

Institution: UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
Unit of Assessment: D30 History
Title of case study: Co-Creating Community Histories
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) Research by Carl Chinn, MBE at the University of Birmingham has contributed to a better public understanding of community relations (past and present) within the Birmingham area, particularly for smaller and formerly marginalised communities. Chinn has also produced a wealth of new, accessible historical data, both directly (through the online and freely available BirminghamLives Archive) and indirectly through stimulating local public interest in local history and encouraging and supporting publication of personal histories, websites and archives which are freely available to the public. Chinn's research and commitment to public engagement have also had an impact on the delivery and design of local school curricula and acted to highlight the opportunity of higher education to pupils. Chinn's research also acts to preserve and present the cultural heritage of the Birmingham area and contributes to the process of memorialisation and reconciliation for all of its people.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) The research that underpins this work has been carried out by Chinn, originally a lecturer and latterly Professor of Community History at the University of Birmingham. Chinn's research makes use of traditional historical sources but also engages widely in oral history. His research has emphasised the importance of the 'voice of the poor' in working-class and immigrant histories, and led him to encourage people to write down their memories to extend the range of working-class evidence. The result has been a string of academic publications about the lives of the poorer urban working class in big cities in England and especially Birmingham, and the creation of an archive of donated material. Chinn's research in this area can be traced back to the late 1980's; however, selected publications within the period 1993-2013 are detailed below (see outputs R1 – R3 below).</p> <p>Chinn's <i>Poverty Amidst Prosperity</i> (R1) drew on a wide range of source material and covered a variety of topics including the relationships between poverty and disability, old-age, health, housing and communities. It has been praised as 'an extremely valuable contribution to the literature'. A revised edition in 2006 also included public donated photographs, another source that Chinn had begun to use to open-up Histories that have previously been ignored.</p> <p>This national study is complemented by case studies of immigrant communities in the city, namely the Italians (R2) and Irish (R3), which also draw on first hand testimonies of individuals who lived in Birmingham. Chinn has since published two popular book series focussing on Birmingham (<i>The Streets of Brum</i>) and the Black Country (<i>Black Country Memories</i>) which feature the memories of working-class people.</p> <p>Through this work researching the histories of groups who have often been marginalised in more formal histories, Chinn has developed ground-breaking approaches to research via the use of letters, unpublished life stories and photographs. The BirminghamLives Archive of donated material is therefore both central to, and a product of, Chinn's research; public engagement is fundamental to Chinn's methodology as a historian. A key aspect of working-class experience that has emerged strongly from this research is the way in which ordinary peoples' understandings of their past history have shaped their cultural values and sense of self. This insight has particularly informed the creation of the BirminghamLives Archive as a resource through which local people can find out about and recover their sense of past to enrich their understanding of themselves and their place in the world.</p>
<p>3. References to the research All outputs available from HEI on request. R1. <i>Poverty Amidst Prosperity: the Urban Poor in England 1834-1914</i> (1st published Manchester University Press: 1995; new edition, Carnegie Publishing, 2006)</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

- R2. "Sturdy Catholic emigrants": the Irish in early Victorian Birmingham', in Roger Swift and Sheridan Gilley (eds), *The Irish in Victorian Britain. The Local Dimension* (Four Courts Press: 1999).
- R3. "We All Come From Round Sora": Italians in Birmingham', in Owen Ashton, Robert Fyson and Stephen Roberts (eds), *The Duty of Discontent. Essays in Honour of Dorothy Thompson* (Mansell: 1995)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Aspects of Chinn's public engagement activity are core to his research methodology and in that way cultivate impact with/upon those individuals and communities with whom he interacts to produce his research. In 2013, Chinn was honoured to receive the Award of Master of the University from the Open University in recognition of his notable contribution to public service, education and culture in the West Midlands, including his work in engaging the public with their local history (described below).

One of the key ways by which Chinn's research has had demonstrable impact is through the creation of the BirminghamLives Archive, comprised of public donations of historical material [see source 1 below]. Prior to the REF assessment period, in 2002 in recognition of the importance of this innovative collection, the Birmingham Grid for Learning set up a dedicated website (BirminghamLives) to make the archive accessible to the public. The website contains over 40,000 items (although more than twice this number exists in the original archive, and has continued to grow throughout the period 2008 - 2013), including letters, life stories, interviews, cine film clips, photos and a wealth of memorabilia. Together they make up one of the biggest collections of working-class life history for any one place in the world, bringing to light the everyday lives of the many Birmingham people that have been mostly overlooked by historians. The Head of Collections Development makes it clear that 'the collection provides a large and extremely rich source for the history of urban working-class life from the late nineteenth century and twentieth century. The depth of material relating to history of women is particularly valuable, as is the rare material relating to the experiences of immigrant and minority ethnic communities such as those from the Italian, Jewish and South Asian communities. The archive also, of course, provides a unique reflection of Carl's vision as an academic public historian who realised the importance of reaching out and exchanging knowledge beyond the academy long before that became a recognised or common practice' [2]. Without Chinn's research, these resources would not have been collected or subsequently made available for use in the ways detailed below.

Chinn's research has concentrated upon those who have often been excluded from or marginalised by formal history: the working class, especially the poor; women; and ethnic minorities – with a particular focus on Birmingham and the surrounding areas. Through his work on the history of local communities, Chinn has both **enhanced people's understanding of their place in local history and facilitated their contribution to it**. As a result of employing the methodology in the production of the above outputs, Chinn relies on the letters, poems, life stories, creative writing, photographs, paintings, drawings, recordings or videos of 'ordinary' individuals for his research donated by individuals from Birmingham from across the world and these both contribute to Chinn's research and demonstrate the public's engagement with it. The vast quantity of donations have come as a result of Chinn's high profile as Birmingham's Community Historian in the period 2008 - 2013: in addition to academic papers and popular works of history, Chinn engages the community through weekly local history features in local newspapers the *Birmingham Mail* (circulation 48,660 - this weekly column in particular is a crucial feature of Chinn's engagement), *Express* and *Star* (circulation 116,992, with estimated readership at 290,000); through a weekly radio show on BBC WM; and the publication of a monthly magazine *Brummagem* about local history and using the contributions of the public (circulation 3,000).

