

## **My House My Street: Engaging Local Communities of Volunteers to Learn, Train and Gain from Lost Local Heritage**

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### **Abstract:**

MyHouseMyStreet is an HLF<sup>1</sup> funded, community-based digital archive providing information about Brighton & Hove's historic houses and streets. Initiated by The Regency Town House Heritage Centre<sup>2</sup>, the aim of the project is to encourage and enable exploration of the local heritage of the less fashionable 'back-street' neighbourhoods in the city through an online database of property-related information that has largely been collected, digitized and documented using crowd-sourcing. The project website provides a database of local heritage information through the vector of local people's homes and as such has inspired a high degree of engagement with community stakeholders. The outcomes of the project have been an enhanced pride-in-place, neighbourliness and civic awareness of the local residents. It is argued that these factors that have been key in recruiting and retaining volunteers in this community-led digital archiving initiative. The website implements a "Drupal" content management system with faceted browsing with a specially created taxonomy to facilitate ease of use for local history researchers.

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<sup>1</sup> Heritage Lottery Fund - <http://www.hlf.org.uk/Pages/Home.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> <http://rth.org.uk/>

Information has been gathered, digitized and catalogued for 25 streets, which contain 1200 homes, and which provide the basis for community-led “street histories” for each of the streets in the pilot project. The outcomes of the project show that volunteers commit their time to projects for specific reasons: on the one hand for the pleasure of autotelic learning, on the other, for fostering a sense of place and history.

### **Introduction**

MyHouseMyStreet (MHMS)<sup>3</sup> is a community-based digital archive providing information about Brighton & Hove's historic houses and streets. The aim is to encourage and enable the public to explore the local heritage of Brighton & Hove through the historic documents collected, digitized and presented on the project website. A particular focus has been on the less fashionable 'back-street' neighbourhoods in the city that have nevertheless had long and colourful pasts and that remain vibrant residential and commercial areas today. The project encourages neighbours to get to know one another and to work together, generating a sense of pride-in-place that has resulted in numerous requests for similar initiatives in other towns and cities. MHMS was conceived by The Regency Town House Heritage Centre, which in fulfilment of its aims offers House tours, outreach events and a number of digital initiatives. The latter range from projects focused on the cataloguing of architectural drawings and ornaments, to disseminating Georgian and Victorian manuscript correspondence online. MHMS is one of the most ambitious digital initiatives of the trust to date.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://myhousemystreet.org.uk/>

## Context

MHMS builds on several precedents in both the research and commercial arenas. These include: crowd-sourced citizen science and heritage projects; genealogy and family-history interest and public interest in local history and heritage. Examples of the first, crowd-sourced projects include "Old Weather"<sup>4</sup> and "Zooniverse"<sup>5</sup>. In "Old Weather", 100,000 documents were uploaded, and the project team found that the public had processed all of them several years sooner than they had anticipated. Another example with a closer subject matter to MHMS is "Parish Clerk"<sup>6</sup>, where members of local communities digitized parish records around the country. 'Letters in the Attic'<sup>7</sup> took crowd-sourced contributions of family heirlooms from the public for an exhibition and digital archive. In addition to building on this growing public interest in citizen science (and culture), MHMS also builds on a recent uplift in interest in online-based family history research. This trend has seen commercial enterprises recognize the profits to be made in this growing market. Examples of such entities include [ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) and [findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk). The success of these websites demonstrates the willingness for the average customer to pay up to £100 P.A. for a subscription that gives them access to a variety of historical document types such as census, births, marriages deaths, military and immigration/emigration records. This online demand is also mirrored by the uptake in broadcast and print media coverage of genealogical interest as exemplified in TV programs such as "Who do you think you are?". MHMS benefits from both these trends

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.oldweather.org/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.zooniverse.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.onlineparishclerks.org.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.communitycatalogues.co.uk/view\\_a\\_\\_1\\_or\\_\\_3\\_pn\\_\\_0.aspx](http://www.communitycatalogues.co.uk/view_a__1_or__3_pn__0.aspx)

and a general appetite for local history and heritage. However, what is unique about it is that it takes the starting point of a typical genealogical perspective and alters the focus from one of family history to one where the home is the nexus for research. MHMS broadens the sense of the 'personal' in family history research to that of the 'public realm' of the street. It also renders 'personal' the 'public' heritage of individual neighbourhoods by populating them with the life details of those individuals who lived there and called these historic places "home".

