LIVING MEMORY

Photography and Life Stories from across the Black Country

MAPPING DOCUMENT

Documenting the significant local photograhy collections from across the Black Country

Contents

Front cover: photograph from Ron Moss Collection.

About the Living Memory Project

The Living Memory Project was a 3-year initiative funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund to explore, archive and celebrate life stories around photography collections from across the Black Country in the West Midlands. The project focussed on family albums and wider collections that spanned at least 8 decades and represents material from all aspects of everyday life that have been taken or assembled by family and community members, local historians and amateur photographers. These collections offer unique perspectives on social and cultural life from the perspective of working-class communities that largely exist outside of local and national archives.

The project recorded over 50 life stories around personal photographs and collections, digitised over 5,000 images, and hosted over 100 creative workshops, collecting events, pop-up exhibitions, talks and film screenings. The project also raised additional funds from Arts Council England to commission a series of community-orientate artist commissions.

You can see the full range of our activities on our website: www.livingmemory.live.

The Living Memory project was a partnership led by Sandwell Advocacy and included Dudley Archives, Sandwell Community History and Archive Service (CHAS), Sandwell College, The Black Country Living Museum, Sandwell and Dudley Library Services, Sandwell Borough Council, Big Local at Grace Mary and Lion Farm.

About this Mapping Document

As part of this project, we put out a call for information about significant community-held photography collections. We worked with nine remarkable and strikingly diverse collections. We featured some of them in the new Living Memory book (available on the website) and told some of their stories. This document digs a bit deeper into these collections, describing what they contain, how big they are, why they are significant, and outline any known plans are for their long-term preservation.

We are sure many more valuable photography collections exist out there in the community and we aspire to see this list grow as more come to light.

If you want to get in touch about these collections or have information about others, please drop us a line here: geoff@livingmemory.live

Considering photographic collections and family albums

During the project, we worked with important private collections of photographs, sharing some of their content with a wider public. This paper documents some of these collections that exist across the Black Country, along with reference to formal archives.

The motivation for collecting is highly individual; it can be triggered by a deep interest in a particular topic or subject, trains and automobiles for example. It can arise from the desire to master a new technical or aesthetic skill – in this instance, that of photography, understanding of the mechanics of different kinds of camera equipment; apertures and shutter speeds, film emulsions and darkroom techniques, and comprehension of compositional devices, the use of different angles, scale and perspective, textures of light and shade, learning how to avoid the making of a dull photograph, in all senses of the word.

While some collectors will rigorously catalogue every single detail of what they have amassed, others organise their materials in the most arbitrary fashion. Most family albums, you will find, often may not record even the most basic information of who is in the photograph, where or even when it was taken. Found decades later, at a flea market say, far removed from its original context, the images are open to serial interpretations and flights of imagination.

In 1972, long before the invasiveness of social media, John Berger wrote: 'Photographs bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation. A photograph is a result of the photographer's decision that it is worth recording that this particular event or this particular object has been seen. If everything there existed were continually being photographed, every photograph would become meaningless.' He states that the most popular use of the photograph is as 'a memento of the absent.'[1]

He later suggested that there are two different uses of photography: 'An ideological use which treats the positivist evidence of a photograph as if it represented the ultimate and only truth. And in contrast, a popular but private use, which cherishes a photograph to substantiate subjective feeling.'[2]

[1] *'Understanding a Photograph' in Selected Essays and Articles: The Look of Things, John Berger, 1972.*
[2] *'Appearances' in Another Way of Telling, John Berger and Jean Mohr, 1982.*
The images hidden in our family albums, stored away in shoeboxes, treasured in the collections of local enthusiasts, as well as providing evidence of individual histories also can offer rich perspectives on our rapidly changing society. What is inspirational in any examination of these private photographic collections are the stories they can tell you of a particular time and place, be that of a particular person, fashion, the ephemera of a social and political environment. An extensive collection of photographs, something physical, something that you can touch, demonstrates a multitude of lived experiences, sometimes simple (a picnic on a sunny day by the river Severn), sometimes complex (the local industrial landscape utterly changed, a way of life gone).