By drawing together the directly narrated experiences of local people, Chinn's research, and the archive in particular, acts to **preserve and present the cultural heritage contributing to the process of memorialisation and reconciliation** for all of its people. In 2012, Chinn donated the 'Black Country Memories Collection' from the archive to the Black Country Living Museum. The Senior Curator for the Museum identified Chinn's research (of which the collection is a part) as

Impact case study (REF3b)

making 'a significant contribution to understanding the human history of the Black Country and to capturing irreplaceable reminiscences from those who lived or are living here' [3].

The archive has stimulated interest in local histories. Chinn receives an average of 65 emails per day, which include not only donations to the archive, but requests for assistance and input into local and personal histories (about a third of the total). Chinn's democratisation of local history through his research and subsequent public engagement activities has **resulted in the publication of countless local histories of the area** (Chinn has written forewords for at least 60 books of local history - 23 since 2008 - as well as inspiring and supporting the production of countless others) and the production of local history websites, also aimed at engaging the public [4]. The archive is also vital resource for **amateur and professional historians** alike, providing as it does a vast collection of sources online.

Chinn's research has also benefitted schools, **providing free KS1 and KS2 teaching ideas based upon the sources within the archive** [1]. What Chinn and the archival team are keen to emphasise through the provision of such resources is that an understanding of the past can provide vital continuity for young people living in a perpetually changing world, giving them a sense of place and belonging and an appreciation of the fact that the rights we now enjoy were gained through the hardships of those that came before. In his talks to local schools, Chinn creates 'intergenerational activity', by encouraging children to explore their histories with family members. Through working closely with local schools, **Chinn has had an impact upon the design and delivery of their curriculum**. As a result of Chinn's influence, one local school has set up their own oral history website (2008) and in 2006 was invited to produce the official Birmingham Air Raids Remembrance Association website (which has had 630,000 hits to date, the majority in the period 2008 - 2013). These both support their own delivery of the history curriculum, but are also available for other schools and groups to use for this purpose, as well as accessible by the public more widely. A further specific example is that as a direct result of Chinn's research and teaching, Swanhurst school elected to teach Birmingham's local history at A-level, with the focus on poverty from 1834-1951 - Chinn's books feature on the reading list for this [5].

Chinn also works closely with the University of Birmingham Outreach office, supporting events aimed at local students from less advantaged backgrounds. These events include: giving annual lectures (since 2009) for the History Quest Event (which forms part of the Raising Aspirations in Secondary Education Programme) for year 9 and 10 students from West Midlands Schools (circa 250 children attend each event); giving lectures at the Academic Enrichment Programme for students in Year 12 (aimed at the brightest local students from less advantaged backgrounds); and in June 2012, giving a keynote at an event being driven by the Department for Education (The DUX) where the most gifted students in year 9 from across the country are attending Russell Group Universities for the day. The event was attended by over 100 students and teachers from around the UK. The connection between Chinn's research and the impact of these events is clear: 'Professor Chinn's interactive and inspirational lectures focus on the importance that local History plays in who we are and how the university is part of the students community. Feedback from these sessions has always indicated that the session that Professor Chinn delivers is amongst the most valued by the students and teachers and **using local history to demonstrate his passion about the importance that education plays**, is a message that always goes down extremely well' (University of Birmingham Outreach Office) [6].

Chinn's particular focus on ethnic, religious and immigrant cultures and communities has been recognised throughout the region, and he has been called upon by a number of charities and associations to **provide them with advice and historical context to understand and respond to the needs of their users and so influence their activities**. For example, working with a Rights and Equality group in Sandwell, Chinn was able to provide historical information 'on families of both ethnic and indigenous people as well as their specific community origins' which helped them to 'to **resolve local issues and bring about good community cohesion**' (group Chief Executive) [7]. He has also supported local groups representing the Irish, LBGT and religious communities, each of whom he was able to provide with tailored information on the history of the area and highlight 'the importance of the positive contributions made by the various communities that inhabit

Impact case study (REF3b)

our area... serving to promote and keep alive the pieces of history that helped shape our communities and point out the common ground we occupy though hardships shared' (Manager, Sandwell Irish Community Association) [8].

In summary, Chinn's research and promotion of community history in the Birmingham area has produced a wealth of new historical data, both directly (through the BirminghamLives archive), but also indirectly through encouraging and supporting the publication of personal histories, websites and archives which are freely available to the public. The research has resulted in a better understanding of community relations (past and present) within the Birmingham area, particularly those for smaller and formerly marginalised communities. Chinn's research and commitment to public engagement have also had an impact on the delivery and design of local school curricula and acted to highlight the opportunity of higher education to its pupils.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [1] <http://lives.bgfl.org/>
- [2] Factual statement provided by Head of Collections Development, Birmingham Archives & Heritage.
- [3] Factual statement provided by Senior Curator, Black Country Living Museum.
- [4] List of publications (available on request).
- [5] Factual statement provided by AST Citizenship, Swanshurst School.
- [6] Collated feedback from attendees (available on request).
- [7] Factual statement provided by Chief Executive, Rights and Equality Sandwell.
- [8] Factual statement provided by Manager, Sandwell Irish Community Association.