ poem ‘Bathed in Birdsong’, in which she celebrates the ‘place of peace’ in which she lives and its ‘outstanding beauty, a feast for my eyes and ears’. It also underpins Stephen Davies’ poem ‘My Lovely Valley’ which celebrates the beauty of Cwmtillery as well as Stephens’s connections to the place. This is where his parents grew up, where he went to school and work, where he met his partner, and where he plans to be buried. References to the rolling impacts of winter and summer on the valley serve to intertwine the seasonal rhythms of the area with the beats of the author’s own life. This reverence for natural heritage is also present in Hilary Davie’s prose piece ‘My Ramblings’, set to film by Hannah Roberts. Hilary offers evocative descriptions of the plants that border the paths she walks. Her musings connect the natural world with human activity in the verdant valleys that she calls home. But the Six Bells Guardian is the visual centre point of Hannah’s film. This monument to the human cost of industry is contrasted with Hilary’s ruminations on the persistence of nature. A similar outlook informs ‘Cynefin 2’, a song written and recorded remotely by participants during the first COVID 19 lockdown in 2020. The lyrics offer thanks for the beauty of the
area and the community that inhabits it. There is a revelatory feel in places, with lines like ‘things I could not see’ and ‘now my eyes are open’. The value of natural beauty is again the imperative communicated by ‘Save the Canyons’ (Figure 6) by Hazel Clatworthy and her daughter Emily, who made the picture in the centre. This collage is a chronicle of residents’ fight to prevent Tirpentwys Woods near Pontypool from being turned into a quarry. The area was an open cast coal mine until the 1960s but is now much rated as a local beauty spot (Coflein, n.d.).

These upbeat takes on the post-industrial era as a healing of the landscape (and thereby perhaps, implicitly at least, the community) adds a new dimension to standard narratives of how deindustrialisation is remembered in South Wales. That said, the prevalence of industry in these pieces, for good or for bad, attests to the purchase it retains in the collective memory of the community. Some works, however, refer to a deeper past, The contributions of local photographer Linda Stemp (Figure 7, presenting two of six photographs) are a useful example of this. Two of her pictures allude to industry,
showing the pithead of Blaenavon coal mine and Llanhilleth Miners’ Institute. The next two are different perspectives on Christchurch in Aberbeeg. This building was completed in 1909 to service the community that grew up around the Six Bells Colliery, but its Gothic architecture alludes to the Middle Ages. The final two show farm buildings of considerable age on the outskirts of Llanhilleth, to the south of Aberbeeg, and pigeon cots on the side of the Ebbw Fach Valley. In this way the collection embraces both the rural and industrial sides of the region’s past. Linda’s reflections on the images make her views on that dual history plain:

An area which once was very rural with small farming communities was plundered and devastated by the industrialisation of the eighteenth century that continued well into the twentieth century. Foundries, steel works and mining has taken its toll on this land and its people.

She then recounts the games of her childhood in the 1960s, playing Celts, Romans and monks, and finishes with a quote from the thirteenth century Black Book of Carmarthen; the oldest surviving manuscript in Welsh. Linda’s sympathies evidently lie with the pre-industrial past. Katharine Marquis’s prose work, ‘Silver Girl’, is similarly rooted in rurality. It uses the plight of a lame farm horse to open a window onto an earlier time when the land was worked in traditional ways. The use of dialect is particularly powerful: for instance, ‘You be gittin’ rid of Jack afore yer touch Silver Girl’; ‘stable lads a plenty out there’; ‘she’s a good’un’. Katharine even provides an accompanying glossary of terms which serves to emphasise the distance between then and now, eliciting nostalgia whilst underlining disjuncture.