Rich Franks, who worked on the project notes this: 'There is an immediacy of connection to a photograph, no matter if you are young or old that you don't necessarily get with other forms of art. You can show a young person a photo of an area they know that has changed and that instantly starts a conversation with them about why it has changed, offering their opinion and insight about their local area, even imagining how it might be in another 20 or 30 years. Likewise, if you talk to an older person who remembers that time depicted in the photograph, they will soon regale you with stories from that period, who they knew, if they had the same car, haircut, coat, what the weather was like that summer, what music they were listening to...' This is what John Berger called a form of 'emotional correspondence' – something that expands beyond the interior focus of the pages of a family album and touches us in unexpected and inclusive ways, inviting us to explore our commonalities or differences.

Analogue photography peaked at the end of the 20th century. In 1999, consumers around the world then took some 80 billion photos with their cameras. Now, with the advent of smartphones, more images are being created than ever before. In 2017, some 1.2 trillion photos were taken, over 3 billion images were shared across social media every single day. How much of this will be preserved, or even ever looked at again, is anybody's guess, as we flounder in 'the exhausting white noise of oceans of information'.[3]

3 *Expression used by Olga Tokarczuk during her lecture 'The Tender Narrator', accepting 2018 Nobel Prize for Literature.*

Wolverhampton City Archive

WOLVERHAMPTON

Ned Williams Collection

Walsall Local History Centre

WALSALL

Alan Price Collection

TIPTON

WEST BROMWICH

SEDGLEY

Keith Hodgkins Collection

Albert Wilkes Collection

DUDLEY

Dudley Archives & Local History Centre

Bob Mansell Collection

Ron Moss Collection

Jim Rippin Collection

OLDBURY

Smethwick

Will King Collection

Keith Hodgkins

Photograph of Keith Hodgkins, 1981

Summary:
A collection of some 30,000 images, mostly 35mm colour slides spanning from 1975 to the 2000s. All taken by Keith, these depict topographical scenes of the Black Country and beyond. He was motivated to capture industrial, architectural and archaeological features, as well as the ongoing changes to urban and commercial (shopping) areas. The slide collection files are arranged purely in chronological order in year files; his digital collection from about 2006 onwards is organised using subject files, usually geographic location. The collection offers a fantastic archive of the changing world of the industrial Black Country. Keith also has also been responsible for collecting and preserving the photographic work of others.

100% accessible - slide collection digitised up until mid-1990s.

The collection is of great importance, and has not been not widely shared because Keith does not see himself as 'a great photographer.' Keith has served as President of the Black Country Society.

'Collecting is one of those things that people who don't collect can never understand. I've got lots of friends whose wives or mothers who would happily chuck the collections in the bin the moment the chap turns the other way. Photography allowed me to collect things that were almost impossible to physically collect, things that I was interested in. For example, I was really interested in bricks, particularly local bricks and Staffordshire blue bricks, many of which were stamped with the maker's name. What a lovely thing to collect but physically difficult. But you could build up a collection of photographs of them.' – Keith Hodgkins

Born in Tipton, Keith began 'collecting' at the age of 10, when he went trainspotting, noting down the locomotive numbers. This involved a great deal of traveling around the area, often with his father, an iron-moulder. Soon after, he began taking photographs, using a Kodak Brownie 120 with roll film of only 12 exposures. Every picture counted. Coming into his 20s, as he completed studies at the Birmingham School of Architecture, he became interested in pubs, very conscious of the fact that many were closing. He remembers conversations with his father about pubs that had disappeared from his younger days and he decided to record the pubs that were still around. About that time, in 1972-3, he also joined the Black Country Society, taking a serious interest in the local environment and the way it was changing. As he recalls, 'Lots of old terrace houses were going, being cleared. So that became another objective, to record that. Landscapes as well. The large areas of derelict land, the legacy of mining and iron working, were rapidly disappearing in the 60s and 70s and had pretty well gone altogether by 1980 - these massive areas of derelict disused land, quite exciting to explore. They turned into new housing estates.' He has shared his photographs in series of books over the years, initially three with John Brimble about Tipton. He also made slide presentations on a regular basis, using duplicates of the slides before the advent of Powerpoint. His prime interest has been the built environment, the way it is formed and how it shapes our lives. As he says, 'It's not just buildings but the spaces between buildings that together form the character, that gives the sense of place where we all live.'

