

Adventures in Tagging – Local History in East London

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1. Introduction

This paper will describe a web based local history project in East London. The project is called 'the Newham Story' (<http://www.newhamstory.com/>) and it aims to capture the history of the borough through the use of both formal, and informal user generated content. The technical application is the Drupal open source content management system. This is a modular application and we are using and experimenting with various taxonomy tools.

There are different aspects to this project, and this paper focuses on the issue of the classification of history, in the context of a local area, and of a diverse range of content. The paper will outline what the project is about, give an overview of the sources of content, describe the classification of the content and explore some of the issues that have arisen.

The first half of this paper will describe the practical issues and the steps followed. The second half will explore some of the questions that have been raised through the construction of the classification, and the wider issues of the 'classification of history'.

2. The Newham Story

Newham is a London borough of over 200,000 people - the population size of a large town. A significant Abbey was located there in the middle ages along with water mills and related productive activities. Industrialisation was rapid and diverse from the 1840s onwards. This included shipbuilding, engineering, manufacturing, printing, chemicals, railway industries and food processing.

The construction of the Victoria Dock in the 1850s began a process that resulted in the area having at one time the largest enclosed dock system in the world. This brought trade, shipping and people from every part of the globe. The subsequent decline of the docks and the industrial base was rapid but that legacy continues to shape the area and the people today. During the Second World War, the area was extensively bombed, with whole areas around the docks and elsewhere being effectively flattened.

For the past 150 years there has been a great deal of immigration into the area, from East Anglia as farm labourers moved to the emerging factories, from Ireland as labour arrived to build the docks, from the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean; this continues with migrants arriving from East Europe, Afghanistan, South America and elsewhere.

The initial project brief was to 'build a web site where people could add their stories, their anecdotes, photographs, audio and video' and to enable people to post comments about other people's stories, photographs and content. The project was essentially conceived as a social networking site for the history of the area and for people interested in this, built using open source tools.

3. Collecting and Collating Content

A number of key sources of content were initially defined, with a realisation that content would be added in different ways at different times, depending on resources. The main areas of content were identified as:

People's stories - user generated content people wrote about themselves, or someone in their family; this could be accompanied by photographs, audio and video. People are free to add as many stories they like of whatever length

Discussion threads - the idea for this was based on an existing bulletin board that had originally been set up (by this author) in 1998. Over the past 10 years this has accumulated thousands of posts, but lacks any organisation and no functionality to load pictures or multi-media content. Anyone could post here and this, unfortunately, made it prone to spam and abusive posts. A basic requirement for the new system was that people would need to register and that there would be much more powerful anti-spam tools.

Formal published materials - the various council departments that have been responsible for museums, libraries and archives over the years have published a number of books, pamphlets, study sheets and other materials. These could all be published as there are no copyright issues.

There is also a substantial written and published record that could be re-published but this would require negotiation and copyright agreements.

Unpublished materials - there is a considerable archive of photographs, registers, letters, diaries, notebooks and other materials that have been donated or acquired over the years. If resources allowed, it would be useful to digitise this content.

Physical objects - there is a collection of physical objects that were part of the Passmore Edwards Museum and North Woolwich Old Station Museum. If resources were available, these could be photographed and added to the site.

In practice, people have registered, they are posting stories and there are lots of active, and at times, highly entertaining and illuminating discussions on the forums. Substantial numbers of photographs have been added, and the professionals and experts have been adding collections and the more formal material. The heritage professionals are also active in the discussion forums and regularly answer questions that have been raised there.

4. Categorisation of the Content

Creating a classification was part of the project from the start. It was decided to have the facets of time, place, people and a classification of subjects. The first draft of the classification was created through an analysis of part of 10 ten years of comments on the bulletin board and by reading a large number of books on the history of the area.

The analysis of the bulletin board revealed not only more obscure and local terms (and some terms that were common in the 1930s and 1940s but that are not used today) but also a version of history that is not recorded in the official and published channels. This will be discussed in more detail below in the section 'Towards a Classification of History'.

The reading of the published material also revealed all sorts of issues; bias, subjectivity, contentious points and so on; but in the first draft we were looking for terms and concepts, not ideological disagreements.