Arguably the most striking rumination on Wales’s pre-industrial past is a six-foot painting called ‘Modron’ by Barbara Candlish (Figure 8). Modron is a mother figure from Welsh folklore and Barbara labels her a ‘mythical Welsh Celtic queen, a Welsh Superhero’ (Koch, 2006). She then identifies her as a prototypical Welsh Mam, a trope which Deidre Beddoe (2000, p. 8) defines as ‘that icon of Welsh womanhood [who] ruled the home, keeping coal-dust, want and trouble out’. For Barbara, Modron and those who came after are ‘the women of the valleys, strong, determined and nurturing’. In a poem written to accompany the painting, she uses the first verse to locate Modron in a pre-Roman setting, positioning the Celts as the progenitors of the Welsh in a manner commensurate with Welsh language culture (Pittock, 1999). The second verse continues:

Down through the decades
Life was harsh, life was grim
She’s always there Modron Celtic warrior Queen
Her fighting spirit can be seen.
To fight injustice, right the wrong
In every miner’s struggle she was there
Walking with the Chaterist to Newport square.
Saving every penny to heal the sick
Nursing the injured in the pit
the NHS was born.

Figure 8. ‘Modron’ by Barbara Candlish.

Here Barbara depicts Modron’s spirit as something passed down through generations of Gwent women over the past two thousand years. As the final verse puts it, in an echo of
an earlier line, ‘her spirit is in our blood and in our bones’. This is a powerful expression of the connection that Barbara feels between past and present. It articulates her sense of rootedness in the historical experience of the place where she lives. More than that, it articulates Welshness in ethno-cultural terms, through ancestry and territorial occupation; years pass and circumstances change, but the character of the people endures. Even the region’s radical political traditions, usually associated with industrialisation, are here presented as the achievement of a millennia-old Valleys spirit.

REACH also gathered more personal recollections which articulate collective identity in other ways. Stephen Davies’ piece ‘Remembering Cwmtillery’ is one example of this. It describes the walks his father would take him on as a child and is accompanied by sketches of the places they would travel through (Figure 9). The tableaus of yesteryear that Stephen’s words and images conjure are vivid; the streets and hills of Cwmtillery, his nan’s cooking, his dad ‘talking shop’ at the colliery, and his exploits with other children on the hillside. Since then the area has undergone a major transformation following deindustrialisation; alterations which Stephen associates with changes in his own life:

My nan’s old house is gone. Sadly. Both mam and dad have now passed away. Mam died in 1987. Dad died in 2018. I am now 61 years of age. And still I enjoy walking the same places that my dad used to take me. Although a lot has changed. The colliery closed in 1982. The site is now a football pitch. All the old waste tips have been landscaped. And more trees are now growing. I have very fond memories of Cwmtillery. I loved it as it was then. And I love it as it is today.

The outlook here is ambivalent, there is a sense of loss but also enthusiasm for the positive impacts of nature’s return. We see something similar in ‘Back on Track’ by Hedley McCarthy, formerly leader of Blaenau Gwent Council, This account of a childhood spent riding the railway in the 1950s again takes a upbeat view on post-industrial change. Its inspiration is the closure of the Ebbw Vale line during the 1960s. But rather than dwell on that, Hedley recounts the train rides he enjoyed as a child and then moves straight to the reopening of the line in 2008. Here, the twenty-first century brings progress after the doldrums of the late twentieth. Memories of childhood are also central to ‘Growing up in Blaenau Gwent’. This is a digital story in which sisters Pat Tovey and Jacqui Bowditch discuss their childhood in Abertillery during the 1950s and 60s. Nostalgia is certainly present, heightened by the accompanying pictures of the sisters as children and young adults. The pair discuss the decline of the extended family, particularly acute given the high numbers leaving Blaenau Gwent since the closure of the pits (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Yet Pat and Jacqui’s own children, three apiece, have stayed in the area and are as close to their cousins as their siblings. The interrelated nature of family, community and place come through strongly in the closing moments.

REACH also involved an intergenerational strand whereby secondary school pupils recorded the reminiscences of older residents and then used them to create digital stories. Some of these offer revealing insights on notions of identity. Norma Williams recalls her parent’s opposition to an influx of new fashions from America in the 1950s. Their concern about respectability suggests that these new styles were perceived as a challenge to the values around which the community was organised (Stead, 1995). After the Second World War, meanwhile, Mike Pescod’s father accepted a posting to
the Royal Artillery Barracks in London. Mike’s exclamation ‘Oh my god, what a place’ speaks volumes about how alien that English metropolis seemed to a boy brought up in the Gwent Valleys. Hazel Robinson, meanwhile, grew up in Brynithel and describes holidays to Plymouth where people would crowd round her family, fascinated by their Welsh accents. She also recalls her English father, who came to Wales in the 1920s, as someone whose accent as well as his birthplace meant that ‘he wasn’t as Welsh as me’.

