



# Kent Academic Repository

**Pasoulas, Aki, Knight-Hill, Andrew and Martin, Brona (2022) *Sonic Heritage - Listening to the Past*. In: Griffin, Howard, ed. *AMPS Proceedings Series. (In)tangible heritage(s): A conference on design, culture and technology- past, present and future*. 29 (1). pp. 133-138. Amps**

## Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/91186/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

## The version of record is available from

[https://amps-research.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Amps-Proceedings-Series\\_29.1.pdf](https://amps-research.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Amps-Proceedings-Series_29.1.pdf)

## This document version

Publisher pdf

## DOI for this version

## Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

## Additional information

## Versions of research works

### Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

### Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in **Title of Journal**, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

### Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact [ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

## SONIC HERITAGE – LISTENING TO THE PAST

Authors:

**AKI PASOULAS, ANDREW KNIGHT-HILL, BRONA MARTIN**

Affiliation:

THE UNIVERSITY OF KENT, UK. THE UNIVERSITY OF GREENWICH, UK. THE UNIVERSITY OF KENT, UK

---

### INTRODUCTION

History is so often told through objects, images and photographs, but the potential of sounds to reveal place and space is often neglected. Our research project ‘Sonic Palimpsest’<sup>1</sup> explores the potential of sound to evoke impressions and new understandings of the past, to embrace the sonic as a tool to understand what was, in a way that can complement and add to our predominant visual understandings. Our work includes the expansion of the Oral History archives held at Chatham Dockyard to include women’s voices and experiences, and the creation of sonic works to engage the public with their heritage.

Our research highlights the social and cultural value of oral history and field recordings in the transmission of knowledge to both researchers and the public. Together these recordings document how buildings and spaces within the dockyard were used and experienced by those who worked there. We can begin to understand the social and cultural roles of these buildings within the community, both past and present.

### THE SONIC EXPERIENCE

Sound exists as an output of action. Activities create vibrations which are transmitted through materials and the air. And thus, through our lived experience we become conditioned to understand that sounds, in turn, have the power to convey impressions of activities. Even those long since silenced.

The technology of sound recording has enabled us to dislocate physical performance action from sonic effect. Almost all of the music we listen to is dislocated from us in either time or place (often both), but the perspective of recording often places us into proximal relationship with these captured sounds. The power of recorded music is that, when we listen to an album recorded 50 years ago and hear the voices of the musicians as if in real-time present in the same room, we become a part of this relived moment.

The sonic experience is therefore direct, personal, tangible, tactile and transcends both temporal and geographic limitations. One does not need to see the object to hear it and feel an affect from it. Sounds are not limited by visual boundaries.

This brings us to the question of sonic heritage. Many museums and post-industrial sites retain the architectural features of buildings made for industry, perhaps some even include artefacts and machinery, frozen in time. But this visual preservation conveys only a fraction of the historic fabric. Absent are the vibrations of action and the sounds which fill spaces, resonating with architecture to

unify object and space. Recorded sound, therefore, provides an ideal medium for engagement and re-enlivening. A powerful form which can de-objectify the past, create affective tracings of spaces and places, and, perhaps most importantly, afford a humanised reading of the past.

All industry, no matter how mechanised and automated, builds from human labour. And thus, the sonification of activity and action gives voice to that labour, which is otherwise silenced by the traditional historical record. The father of soundscape studies,<sup>2</sup> R. Murray Schaffer, flips many established visual concepts into the sonic domain; one such example is his notion of the ‘earwitness’. As James Mansell describes, Schaffer’s term implies that “the audible past is a lost but recoverable environmental reality that the historian can know by listening through the ears, via description in written and verbal accounts, of those who heard it. [...] earwitnesses captured both the sounds of the past and past ways of understanding those sounds in their written accounts of listening”.<sup>3</sup> Thus, when we listen to the sonic memories of former workers we receive both an impression of the historical soundscape, but also their affective and human response to those environments. Examples of this can be aptly heard within our “Whispers of the Past” soundscape installation, whereby we sought to elicit sonic memories from former dockyard workers and to reanimate the sounds described by them, to create evocative pictures of the working yard as they remembered it.<sup>4</sup> We utilised a sonic frame within our oral history questioning to specifically elicit responses to remembered soundscapes.