4.1 People

It's people that make history (though not in circumstances of their own choosing) and therefore this is a key facet. However, defining the people facet is complex because we might want to have 'famous people' and 'local characters' and 'politicians' and 'social reformers'; we might also want to have classes of people (peasants, landowners, merchants, factory workers) and it would be useful to be able to organise and search content on the basis of gender and ethnicity. We have done some work on this but recognise there is a need for further classification and development in this area.

For example, research has revealed the existence of the Coloured Men's Institute established in Canning Town in 1926 and accounts of the Lascars in the area (Robinson-Dunn, 2006). The suffragettes were active and militant in the area before the First World War (Dangerfield, 1935) and there is a tradition of female reformers and political activism (Kapp, 1979). We are aware we need to develop a classification that enables the experience of all people to be found, discovered and added to.

Another characteristic about people is the language they speak. At the moment, the site is almost all in English, but not only are there multiple languages currently spoken in the area, these have also changed over time. A multi-lingual classification is beyond the scope of the current project, but the issue is recognised, as is the need for the classification to reflect the diversity and multi-culturalism of the area.

4.2 Places

The geographical place 'Newham' is now well established and boundary changes, if they occur at all are minor and infrequent. However, the geographical area has not always been as clear as this. In the pre-history of the area, the topography of marshes, rivers, channels influenced the location of settlement and movements of peoples (and rivers still play that role today). Slowly administrative areas developed, initially through ecclesiastical and feudal arrangements until society developed to a point where counties and London boroughs were established. Until 1965, Newham was two boroughs, West Ham and East Ham, and before that, part of the county of Essex. There are still older residents who think of the psycho-geography of the areas as being of the original two boroughs.

Place is a key facet of 'history' but the names of places have changed and it's not always easy to discover when, or why, these changes have taken place. Even recent history presents this issue. During the 1980s estate agents replaced shipping companies and slowly the a whole area was 'rebranded' and 'Dockland' became 'Docklands'. Now a lot of people wouldn't even notice this subtle change but it represent an enormous change in defining what the whole area is. There are still ongoing debates about where places actually were, or are. Place is also subjected to colloquialisms; the docks were once popularly known as 'Dollar Bay'.

A key relationship of any one particular place is with other places. We have started with a very small controlled lists of places but have plans to expand this as the project develops. At the moment place is limited to around a dozen key areas of the borough, plus all of the

existing street names and previous street names. But the connection between one place and another can be a powerful bond. Many people in the area have come from 'other places' and categorise themselves in a wide range of ways. Place shapes identity and there is now the emergence of categories such as 'British Asian'; one that embraces two places several thousand miles apart.

Wider political events can create relationships between places that didn't previously have much strength or connection. One day on the way to a project meeting I spotted this poster on the London Underground

"Hundreds of London buses took troops to the trenches of France and Belgium in the First World War, often driven by the original drivers. Tragically for many, it was their last journey. Back in Blighty women were recruited as bus conductresses to replace the men who joined up"

And then a few days later, while walking past a derelict building (a former bus garage) in Plaistow I spotted a war memorial with this inscription *"Sacred to the memory of West Ham Tramway employees who fell in the European War 1914 - 1919"*.

Two powerful snippets of content; one using the category 'First World War', the other 'European War'. Searchers need to be able to find both, and bring both pieces of content together. And most of those who died in this war are now buried in France, and any visit to a battle field cemetery will reveal a book full of names and addresses of those buried there. These include thousands of addresses of young men who once lived in East and West Ham.

An interesting history of the all the people mentioned on a the war memorials of a small market town in the north east has recently been published (Grint, 2006). This bringing together of names, addresses, occupations, family details, the battles they fought in and how they were killed creates powerful history, interweaving the local and personal with the wider international events.

4.3 Time

It might be presumed that the 'time' something happened (a key facet of any historical event) would be clear and straightforward; but this is not necessarily the case.. 'Year' is a reasonable search, but there needs to be various characteristics of year - when something started, when it finished, minor events during the course of a major event. 'Year' can be contentious; there are disputes about the years in which people were born, died; when buildings were constructed or demolished. The further back in time, the more hazy exact 'year' can become.