The recollections of participants such as Stephen, Hedley, Pat, Jacqui, Norma, Mike and Hazel take various forms, but all are narrativizations of personal experience rather than a call to the imagined past. What they articulate is how important a sense of place, of
rootedness in the Ebbw Fach valley, is to their creators’ sense of who they are. As sociologist Arthur Frank (2002) points out, even biographical stories that retell individual experiences are nonetheless shaped by group assumptions and values (Frank, 2002). That sense of geographical specificity, of the Valley as a place that moulds the people who live there, is also apparent in many of the other pieces already discussed. The following section will consider that line of argument more closely. It will explore some of the key themes arising from the pieces submitted; the emphasis on place, the positive spin on deindustrialisation, the calls to a pre-industrial past, and the invocation of motifs associated with ‘traditional’ Welsh life. In so doing, it will question accepted ideas about how national identity plays out on the eastern end of the South Wales coalfield.

**Analysis of themes**

Some clear themes emerge from the pieces discussed above. One is a positive view of deindustrialisation, focusing on the return of natural beauty rather than on economic decline. This stands in contrast to how working-class communities are expected to remember their roots, with nostalgia for stability and prosperity, and bitterness over their loss (Emery, 2019; Strangleman, 2013; Strangleman et al., 2013). For Sherry Lee Linkon (2018), who studies working class writing, the ongoing impacts of deindustrialisation are a toxic ‘half life’ blighting the communities that remain. For Valerie Walkerdine (2009), writing specifically about the South Wales Valleys, they are a psychological trauma from which affected communities have not yet recovered. Collective memory, whether expressed through official heritage or informal acts of everyday remembrance, can play a therapeutic role in such contexts (Walker, 2021a). Many of the public narratives of South Wales’s industrial history, discussed in an earlier section, bemoan the conditions and inequalities of the industrial heyday but nonetheless hark back to it in implicitly celebratory terms. Such portrayals exemplify how industrial heritage is often lionised after a period of abandonment. This is a process through which, as Hilary Orange (2008) puts it, ‘symbols of social deprivation and economic decline become over time symbols of regional and national pride’ (see also Miskell, 2020). That process is apparent in the exhibiting and interpretational practices found at the National Coal Museum (Pig Pit) in Torfaen, the Rhondda Heritage Park near Pontypridd, and the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea. All three sites celebrate the community spirit and political radicalism of the industrial age and present a corresponding implication of community collapse as a consequence of industrial decline (Dicks, 2000, 2020; James, 2018). Moreover, Rhodes and Price (2023) argue that since devolution the industrial heritage of South Wales has been increasingly positioned as emblematic of national character. Even the dangers and deprivations of industrial life are repackaged as sources of pride. Linked to this is the (generally unrealised) hope, that industrial heritage can be used as the basis for tourist-based economic regeneration in deindustrialised regions (Dicks, 2020).

Like the pieces created by REACH participants, research conducted by Adamson and Jones (2004) tells a different story. Their work suggests that most residents of the South Wales coalfield regard community as the primary characteristic of Valleys life. That is no surprise. The notion of community, in Britain at least, is strongly connected to working class values such as solidarity and emancipation (Berger et al., 2020). Indeed, as Pritchard (2001, p. 59) points out, ‘community is an important element of
Wales’s distinctive identity that portrays Wales in highly flattering terms’. But Adamson and Jones also found that less than a third of respondents felt that community values were in decline as a result of deindustrialisation. Their research thus challenges the ways in which official heritage sites in the region portray the connection between industrial life and community. Yes industry played a key role in forging Valleys communities, but their continued existence is not dependent upon it. The renewed interest in natural heritage, found in the creative work discussed above, can help to explain this. Llewellyn et al. (2019) interviewed residents of the Ebbw Fach Valley about their attitudes to the local landscape. They found that most respondents used strongly affirmatory terms, often making positive comparisons with the damaged and despoiled state of those landscapes before deindustrialisation. This suggests that people in Blaenau Gwent are perhaps more interested in the erasure of industrial scars than the preservation of industrial archaeology.