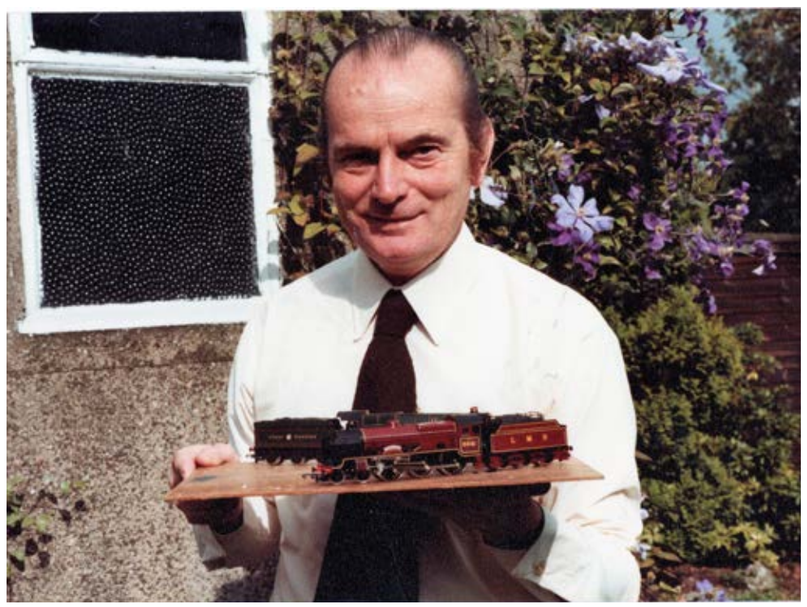
What will happen to his collection? Now Keith is retired, as time passes he is aware that he should pay more attention to handing over material to formal archives, so that it can be preserved into the future. While he is busy digitising his collection, he wonders who is the best custodian at the end of the day, worries how best to preserve these things? He notes that when you give material to an archive with local authority, with cutbacks they may no longer have any archivists or capacity to handle the material. 'I've got masses of stuff. Older people have handed stuff over to me, so that's a big responsibility, looking after those. It's in a reasonable state but it does need more analysis and sorting out into a useable format, so when its handed to an archive it can be easily retrieved. The worst thing is just dumping stuff into an archive and it's just a great lump which doesn't mean anything and it's difficult to access. The daft thing is that, having spent all your life building up this stuff, you need another lifetime to actually catalogue it and put it in a useable state. You need to be able to clone yourself, one to work on the archives while the other gets on with your life...'

Top: Halesowen Road 1975; photograph by Keith Hodgkins.
Bottom: The Old Swan (Mrs Pardoes), Halesowen Road, Netherton,1977; photograph by Keith Hodgkins.

Top: Johns Lane tunnel under the New Main Line canal and railway, Tividale, 1976; photograph by Keith Hodgkins.
Bottom: Bilston Steel Works from the east near Highfields Road, Coseley, 1976; photograph by Keith Hodgkins.

Ocker Hill Power Station, Tipton, 1985; photograph by Keith Hodgkins.

Alan Price (1929 - 2016)



Photograph of Alan Price, 1981.

Summary:
5,000 plus slides and negatives (both colour and black and white) taken over a 30 year period. A mixture of landscapes, trains, buildings, social gatherings as well as personal family material. Of great significance - the collection itself is a project in waiting.

100% accessible, although mostly non-digitised; held by Keith Hodgkins; no more than 10% of collection seen to date. Alan Price was another stalwart of the Black Country Society and keen amateur photographer. With an interest in photographing people and places, he was chairman of Walsall Photography Club for many years and active contributor to the Black Country Society. His photographs are mainly black and white, from the late 1960s to the 2000s. He was undertaking a fairly systematic survey, particularly Tipton and the northern parts of Black Country. The negatives were given to Keith Hodgkins by his family. Every negative pack has a date and the subject matter in most cases.

They are kept in a negative strips which fold out and have a lot of information written on the envelope. Alan kept a meticulous record of every photograph, creating a collection that will be fairly easy to eventually hand over a professional archive.