### **Methodology**

The project relied principally on the dedicated input of volunteers, who contributed to tasks such as identifying and collating original documents to be photographed, record photography, image processing, data entry and record correction. Although a "Facebook" group was set up to market and recruit volunteers, the majority of them were in the end recruited via 3 main channels: firstly from the existing pool of volunteers who were in regular attendance at the RTH for other projects and initiatives; secondly from the North Laine Community Association, a local amenity organization in the target research area; and finally from attendees of the Heritage Open Day exhibitions in the same area. In addition, once the first cohort were recruited, the project spread by word of mouth to other interested volunteers.

The timeline of the project can be summarized into 3 stages. The first stage, from 2008-09, comprised a pilot study with one street. During this initial year there were 5 volunteers. In 2009-10, the pilot was enlarged to test the technology, which was essentially a "Drupal" website for handling data input. In the second year there were 15 volunteers. The project received HLF funding in 2011-12, which was used to build the

final website and extend data collection and processing to 25 streets in a 12 month period. This phase involved the participation of ~100 volunteers. In addition to this, the project involved the participation of hundreds of local residents in the various research streets. The project is ongoing, with a plan to update and extend the dataset annually so that the streets currently completed will represent 5% of the final number of streets.

The project uses census documents and street directories for the occupancy data of the houses in the selected streets. The once-a-decade UK census documentation (from 1841 to 1911) was used to provide names, ages, gender, places of birth and occupations of inhabitants; in addition, street directories (available from the 1780s through to the 1970s) were digitized as a subset of the census information. These document types provide good data on property occupancy, however they do not provide information on property ownership (which was beyond the scope of the project). Volunteers required training in basic IT skills, in addition to specific skills for accessing the historical documentation from the custom-built website. Training in general historical research was often required in order to develop the street histories that were written by volunteers. In some cases volunteers were given more specialized training in photogrammetry techniques.

## **Outputs**

The MHMS online database provides information on 25 streets (1200 homes). This translates to approx 1.4M individual items of data points on the historic occupancy for local streets in the North Laine, East Brunswick and Kemptown West areas of Brighton. The website provides faceted browsing to allow both chronological and typological search and analysis of building occupancy in these areas. In addition to the raw data, street histories are made available that include information from additional sources such

as: education, health, crime and planning records. In addition, historic and contemporary photos of the streets are made available and in some cases digital 3D textured mesh models have been produced.

## **Outcomes**

Since its inception, the project has witnessed a large amount of interest from local residents and volunteers alike. Those residents in the selected streets almost unilaterally adopted posters with the histories of the occupants of their homes and businesses for display within their windows on occasions such as Heritage Open Day weekends. In addition the numbers of volunteers wishing to get involved with the capture, upload and digitization of data has continued to swell, causing a demand to document other neighbourhoods in the city as well as generating interest from other towns and cities.

In addition to public interest, support has been secured from public bodies who have an agenda to widen public access to the data that they hold. These include BHCC<sup>8</sup> and the National Archives<sup>9</sup>, who have both committed to providing census, street directory data and photos. Independent research<sup>10</sup> has uncovered that the project inspires a sense of civic awareness and pride-in-place in the volunteers and residents who participate. It is argued that autotelic learning - learning for the sake of learning - has provided another key motivation for volunteer engagement. In the final analysis, social media was not found to be as useful a medium of communication and recruitment as were traditional methods. It is argued that the reason for this was that the relationships developed relied very strongly on the sense of place engendered by the project, whereas social media are best suited to more transpatial activities and relationships.

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<sup>8</sup> Brighton and Hove City Council - <http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/>

<sup>9</sup> The National Archives - <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

<sup>10</sup> Conducted by BDRC - <http://www.bdrc-continental.com/>