In his book *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* Tim Ingold describes contrasting ways of knowing. One can either know about something, or know through something.<sup>5</sup> To know about something is to be apart from it, to observe it from a distanced vantage – to look at a hammer within a glass case. To know through something is to engage with its physical reality and to understand it in a tactile and enacted way – to hold the roughness of the wooden handle and to feel the pendulous motion through the air as you swing it to strike the nail. Each form of knowing provides a different form of insight, one analytical one material. While museums do enable such tactile engagement with physical objects, there are clearly both practical and logistical limitations incurred by scale and complexity. Short of reconstituting the full industrial complex and sending the audience through rigorous training programmes, one can never hope to afford museum visitors such an immersive experience. Sound however does provide an opportunity to convey impressions of scale significance, and activity which can communicate activity. Echoing Tim Ingold, Mansell outlines two variants of the sonic encounter; in our project we are not listening to the past (in a distanced way), but listening with and through (to connect with).<sup>6</sup>

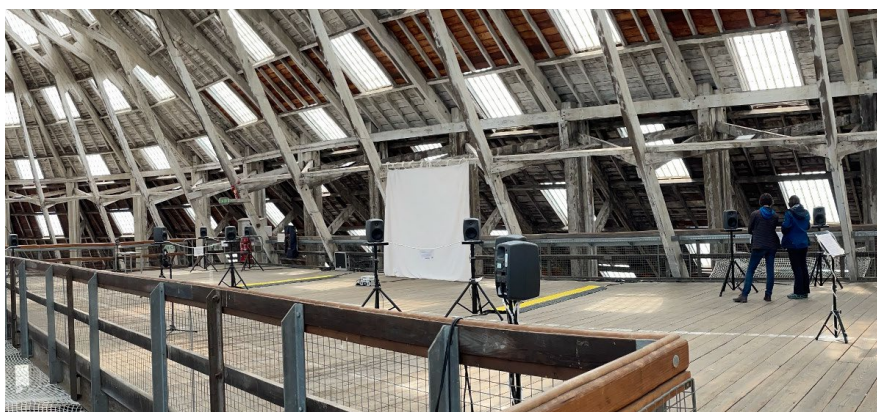
All museum artefacts frame their objects, placing them in a context that shifts or directs interpretation. In the creation of our soundscapes we drew upon skills, expertise and practices from film sound and electroacoustic music, to both reconstruct soundscapes which are lost to time and articulate them to highlight the affective experience. This active process of compositional intervention is offset to some extent by the more open subjectivity of the soundscape. One may choose when and what to listen to and thus direct their own interpretations and reading of the soundscapes. In all we sought to be true to the record, and for our living oral history participants, shared back our recordings for their assessment and response before final publication.

## **HISTORY REVISITED**

One of the questions we explore in our research, concerns ways we can utilise sounds to construct experiences of overlaid histories. We aim to create situations whereby audiences in concerts, visitors to galleries and museums, as well as online explorers, can rediscover histories and places through the sonic medium. Our endeavour does not end with the construction of historical soundscapes, but goes beyond it, into understanding the context of those sounds we do not currently hear, as well as the reactions of their listeners in those bygone eras.

Our installation ‘History Revisited: Exploring the Sounds and Stories of Chatham Historic Dockyard’ was exhibited in the Mezzanine of Slip 3 at Chatham dockyard, between 4-8 May 2022. The installation was designed for 3 projectors and 26 loudspeakers playing 18 sound compositions. The loudspeakers were spread in the space, which is a little more than 1.6 km<sup>2</sup> wide. The building was constructed in 1838 and its frame was designed by Sir Robert Seppings with the cover resembling an upside-down ship.

The Mezzanine’s wooden structure evokes past ages with strong historical allusions. Our aims were to let visitors discover the historic space by navigating it through sound, and to emphasise the sonic content of the installation by exposing visitors to the historic landmark. We reorganised the architectural space into aural zones, and the loudspeakers were positioned in pairs for playing back stereophonic sound. Visitors wandered through the space, approaching individual aural zones to experience stories and sounds related to the dockyard, its history and activities. In between pairs of loudspeakers, the aural zones were mixed together, and by walking, visitors were in control of the fade in and out between stories, creating their own unique narrative as they moved forward.



*Figure 1. Part of the installation, north-west side of the Mezzanine.*

There were two sets of compositions in the audio part of the installation. The first set contained compositions created by our research team, while the second comprised soundscape pieces created by schoolchildren.