Such attitudes are evident in the final slide of the Blaenau Gwent Timeline (Figure 10), constructed by participants from their discussions at workshops. But the timeline as a whole, taking the reader from before the Romans to the post industrial era, is as much about coherence as contrast. It presents a linear sequence which connects ‘then’ with ‘now’, tracking historical change but emphasising a fundamentally continuity in land and people beneath that. That desire to identify continuity between the present and the deep past is also apparent in other submissions, such as the Modron poem and the commentary accompanying Linda Stemp’s photographs. The timeline also alludes to the importance of the national past to conceptualisations of the area’s local history. The first four slides cover the Celts, the coming of the Romans, the arrival of the Normans and life in the Middle Ages. They contextualise local concerns within a broader national narrative. The Silures who occupied Gwent before the Romans are discussed in relation to the defeat of Caratacus in Shropshire. The Norman occupation of Gwent is mitigated by native successes in Gwynedd and Powys. A general description

Figure 10. Final slide of the Blaenau Gwent Timeline.
of medieval peasant life sits next to a section on St Illtyd’s church in Llanhilleth. The tale of industrialisation is similarly told by switching between local and national lenses, with the Sirhowy Iron works and the Marine and Six Bells Collieries used to illustrate a nationwide industrial boon.

The use of Welsh words and phrases in participants’ poems and songs invoke wider forms of Welshness in a different way. Barbara Candlish uses Welsh for the title of her poem Mar neu O’r Blaen, with an English translation (Then and Now) appended. She also adds a note explaining that ‘the sky is smiling;’ is a Welsh language expression for when the weather is sunny. Cynefin 2’ makes a similar claim to linguistic authenticity through the appropriation of Welsh folk songs. The chorus is inspired by the Welsh-language lullaby Suo Gân. The closing sections are a reworked version of the Welsh-language folk song Ar Lan y Môr (Kinney, 2011). These are deliberate invocations of a language which few in the area speak, but which is nonetheless seen as a marker of Welsh identity and a birth right unfairly denied (Bowie, 1993; Roberts, 1999). Yet the lack of anti-English sentiment in these outputs is also revealing. Scholars often contend that differentiation from the English is a core aspect of Welsh identity (Bowie, 1993; Haesly, 2005; Johnes, 2015). Its absence from these pieces implies a sense of collective self that is based on shared historical experience rather than national grievance. Oppositional definitions of Welsh identity perhaps come to the fore in moments of heightened national awareness (Johnes, 2000) They are less important in day-to-day settings where the unconscious business of identity making takes place (Billig, 2017).

What we see in the pieces produced by REACH participants are elements of what Anderson (2006) would call an ‘imagined community’, centred on the locality but extending temporally into the past as well as spatially across the nation. That interpretation becomes more compelling if we accept that the concept of ‘community’ in the local sense provides a means of distinguishing local identities based on direct experience from membership of groups at national or global levels (Borland et al., 1992; Gilbert, 1995). Furthermore, the use of historical elements to define communities is key to what Anthony Smith (Smith, 1988, 2009) conceives of as the ‘myths and symbols’ of identity. According to Smith, by drawing on shared stories about the past, by creating a sense of connection with the actors in those stories, nations maintain identities in the present. But Smith’s framework also works for local identities, which are built around practises of representation, including heritage, that define the symbols which demarcate the community (Berger et al., 2020). When operating at that local level, this process recalls Maurice Halbwachs’ (1992) concept of ‘collective memory’, referring to the ways in which shared understandings of the past are embedded in social interactions but derive from wider cultural contexts. In fact, for Wales Smith’s theories are work better at the local level than the national. Thompson et al. (1999) have suggested that Welshness lacks the coherence and uniformity that Smith’s ethno-symbolist model of identity formation requires. It is certainly true that the industrialised and English-speaking South Wales Valleys do not sit comfortably besides notions of the rural, Welsh-speaking Gwerin (Day & Murdoch, 1993; Dicks, 2020; Thompson et al., 1999). Yet as we have seen, elements of that more ‘traditional’ idea of Welshness do appear in the pieces submitted to BG REACH. The industrial experience remains powerful of course, in memories from childhood, in the motifs of pitheads and miner’s cottages, even in ruminations on danger and deprivation and a landscape despoiled. Yet the creative reflections on
heritage discussed above suggest that nowadays industry is only part of the story for people living in Blaenau Gwent. It is the contemporary history of the post-industrial era that has become more important, particularly in relation to a tale of nature revived. This in turn has led to an increased sense of connection with the rurality that participants associate with the deeper past.