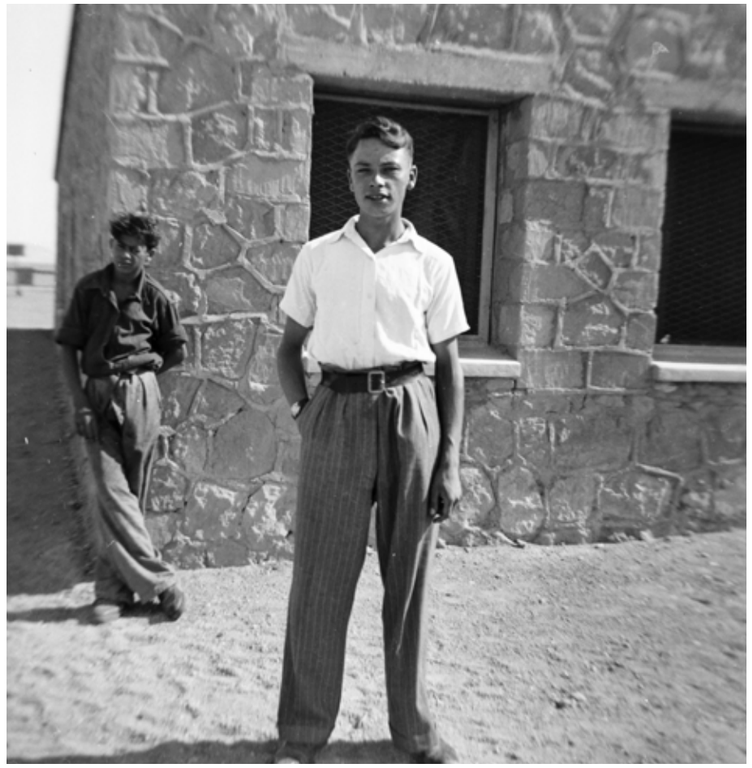
Sandwell Community History and Archive Service hold a number of prints, Walsall Local History Centre hold a number of slide files.

Top: High Street, Princes End, Tipton with the old brewery building behind, 1973; photograph by Alan Price.
Bottom: Druid`s Head public house, Coseley, 1968; photograph by Alan Price.

Retired miner Mr T. Harris of Gornal Wood, 1968; photograph by Alan Price.

The Railway Vaults, on the High Street in Dudley, since 1861. It closed in the early 70s; photograph by Alan Price.

Ron Moss (1930-2019)



Photograph: Ron Moss, Eygpt, 1949.

Summary
10,000 plus negatives (mostly black and white) and later 35mm slides taken over a 50-year period. A keen photographer who documented early family life, then later his interest developed into photogrpahing transport and industrial architecture.

100% accessible, nearly all digitised except later years. Negatives held by his daughter Cheryl.

The early work is of great interest as a social document of personal life - technical and aesthetically the work is outstanding. The later period of his work is of great interest as a record of landscapes, trains, buildings.

Most of Ron's work has now been digitised thanks to the efforts of Keith Hodgkins. All of his photographs and negatives are currently in the safe keeping of his daughter Cheryl.

'Dad had always got two cameras, a slide and a print film and then when colour came in he'd always got black and white and a colour. He'd always got that going. I can always remember him changing the reels. I would never think are taking photos of workplaces and dad always did. He's got pictures of Harold Gorges, and Leland, and all sorts. Something I would never dream of taking camera to work. And yet you get so close to people you work with that I wish I've got a record of those personalities now.' – Cheryl Aston

Ron Moss was born in Dudley. Called up for National Service, he was posted to Malta and Egypt. Photography was his main hobby from early on. He spent his working life as a toolmaker. Significantly, he was a member of the Black Country Society very soon after its inception in 1967; working with them he produced over 40 articles and small publications about a range of fascinating subjects. He also led their Industrial Archeology Group for many years; as part of this he brought the vision and energy to renovate the now famous Mushroom Green Chainshop near Cradley Heath in 1977. He lectured widely about his diverse interests in industrial archeology and preservation, publishing several important books, including the well-known Cradley Heath, Old Hill and District in Old Photographs (1998/2004) and Chain and Anchor Making in the Black Country (2006/2013).

Ron built a remarkable personal collection of photographs that captured the many chapters of his life. Wholly self-taught, he was an outstanding enthusiast of photography. His early work is of particular interest as a unique social document of personal life - technical and aesthetically the work is outstanding.