The compositions of our research team were based on aural history archival material, interviews our team conducted, and sounds we recorded, processed or created from scratch. The soundscapes we developed were informed by descriptions of past events given by the interviewees.<sup>7</sup> Stories in our installation contained personal accounts, memories and anecdotes that were evocative and became alive again through the human voice. We approached each story from the vantage point of the person who experienced it, emphasising emotive details by creating sonic impressions of the remembered scenes. Each person’s recollection added to the collective memory of the diverse group of people who happened to work or live at the same place, sometimes during different periods. This artificial collective memory, put together by our research team, formed an intricate picture of interwoven lives in the dockyard. As Halbwachs writes “[d]on’t we believe that we relive the past more fully because we no longer represent it alone, because we see it now as we saw it then, but through the eyes of another as well?”<sup>8</sup>

The second set of compositions was created by schoolchildren of Canterbury Academy Secondary School using our field recordings of Chatham dockyard. In November 2021, our team delivered workshops at the academy, which were focused on using location sound to generate musical ideas, initiating discussions on the changes in the local sound environment and social life. The workshops

resulted in positive feedback and yielded creative responses from the students. Through this work, our project created a link between the young generation and a heritage site, encouraging children to value local history and their heritage through their own creations.

All the compositions in the installation were played in loops, starting and ending at different points in time. Thus, the overall soundscape was never repeated exactly the same, mixing stories and sounds arbitrarily, creating an impression of a *collective memory soundscape*. Three screens displayed bygone images from the dockyard archives, emphasising further the connection between the composed soundscapes, the exhibition space and their histories. We did not expect visitors to listen to every story and watch all images.<sup>9</sup> Our aim was to create a versatile, malleable sonic space with its own life and memories, which could be experienced for as long as someone wished. Some visitors walked slowly through the space without stopping, awed by the historic landmark which was filled with voices and nautical sounds. Others stayed for much longer, going from one story to the next, listening intently.

In the five days that the installation was exhibited, at least 200 visitors experienced our work. Our discussions with many of them and the comments they wrote on the visitor book demonstrated the enthusiasm of our audiences, who found our installation very engaging, and regarded it as an integral part of that historic space.

With our installation, we wanted to draw attention to the key role that sound plays in understanding and communicating history. Our work was received enthusiastically both by the general public and the dockyard museum, who are adapting their approach to exhibiting history. The museum is developing a new direction in representing the past with new methods of display, to include sound, in order to enhance the visitor experience, and make the different layers of local history not only visible but audible too.

## REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE ARCHIVES

As we digitised the archives, we discovered that women's voices were under-represented; this can be seen in various collections and projects that occurred over the years. For example, the *VE Day*<sup>10</sup> and *Home Front Recall* collections, recorded in 2005 and 2006 respectively, feature interviews with people who lived in the Medway towns discussing their experiences of WW2. Four out of eleven of the interviewees are women. Three of these women were children during WW2 and they discuss their experiences of going to school, being evacuated, sleeping in air raid shelters and celebrating VE day. The fourth, Mrs Wade, a secretary at Chatham Dockyard, discusses her work duties and her witnessing of ships returning from Dunkirk in 1940, and her memories from the air raid shelters during night bombings. She describes the bombing of the Smithery and the impact it had on her, her friends, and her working environment; and how sometimes she had to work in a shelter during the war because "the men had to get paid". She recalls that during the war there was a "terrific din at Chatham because of all the ships that were in would open up, and there were also guns on Tower Hill".

We discovered recorded interviews with a lady called Noreen Chambers, a clerical officer at the dockyard just before it closed in 1984. Chambers talks in detail about the process of the dockyard closing and her experiences of working at that crucial time. She comments on there being a feeling of loss as every Friday they said goodbye to a person or a ship, like a little funeral every week. She also mentions that more and more buildings had signs that said not to be re-occupied. Chamber's account gives us a rare insight into what it was like to work in the dockyard as it began the process of closing down.

### **New Additions to the Archives**

Women's stories and voices offer different perspectives of life at the dockyard, since women had different jobs compared to men, and worked in different buildings, such as the spinning rooms and the drawing office. We interviewed four women whose job roles include a tracer,<sup>11</sup> a master ropemaker, a former WREN (Women's Royal Naval Service), and a clerical officer.

The aim of the interviews was to discuss their experiences at the dockyard while also obtaining descriptions of the soundscape of their workplace. In her interview, Leanne Clark, a master ropemaker, talks about the sounds of the ropery and how this unique space (¼ mile in length) is rarely silent, and that when it is, it feels unnatural. She discusses how workers use bells to communicate over long distances; a ring "signals that you must do the opposite of what you are currently doing e.g., if the machine is on, turn it off". Such descriptions combined with the field recordings we made in the ropery enable us to create an accurate sonic experience of this unique working environment.

Sandra Fraser discusses her role as a former tracer at the Dockyard where she worked from 1961-67. She describes how she traced electrical drawings for the draughtsman, using linen and different types of pens. Fraser describes "clanking from outside, as machinery was being moved around", "the train going down the track" and tracers inside chatting amongst themselves.