This reverence for nature is frequently expressed in terms of landscape. Almost two thirds of the tiles in the BG REACH collage centre on topography in one way or another, frequently locating human-made structures within the hillsides that define the area. Linda Stemp’s photographs do the same, visually juxtaposing the cultural and natural heritage of the Ebbw Fach valley. Works such as ‘Remembering Cwmtillery’ and ‘My Ramblings’, meanwhile, take the reader on journeys through the landscape in order to access the meanings and associations it holds for the authors. ‘Bathed in Bird-song’ even depicts such journeys explicitly in terms of (re)discovery:

A little further on the lambs are baaing
Another treasure uncovered
Unseen by me for years

Many other BG REACH submissions are replete with spatial specificity. ‘Mar neu O’r Blaen (Then and Now)’ refers repeatedly to the hills, valleys and rivers of Blaenau Gwent. ‘The Welsh Miner’s Wife’ mentions a nearby steelworks (presumably at Ebbw Vale). The opening verse of ‘Cynefin 2’ refer to ‘mountainous Welsh valleys’; ‘dog walks in Six bells’, ‘my valley home’ etc. The recollections of Hazel Robinson, Mike Pescod, and Pay Tovey and Hilary Davie all, in different ways, anchor them unequivocally in Blaenau Gwent, The same theme is at play in ‘My lovely valley’, in which Stephen’s life is played out within the contours of Cwmtillery. As Pat Tovey puts it in ‘My OU Break-down’, a reflection on the BG REACH project and the Coronavirus pandemic, ‘this is our little world, our piece of heaven’.

What these pieces reveal is how participants conflate the networks they inhabit socially, the landscapes they occupy physically, and the histories they inherit temporally. Of course, that is true of many communities; their sense of place is built in part from the physical environment and an awareness of continuity and change over time. What REACH adds is a fuller appreciation of just how intertwined those social, historical and geographical elements can be. In this way the project suggests that an awareness of locatedness in time as well as space can contribute to Cynefin, that sense of rootedness that is a powerful aspect of identity in many parts of Wales. This tallies with research recent research conducted with residents of Abertillery, Aberbeeg and Llanhilleth by Amy Walker (2021b, pp. 58–60), who found ‘a sense that everyone shared the same experiences, histories, geographies and social networks’. Given the centrality of place to how this identity is constructed, it is useful to think about the Ebbw Fach Valley as a cultural landscape. This concept came to prominence in the 1990s as the importance of interactions between the land and its inhabitants gained recognition. Landscapes bear the physical traces of human activity, but they also act as vessels of meaning for the personal and collective memories of the people that live in them (Agnoletti, 2008; Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Lennon, 2011). Olga Lavrenova (2019) even goes so far as to describe landscapes as cultural constructions in their entirety. This brings us to Appadurai’s (1996, p. 18 & 41) argument that, ‘locality itself is a historical product’, but in a representational as well as a causal
sense. In his own words, communities at the local level frequently invent for themselves ‘a collective conscience whose historical roots are in some distant past […] but are potentially available to ignition by new historical and political contingencies’. In this way the inhabitants of cultural landscapes equip themselves with a shared, bounded and historically derived sense of place.

That is very much what we see in the work produced for REACH; a notion of heritage that is primarily local, socially constructed, and built on the supposition of a definitional relationship between the land and its people. Both scholarly analysis and official heritage have tended to understand that phenomenon primarily through the lens of industry. As this project demonstrates, however, whilst industrial motifs do loom large there are other aspects of the past, both distant and very recent, which make an important geo-historical contribution to how community members conceptualise their place in space and time. Yet that sense of identity also draws upon symbols associated with the other form of Welshness, thus problematising the notion of a neatly bounded and distinct form of Valleys Welshness. This suggests a blurring of the boundaries between our two myths of Welsh identity.