Time presents a further challenge when it comes to creating controlled lists of historical periods. There are questions as to how many time periods to add as controlled values and how these might be defined. I personally don't like the monarchist division of periods into 'Georgian', 'Victorian' and so on and would prefer alternatives; however, there is a need to use categories that people are familiar with and understand, rather than inventing too many new ones that satisfy the inner classifier but don't mean much to the end user.

4.4 Subjects

In creating the subject classification, we are trying to cover the needs of different audiences

and trying to be comprehensive from the beginning. The classification can grow and change but it would be a weakness if the initial version lacked key subject areas. As we built the classification and began to use it on content, we also became aware of its limitations and started to explore other ways of arranging, organising and retrieving content. The taxonomy tool within Drupal provides a great deal of flexibility and we have yet to feel constrained in changing terms, deleting or adding new ones; in fact this process is easy and straightforward. This has given us a lot of room to experiment in the first drafts and tests of the classification.

The cry that always goes up now when classification is raised is 'why not just use Google?' But let's look at a statement from Mayhew about the conditions in the docks in the 19th century;

"...a sight to sadden the most callous, to see thousands of men struggling for only one day's hire"(Porter,1994).

Does adding the tag 'exploitation' to this content expand the meaning? It certainly doesn't distract, and may help users who have specific search queries.

And then there is this description:

"The teabowl and saucer...illustrates the carefree style of drawing adopted as a matter of expedience; many of these pieces were no doubt painted by children who acquired the ability to decorate the pieces at a rate that was commercially viable"(Gabszewicz, 2000)

This is a description of a photograph of a piece of Bow porcelain. This piece of content may appear on a web page with no other text. But if this is now tagged with 'exploitation', then both pieces of content can be brought together in a virtual environment, just as they once existed on the same historical plane in a physical environment.

The other problem with 'let's not tag' is that there's no way then to retrieve photographs except through the content that surrounds them, or captions or titles. Not tagging then reduces the ability of the user to retrieve. Even with place there is a need to tag; West Ham Cemetery is in fact in Forest Gate. That's not obvious from its name.

5. How the Tagging Works

Once the user logs onto the system, they can add content, and in the process of doing this they can select from one, or all of the controlled lists; they can select a term from 'place', 'time', 'people' and 'subject'. They can select multiple terms for any of these categories. They can also add their own tags; this means the user can either choose from the controlled vocabulary, or add their own tags, or they can do both.

The taxonomy tool also enables us to add synonyms and show related terms. To develop the classification, we can harvest the user generated tags, and harvest the terms users have entered into the search engine.

When the content is uploaded as a story, the content is displayed in the following way. There is a title, beneath a photograph if one has been added, and then the text. Beneath the text is the collection of tags. For example:

Dockers Statue (*title*)

Thu, 23/04/2009 08:26 (*time and date - auto-generated by the system*)

Admin (*author information auto-generated by the system based on log-in*)

Photograph

Text

"The long awaited Dockers statue has finally been sited in the Royal Victoria Dock...it depicts the dockers at work and it is dedicated to all the Dock Workers from the 1800s that had such a hard life..."

2009 - Custom House - Royal Victoria Dock - Working Lives (*these are the tags added by the author - either from the controlled list or tags they have created themselves*)

The tags are highlighted in magenta, so they are a distinctive colour, different to the black of the text. If the user now clicks on 'Custom House' then they will retrieve all the other information, regardless of where it is on the site, that has been tagged with 'Custom House'.

To illustrate this point, I've just done that and the following stories have been retrieved:

History Fence - a story about a fence on the Canning Town roundabout that has photographs of the area

The Gypsy Wedding - the wedding of Rose Fry and Edward Harnetty in 1925; Rose Fry was one of 17 children...

Kenny Lynch OBE - originally from Custom House, he was one of the first Black singers on the British pop scene in the early 1960s; his father worked as a stoker in the Beckon Gas Works...

Linda Lewis - singer and songwriter also from Custom House...

The End is Nigh - the Last Division One Speedway Season at West Ham - the last ever speedway season at Custom House...

...and so on.

We feel the strength of this is that it provides structure and organisation, but it encourages people to browse as all content about Custom House can be related; the analogy might be the second hand book shop inside the library.