If women's voices are not part of the archive, then we are missing out on the stories of female apprentices and those who worked as tracers, clerical officers and spinners. The addition of women's voices ensures that a diverse range of knowledge, memories and experiences can be shared with researchers and the general public.

### **CONCLUSION**

Our project promotes 'knowing-through-listening' and the successful audience responses to our sonic interventions have demonstrated the significant potential that music, sonic arts and sound studies have to contribute within heritage environments, beyond mere decoration and tokenism. Engaging sonic perspectives allows us to open up new tactilities and affords approaches to engagement with the intangibility of past human action. Our installations "Whispers of the Past" and "History Revisited" provided a sonic re-enactment of the space and drew listeners in to engage with the ideas and architectures explored.

We must be mindful of the representations we project and the political ramifications, but also accept that all heritage contexts construct artificial framings of objects, ideas and knowledge. The primary goal of our project has been political, to represent the perspective of the worker and flip the traditional top-down perspectives of history via a focus on the texture and detail of lived experience. We have explored rich seams of information within the archives, historical publications and through oral history interviews. Our work interrogating and expanding the archives' representation of women has been important in this regard, again demonstrating underappreciated and marginalised perspectives. The subjectivity of sound becomes its power in this context, enabling audiences to apply their own listening to ensound spaces and museum collections.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This paper has been produced through research funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The full title of our research project is 'A Sonic Palimpsest: Revisiting Chatham Historic Dockyards' and examines the sound environments of past incarnations of Chatham Historic Dockyard in the UK. The website of the project gives more information: <https://research.kent.ac.uk/sonic-palimpsest>
- <sup>2</sup> Soundscape studies explore and expand our existing knowledge about sound and listening, and the relation between human beings and the acoustic environments they inhabit and perceive.
- <sup>3</sup> James G. Mansell, "Historical Acoustemology: Past, Present, and Future," *Music Research Annual 2* (2021): 1. James Mansell presents a comprehensive survey of the field and methodology of historical acoustemology. The term 'acoustemology' was coined by anthropologist Steven Feld (1982) and combined the words 'acoustics and 'epistemology' to propose sound as a way of knowing.
- <sup>4</sup> "Whispers of the Past" soundscape installation and geolocated soundwalk; the audio part can be listened to online: <https://soundcloud.com/electric-medway/sets/whispers-of-the-past>
- <sup>5</sup> See Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture* (Routledge: London, 2012)
- <sup>6</sup> James G. Mansell. "Hearing With: Researching the Histories of Sonic Encounter," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sonic Methodologies*, ed. by Michael Bull et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 93–114.
- <sup>7</sup> There was one exception; a pair of loudspeakers played repeatedly the title of the installation in Morse code, which was also printed on the exhibit label. Visitors included former workers of the dockyard, and it was interesting to speak with an elder visitor who used to work in communications, who could recognise and translate the code correctly.
- <sup>8</sup> See Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 23.
- <sup>9</sup> The total duration of the compositions was 45 minutes, and the duration of the videos containing images of the dockyard exceeded 25 minutes.
- <sup>10</sup> Victory in Europe day, 8 May 1945.
- <sup>11</sup> Tracers in the dockyard draw and reproduce complex engineering plans.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bernstein, Daniel M., Veronika Nourkova, and Elizabeth F. Loftus. "From Individual Memories to Oral History". *Advances in Psychology Research* 54 (2008): 157-81.
- Bijsterveld, Karin. "Ears-on Exhibitions: Sound in the History Museum". *The Public Historian* 37, no. 4 (2015): 73-90.
- Feld, Steven. *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.
- Feld, Steven. "Acoustemology." In *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak, and Matt Sakakeeny, 12-21. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. *The Collective Memory*. New York: Harper & Row, 1980.
- Hendy, David. "Distant Echoes: Evoking the Soundscapes of the Past in the Radio Documentary Series Noise: a Human History". *The New Soundtrack* 6, no.1 (2016): 29-49.
- Ingold, Tim. *Making: Anthropology, Archeology, Art and Architecture*. Routledge: London, 2012.
- Mansell, James G. "Hearing With: Researching the Histories of Sonic Encounter." In *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sonic Methodologies*, edited by Michael Bull, and Marcel Cobussen, 92-114. London: Bloomsbury, 2020.
- Mansell, James G. "Historical Acoustemology: Past, Present, and Future." *Music Research Annual 2* (2021): 1–19.
- Riley, Mark, and David Harvey. "Talking geography: on oral history and the practice of geography". *Social & Cultural Geography* 8, no. 3 (2007): 345-51.
- Swain, Ellen D. "Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-first Century". *The American Archivist* 66 (2003): 139-58.