Community responses

As a participatory research project, one of the aims of REACH was to assess whether creative and collective engagement with heritage could strengthen community cohesion. Feedback from participants certainly suggests that opportunities to engage with local history through the creative arts had community benefits. People who had moved to the area recently felt able to integrate more quickly and reported reduced feelings of isolation. Long-term residents commented that REACH enhanced existing community links by strengthening relationships with people they only knew in passing. In a short film made by the project, participants commented on the value of reconnecting with old acquaintances and of ‘seeing the community coming together’. In the words of one lady ‘we try to keep as one big family’. Pat Tovey’s reflective piece ‘My OU Breakdown’ alludes to similar themes, talking about the project’s impact in terms of overcoming self-doubt, becoming a student, and strangers becoming friends. In her own words ‘our community was good, I just needed to open my eyes to see it’. That said, there was significant trepidation before the sessions began. One participant reported; ‘I was so nervous, I thought it would be too hard for me and I wouldn’t be able to get involved’. Another said; ‘at the beginning we were all worried it would be like school, it put a lot of people off’. However, the same two respondents also told us, respectively, that; ‘I loved it, it opened my eyes to life around me and made me want to learn again’, and ‘after the first few sessions word got around it was nothing like school, it was interesting and fun’. Those who attended workshops also commented on their value for improving confidence and learning or reactivating artistic skills. One reflected: ‘who would have thought that we could all become students again?’ Another said ‘there is loads to learn and lots of us who want to’. A third told us; ‘it made me realise I’m not too old to learn’. Similar themes emerged from the feedback on the project’s intergenerational strand. One older resident reported that ‘I didn’t think they [the school pupils] would want to hear what we had to say’, One of the pupils, meanwhile, confided that they were ‘nervous to start the project because I have never done anything like it before’.
Once activity was underway, however, feedback was much more positive. After the launch event (a themed 1950s period afternoon) one of the residents said ‘I love seeing the young people joining in, they were great fun and we all enjoyed it’. The attitudes of the pupils underwent a comparable change. One said ‘I loved listening to music with the elders and it was even more enjoyable to dance with them’. Another told us ‘I loved it so much that me and my friend are going to volunteer after school’.

These responses demonstrate the social value of participatory projects like BG REACH, particularly given the emphasis on community and locality in the work and testimony produced. As explained in an earlier section, both heritage and the arts offer opportunities to support confidence and skills acquisition; help foster new relationships and strengthen existing ones, embed community membership; and support participants’ wellbeing (Byrne, 2008; Johnston & Marwood, 2017; Kay, 2000; Matarasso, 1997). The project certainly achieved those things, and at the same time contributed to the rehabilitation of Blaenau Gwent’s image in the eyes of residents. As one participant put it ‘It’s made me realise how lucky I am to live in this area. It is rich with history and it’s fascinating to walk in the footsteps of our grandfathers’. Others made similar points, for instance; ‘it opened my eyes to the area’ and ‘be proud of where you live’. The value of being able to share perspectives on the region’s history with other residents was a feature of the feedback from multiple respondents. Such comments, although ostensibly about the benefits of the activities themselves, bring us back to the notion of identity. Involvement in the project strengthened participants’ sense of being a member of a community that is defined in part by its shared historical experience.