Cheryl, his daughter, says: 'Dad had the foresight to take photos of everything, of not just family and industrial things but things he knew weren't going to be there anymore. You know my Mum couldn't understand it perhaps at the time but now we can see the value of it and people love to reminisce and obviously I'm lucky to have all these photographs to reminisce about childhood and it sparks off such lovely memories. I think as well he had photography magazines. He always read a lot about everything that's why he could talk a lot about lots of different thing; because of his background starting off in a drawing office everything was very meticulous, everything was kept beautifully. I can hear my Dad saying, 'Don't take the shortcuts! Do it properly! It's worth doing it properly.' We're the same, if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well. That could be Dad's motto really: Take your time. Do it properly.'

Ron's collection spans over five decades and begins with the documenting of family life and youthful days spent courting Sylvia, who he married in 1953. He extensively captured the childhood of their son and daughter, Gary and Cheryl, along with time spent with friends, social occasions, family life and holidays - and latterly, increasingly his enduring passion for transport, architecture, alongside the rapidly changing industrial landscapes of the Black Country.

Top: View of Cobbs Engine House, Rowley Regis, 1978; photograph by Ron Moss.
Bottom: Photograph by Ron Moss.

April 1952; photograph by Ron Moss.

April 1952; photograph by Ron Moss.

Back yard of home, May 1950; photograph by Ron Moss.

Will King (1906-1964)

Photograph: Harry King and Will King (left) on the boat Pixie, 1961.

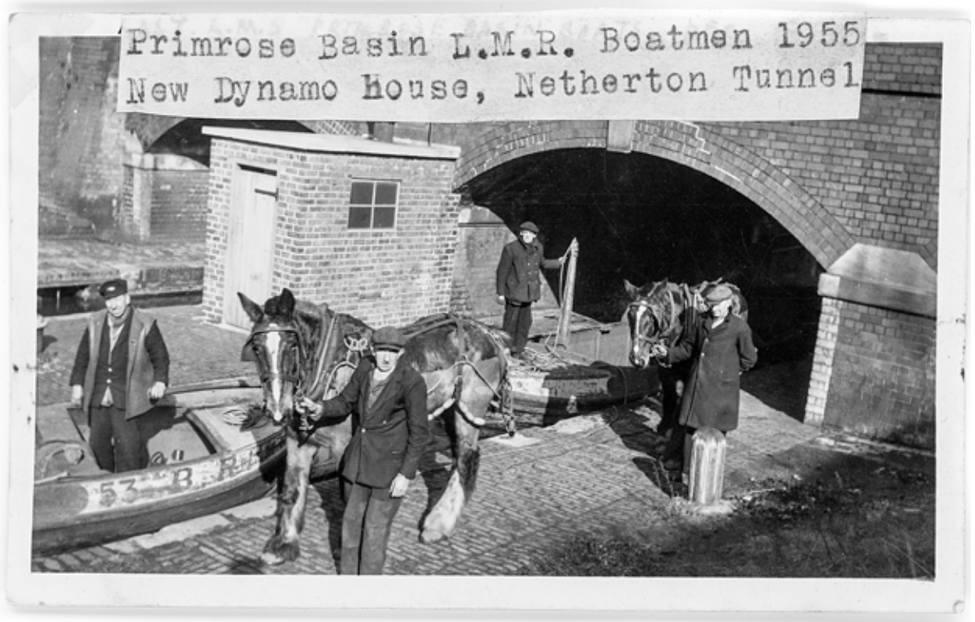
Summary
2,000 plus images of canal life, mostly post Second World War to 1960. His collection remains as a living testament to that form of transport, once so absolutely essential to the area and such an integral part of local cultural identity.

100% accessible, all held by his daughter Ruth Collins, who knows a great deal about the collections and subjects as she helped to compile them when she was younger. Most of the material exists as original prints and all negatives are in the collection. Mostly of it scanned very low resolutions. Some rescanned as part of the Living Memory project at very high resolution for exhibition.