There are over 300 people registered to use the site, while many of these are regular posters and readers of the forums, a much smaller number are adding content. However, of those that do, people find it easy and understand how some basic tagging helps knit all the threads of the story together. Once you get the hang of it, it's actually fun to think about how tagging could help show relationships between content that you know about, but others might not find so obvious.

The system also enables the professional curators and subject matter experts to classify more fully after the contributor has posted a story; so while the user can add a story with no tags, or a minimum one tag, the professionals can help with the organising of the content by adding more tags. This provides a link between the folksonomies of the users and the controlled vocabularies.

6. Towards a Classification of History

We have developed a small, but workable classification of history. Any classification of history is a complicated process because the term 'history' is itself a complex, multi-dimensional compound. Local history on the web, even if it is loosely defined covers a number of areas (Barratt, 2009). Work has been ongoing for several years looking at the taxonomic issues relating to describing and classifying the past and the issues of spatial and temporal relationships (Tudhope, Taylor, Beynon-Davies, 1995). In this section of the paper, we will explore some of the issues that will impact on any classification of history.

Up until relatively recently, the *form* in which history was presented was generally books, films, museums, radio programmes and so on. The writing of history was generally by academics and the publishing of history was generally controlled by a fixed number of companies and organisations that would use certain criteria and rules for selection, broadcasting, printing and display. The world wide web changes this model in allowing anyone to 'publish' and 'broadcast' their version of history, or their personal account of wider historical events they were involved in.

The development of a social web and the different ways in which content can be replicated, tagged and brought together has been described in by David Weinberger in '*Everything is Miscellaneous*' (Weinberger, 2007)

Digital environments enable new possibilities for the organisation of information (and therefore of history which is information about the past); and this information and history can be re-organised and organised again and again in multiple ways. We are no longer restricted by the physics of the library shelf. The digital environments also enable, indeed may encourage, people - anyone - to write and publish. This cultural impact and change is explored in more detail by Clay Shirkey in '*Here Comes Everybody*' (Shirkey, 2008).

In this new model for the presentation of history, patterns may be spotted that were not obvious before, and new voices and perspectives can be collated by the end users themselves to show multi-dimensional collages of facts, opinions and versions. History is contradictory and there can be diagrammatically opposed views of what could be described as a single event. Hopefully the tagging can show the contradictions and opposing views, rather than trying to iron everything into a particular perspective.

7. The Nature of History

In '*The Shape of Time - Remarks on the History of Things*', George Kubler explores some of the underlying forces that are at work in the creation of history itself (Kubler, 1962). The book is fascinating at many different levels, not least because of his comments in the chapter 'The Classing of Things'. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a full overview of the ideas in the book, but we have found them extremely useful in forming our underlying philosophy of 'what is history'. There are two points in particular that have been useful.

The first is the idea of an object having endogenous and adherent signals. The endogenous signals are those that emit from the object itself, the adherent signals are those that are added. The adherent signals are added to over time and can change. This has implications for classification, in that it cannot be seen as a static activity.

The second is the idea of series and sequence; there is a *continuity* within series that may not be at first obvious. There have been bakers in the area for over 2000 years, they are not a

recent phenomena, although the machinery may have changed. Objects like hammers have retained the same form for an even longer period. This again has implications for classification of objects over time.

8. The Recording of History

The written historical record is relatively new, and until the last 100 years or so was very much in the hands of certain groups of people in terms of both the writing and publishing. There are very few, if any, auto-biographical texts of 14th century peasants (I hasten to say none because I don't have enough knowledge of this); or 15th century millers; or 16th century weavers; or 17th century sailors.

The idea and practice of writing history from the perspective of the participants, of recognising 'ordinary people' as being present and active during historical events had to be *fought* for in the academy, and it is thanks to people like EP Thompson with works such as *The Making of the English Working Class* that this method of writing history has become more widespread and valid (Thompson, 1963).