Similar themes emerged from the comments which visitors to the physical exhibition were invited to leave. In total 146 feedback cards were left, many of them from current or former residents. Of those, only 11 contained negative comments, referring mainly to either exhibition design or a feeling that the materials did not represent all parts of Blaenau Gwent. The vast majority were positive, saying things like ‘makes me happy to be a part of a community’; ‘it’s a lovely reminder of our heritage’; ‘a beautiful representation of home’ and ‘it’s amazing to see Blaenau Gwent represented in art, so many happy memories and feelings’. For other visitors the displays aroused specific associations, for instance; ‘evokes memories of my nan and gramps’; ‘I remember my childhood with my friends playing in the street’; ‘this reminded me of the times that I was with my parents’ and ‘brough back so many happy memories’. Indeed, some visitors were inspired to use the feedback cards to share their own stories of the area. One wrote ‘my grancho was a miner in Penalta Pit and took part in the strike. He misses it so much’, Another wrote ‘My grampy used to cut the pit props in the colliery to make the pit safe’. Some of the stories on the comment cards reflected the mixed feelings about the industrial era evident in the pieces on exhibit. One visitor wrote ‘I think my life would have been drastically different if my father was able to continue mining. Financially it was hard growing up without the security and pay Welsh mining provided’ Another reflected as follows: ‘Great memories! My dad went down the pit in 1938. Ended up with a broken back!! But around all that, there was love and community!’ A bolstered feeling of place-based pride was thus one positive outcome of the project, for participants and exhibition visitors alike. But more than that there is, in the comments by visitors as in the works produced by participants, a sense of community identity forged by shared experience and transmitted down the generations. This lends further weight to Tonkin’s (1992) contention that imaginings of the past, seen from the changing perspective of the present, are pivotal in
shaping group identities. This finding is significant because collective memory plays an important role in defining membership of post-industrial communities (Light, 2000). Participation in the arts, meanwhile, enables people to clarify and articulate their own cultural identities (Marshall, 2007). Bringing the two together was the innovation allowing REACH to succeed as a community development initiative and a research project.

Much of the feedback from participants echoed the preoccupations found in the work they produced. Many reported that they had expected to find themselves focusing on industrialisation but instead connected more with other forms of heritage. One said; ‘the history talked about usually in the area is from industrialisation onwards and we’ve done that to death. Nice to explore a richer history than what I know about’. Another commented that ‘I thought I knew all there was to know about my area, then we started to hear about […] wild animals roaming Blaenau Gwent and ancient burial grounds where a Giant is said to be buried waiting to rise up and save Wales’. The revival of nature was also a significant focus for comment. Several respondents reported that they valued the chance to engage with the area’s natural heritage and felt this was just as valid as learning about the human-made history of the area. One said ‘Man-made history and heritage has its place, but I strongly believe the area needs to move on from this. Environmental concerns […] need as much focus’ Another told us that the project ‘helped me see beauty and nature in the area’. A third wrote, ‘I’d like young people to realise how beautiful the area is’. That said, some respondents felt that the project could have done more to explore the negative impacts of industry, such as living conditions and mortality rates. Others expressed a desire to situate the history of the Ebbw Fach valley more fully in that of the story of Wales as a whole. Through much of the feedback was a tacit recognition that knowledge of the past informs identity in the present; what one respondent described as ‘the Blaenau Gwent spirit’. In this way the project highlighted the centrality of heritage to the definition of ‘community’ offered by Berger et al. (2020); i.e. a means of alluding to shared interests and common ties that go beyond people simply living in the same area or interacting in the same sphere.

On that note, it is worth remembering that for over two decades commentators have recognised a moral imperative to use heritage as a means of addressing social injustice (Newman & McLean, 1998; Watson & Waterton, 2011). There has, however, been an understandable tendency to focus on economic outcomes at the expense of other potential benefits (Lak et al., 2020; Oevermann & Mieg, 2015; Rhodes et al., 2021; Smith, 2007b). Exploiting the economic potential of heritage for the advantage of local communities is of course hugely important. Yet as Pendlebury and Profyoriou (2017, p. 429) point out, prioritising heritage’s economic value at the expenses of other benefits is ‘an easy trap to fall into in a world where capital accumulation overrides most processes in most places’. The Ebbw Fach valley cannot claim famous sites that will attract tourists from outside The heritage reflected in the works created by REACH participants is rather an awareness of lives lived, generation upon generation, in a particular place. Seen from that perspective, it is not the past itself that is bequeathed to the present but rather a sense of continuity with it. In the words of Johnston and Marwood (2017, p. 818), ‘the inherited past is part of political, community and personal discourses in the present, and it is a structuring condition of our future’. REACH demonstrates this. The process of creatively reflecting on local heritage can contribute to place-based identities as well as shedding light on them. Acts of place-making built around collective memory are a means by which communities can mobilise for survival
(Byrne, 2008; Harrison, 2010). Such outcomes are not as easily measured as economic regeneration but are nonetheless positive.

David Harvey (2001, p. 326) identifies heritage as ‘an instrument of cultural power’. REACH sought to use a grassroots approach to heritage in order to transfer some of that power to people who do not normally hold it, enabling Blaenau Gwent residents to issue a riposte to place-based stigma through the talents of the people who live there. The virtue of this ‘heritage from below’ perspective, derives not from claims of greater authenticity but rather from its facility to complicate public understandings of Wales’s history, and to challenge power inequalities in relation to who controls the past. The fact that over 18,000 people visited the physical REACH exhibition in a three-month period suggests some degree of success.

**Conclusions**

The outcomes of the BG REACH project confirm the efficacy of combining heritage with the creative arts as a means of delivering benefits to participants and contributing to the identities that underpin community cohesion. As an exploration of identity, meanwhile, the project’s success supports a methodological contention; that creative pieces produced by ordinary people can be textured sources of information about the outlooks of their communities. Artistic work offers participants greater latitude than surveys, interviews or focus groups. It also provides a body of source material that, whilst challenging to work with, acts as a rich trove of information, both intentional and not, on the worldviews of its creators. By using social endeavour to facilitate the production of creative reflections on local heritage, and then analysing those works as cultural products, the project has revealed much about the intersections between heritage, locality and national identity.

Taken as a whole, the body of work produced reveals three things which add to our understanding of Welshness in the coalfield. Firstly, there is a powerful relationship in participants’ minds between the neighbours they interact with, the topographies they live in, and the histories that have unfolded there. This shows that the concept of landscape as a cultural construct, as championed by scholars such as Ken Taylor and Jane Lennon (2011), as well as Olga Lavrenova (2019), has considerable applicability for considerations of Welsh identity and the regional variations therein. Secondly, one consequence of that connection with place is that working class communities do not necessarily view deindustrialisation in negative terms, as the writings of scholars such as Valerie Walkerdine (2009), Tim Strangleman (2013) and Sherry Lee Linkon (2018) assume. Instead, the residents of the Ebbw Fach Valley who participated in the REACH project see the decline of industry in a positive light, not as trauma and toxicity but rather regeneration and renewal. It is natural heritage and its facility for promoting community wellbeing, rather than cultural heritage as a reminder of what has been lost, which is at the heart of such perspectives. Finally, the outputs of the project challenge the contentions of scholars such as Thompson et al. (1999), Simon Brooks (2017) and Robin Mann and Steve Fenton (2017), who argue that the ongoing currency of the industrial past in South Wales continues to undermine the coherence of Wales’s national self-image. The industrial version of Welshness certainly remains strong in Blaenau Gwent. Four decades on from deindustrialisation, however, it also incorporates motifs of language and rurality more often associated with Balsom’s (1985) Y Fro Gymraeg. Could this be an early indication that, beneath
the radar of national campaigning and electoral politics, Welsh identity is becoming less splintered than once it was?

The achievements of the BG REACH project have inspired a successor, which will seek to further investigate that very question. Wales REACH will run for two years, offering a far greater range of heritage and creative arts activities than its predecessor. It will work with five communities across Wales that are disadvantaged by dint of socio-economic status, ethnicity, age, location and / or disability. Scoping activity for the project has been funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) and conducted by a coalition of twelve partner organisations, led by the OU. At the time of writing, the project team is awaiting a decision on follow-on funding from NLHF which will enable the full delivery of the planned programme. As with BG REACH, the project’s aims are to improve participant wellbeing, strengthen communities, rebut stigmas, and amplify unheard voices. Crucially for this article, it will also enable us to take a comparative approach to understanding intersections between heritage and identity across several different communities in Wales. We look forward to reporting on findings in due course.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Sarah Roberts and Susie Bowers for their tireless work to make BG REACH a success through the COVID 19 pandemic. The same goes to Veronica Davies, Elizabeth Ford, Liz Lane and Robert Matthews, who facilitated the project’s workshops and activities. Thanks also to Martin Clarke, Karl Hack and Paul Lawrence, who commented on a draft of this article, as well as to the two anonymous peer reviewers. Your suggestions made this a substantially better piece of work. And finally, huge thanks and congratulations to all the BG REACH participants whose enthusiasm and talents made the project a success.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by UK Research and Innovation.

Notes on contributor

Richard Marsden is a senior lecturer in History at the Open University, UK.

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