In addition, in the past forty or fifty years, there has been an exponential growth of auto-biographies; there are several that relate to the Newham area and its surrounds, or the experiences of working in the docks or on the river. Titles include *Men of the Tideway* (Fagan and Burgess, 1966), *Good Morning Brothers!* (Dash, 1987), *Some Lives!* (Widgery, 1991), *Maid in West Ham* (Alexander, 2001), *My East End* (O'Neill, 1999), *Dockland Apprentice* (Carpenter, 2003) *Tales of London's Docklands* (Bradford, 2007). This form of publishing is relatively new but surely it enriches the historical record and adds, and indeed helps form our knowledge of an area? This genre could be described as 'eye witness to history'.

What I think has happened in the past 100 years or so, is many more 'ordinary' people taking up the challenge of writing their history, from their perspective and with as much honesty as will enable them to retain their dignity. I also think in the past 20 years or so this type of history has increased in volume and rate and that increasingly people will find the confidence to express their more private and inner views, rather than to try and reflect their lives within the official viewpoints. This is going to be a challenge not just to the view of history, but also of the classification.

There are some people who would question the merit and accuracy of both this auto-biographical approach and the 'anecdotal' comments based on memory. It's certainly the case the memory can play tricks and be inaccurate. However, this isn't to say that all memory is false and that there isn't a validity (and accuracy) in what someone writes on a discussion forum about the history of an area. There is a useful discussion about memory and history in '*Why Life Speeds Up as You Get Older*' by Douwe Draaisma (Draaisma, 2004).

An example of what this working class auto-biographical history can include, is outlined below, from *Maid in West Ham* by Ivy Alexander. After the publication of her book, she received letters from many people; including one from Harry Marshall,

'...now aged 85 years, was in the early 1930s working as a 'wireman's mate' and helped install electricity in many houses in West Ham...during the course of his work he had access to bedrooms and discovered that 'many of the beds were covered by immaculate bedspreads, emblazoned with the words, Shaw Saville, Houlder Line, Nelson Line, Port Line and P&O'

Ivy also wrote:

“I was delighted to receive six, single spaced, typed A4 pages from a 93 year old former Customs Officer from Harwich who obtained a copy (of the book) from his local library. He worked in the London Docks from 1932 – 1938 and came to know West Ham when he was posted to the Albert Dock.

“He writes, 'You would have shared my horror at seeing a fleet of dustcarts proceeding through West Ham loaded with perfectly good bananas bound for destruction because they were ripe, and passing so much poverty where they would have been good and tasteful nourishment. Even worse, any ripe fruit was deposited in bins at the quayside for collection and dockers were actually prosecuted for helping themselves to these'. He recalled a wealth of memories and generously said it was my book that had rekindled them.

9. Conflict in History

History is the result of conflict; between classes of people, between countries, between industries; between one set of ideas and practices and different ideas and practices. But always it is the interaction of people that creates history. The underlying conflict within history itself creates tensions and contradictions and mutually opposing views. How can a classification deal with this?

It is possible to read through historians of the early 1800s and find those who think the developing factory system brought nothing but good; and those that disagree; so called 'facts' about standards of living, wage rates, rates of exploitation, working conditions and so on, are still being disputed.

Recent history such as the closure of the docks is both an alive and often bitter subject of debate. There is a considerable archive, including rank and file newspapers such as *The Dockworker*, and many of the participants are still living. Historical debate doesn't neatly divide in two; there are multiple perspectives why an event such as the closure of the docks happened.

10. Why Does Some History Seem to Disappear from the Record, Only to Reappear at Later Date?

There is no equality of historical knowledge and there are many historical events that have not subsequently generated large numbers of information signals. In the last few months of the Second World War, over 650,000 people were killed in the aerial bombing of German towns and cities. The trauma was felt by millions more. In his book 'The Natural History of Destruction' WG Sebald explores why there are so few references to this event in the post-war literature of the country (Sebald, 2003).

When Ken Loach's film *Land and Freedom* was first shown in Spain it helped to generate a debate among a whole new generation of people. Jonathan Steele in the Guardian wrote "*In Spain, where the film was released in May, thousands of people, mainly young, have been besieging the movie houses to uncover the secrets of what their grandparents really did in the war*" (Steele, 1995). Now the Spanish Revolution and Civil War are hardly secrets, but because of the victory of the Francoists a particularly version of what happened was allowed and people were very fearful of openly, or even privately, discussing their experiences of the events.

I use these two examples, not because they occurred in East London (although connections could be made) but because they show how large historic events can fall off the event horizon for long periods of time and then *reappear*. What hidden history of East London will emerge in the future that we have managed to miss in our present?

Some categories, the term 'MPs expenses' floats into the mind, can lie seemingly dormant and neglected year after year, until suddenly, they become a keyword into a much wider social and political realm, linking contemporary events with historical events.

10. Gaps in the Historical Record

We never know what we don't know; but it is possible to spot gaps in the historical record. There is little 'history' about the introduction and appropriation of digital technologies in East London; there is no record of the first email sent between an E6 to E16 postcode; no record of the first website set up within the area; no evidence of who brought the first mobile phone here. All this technology, so many social changes it drives along, and despite it being so 'information based' so little information about its own history. Bridgette Wessels covers the issue about the appropriation of technologies (with reference to East London) in her book *Inside the Digital Revolution: Policing and Changing Communication with the Public* (Wessels, 2007). There is still a whole history of technical change in the area that has yet to be written.

There is a constant mass extinction of mass produced commodities that is startling and bewildering; where exactly do all everyday objects go to? Do we really live in such a disposable society? Objects that were commonplace for one generation have disappeared a decade later; Bakelite radios, newspapers, milk bottle tops from individual dairies - the volume has changed from millions of replicated objects to one or two examples in the cabinets of museums, or possibly isolated in individual lofts or cupboards. Even current historians may struggle to find prime objects and examples from the quite recent past; perhaps some objects disappear altogether without ever being recorded or classified.

People also disappear from the historical record; it can be almost impossible to trace ancestors because their poverty allowed no marked grave and their illiteracy left no self-penned written record.

11. Conclusion

We would make no claims to have created a comprehensive classification of history; such a project, if it could be completed, would require more resource and time than we have been able to allocate to this project to date. We would question whether such a classification would be possible or desirable. History is multi-dimensional and it is full of characters and actors who have a habit of not sticking to their parts and proclaiming on all sorts of things that others think don't concern them.

History is a political process as much as anything else. It does not progress in a linear way and if we went back in time and made alterations here and there, the subsequent development of history would be different. Therefore the classification of history is a political activity and it is questionable as to whether the builders of any classification can be neutral.

Rather than 'a classification of history' we would prefer the production of 'multiple

classifications of history' (based on the ideas of the classifiers rather than distorted presentations of 'neutrality' and 'objectivity') and the ability of the actual participants of history to be involved in creating their own keywords to describe their experiences and views in their own way. The question is how to develop classifications of history based on acknowledge interpretation of the facts (what is known); rather than on ideological assumptions.

It's a strange concept, but history, although it has *happened* isn't actually *static*. The interpretations change over time. Christopher Hill writes "*The historical narrative, the main outline of events, is given. No amount of detailed working over the evidence is going to change the factual essentials of the story. But the interpretation will vary with our attitudes, with our lives in the present. So reinterpretation is not only possible, but necessary*" (Hill, 1972)

This presents a challenge to the classifier of history, but if the challenge can be recognised, if flexibility and scalability can be built into the classification, and if the end users can be allowed to pour their never ending tuppence worth into the proceedings, then it should be possible to begin to classify history in a way that will suit multiple users.

A final digression. In the Northumberland countryside, there is a fantastic museum based at a former colliery. It's the Woodhorn museum and it's also the home of many of the paintings of what became known as the Ashington Group. In the 1930s, Robert Lyon arrived and set up a painting class (Feaver, 1993). The paintings are on display today. They show working class life in the area; they show miners underground, they show pets and galas. Hewers and pitmen painting? Who would have thought. I for one would welcome more auto-biographies of dockers and secretaries; bus conductresses, clerks and mechanics, factory workers and taxi drivers, shop workers and builders; a democratisation of the historical record that might reveal more than the official version; more, I think there's a place for the democratisation of classification; structure, organisation; but in the language of the participants themselves.

A classification of history that can work with folksonomies, can be integrated with other forms of retrieval, can be used as the basis for directories and indexes will be a powerful tool over time. Our future will become someone else's history and they will be grateful for any useful tools we hand them.

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