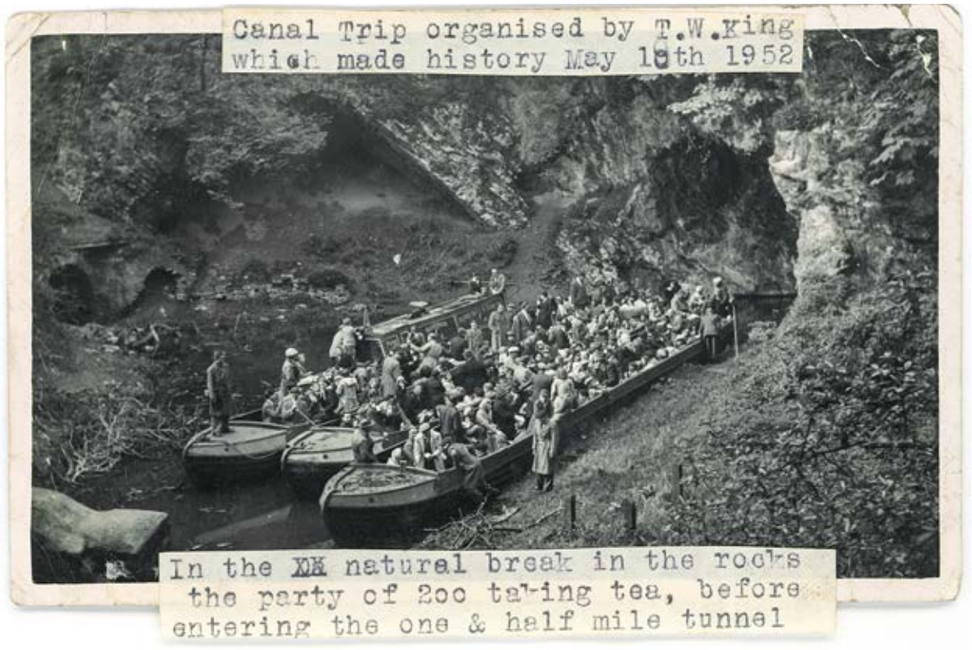
Thomas William King was a toll-keeper for Birmingham Canals Navigation, the network connecting Birmingham, Wolverhampton and the eastern part of the Black Country. He became serious about photography when he bought a 116 Kodak camera. His main interest was canals, the site of his professional life, particularly the Grand Union canal, one he had worked on as a child and an adult. His ambition was to take a photograph of every lock between London and Birmingham and then every bridge between, though later in life he fell ill before he was able to complete all the bridges. Many of his prints are annoted with explanatory text. Some of his photographs are held by Birmingham Museums and some by Dudley Archives.

'My father was born into a boating family. His father owned his own boats and before that his grandfather owned his own boats. My grandmother was also the daughter of a lock-keeper. My grandfather bought a house so his children could go to school. So my father had an education until about the age of 13, when he helped his father on the boats – as all his brothers had been recruited into the First World War. He also delivered coal for Barlows, who owned boats locally. Eventually, he got a job with the Birmingham Canal Navigation and his job was to keep the towpaths and the locks clear of rubbish and weeds. People weren't taking photographs of canals then because they weren't that popular, but he would take photographs, like that one on the ice breaker boat – people doing things on the canals.'
– Ruth Collins

Photograph by Will King.



Photographs by Will King.



Photographs by Will King.

Jim Rippin

Photograph: Jim Rippin with his Dinky toy collection, photographed by his Dad, Bill.

Summary
An unknown number of negatives and slides. A fascinating collection of images, mostly of parts of Oldbury, Lion Farm, Rowley Hills dating back to about 1946 up to the present day; includes landscapes and domestic scenes, some buildings. Kept in mixed conditions and not catalogued; some negatives damaged. All taken by Jim as well as some by his father and brother.

100% accessible and held by Jim in various folders, holders, boxes and albums.

An important collection with a wide range of content that reflects the many interests of Jim. Some of the images were used as the backbone of a new guided walk over the Rowley Hills, presented as part of the Living Memory project.

'Photography was on real film back then. There were no digital enhancements at all. So you didn't know whether the photograph you had taken was going to be any good or not, if you had got the right aperture setting or if the light had got into there and ruined the film and so on . I often borrowed Dad's camera as it was better than mine, a flat one that you opened out with a bellows and a little viewfinder you had to adjust. I would take some pictures every now and then of something that interested me, walking over the fields, or by Henley's Farm.' – Jim Rippin

Jim Rippins's father Bill worked at Accles and Pollocks. Both his father and older brother had cameras, and soon encouraged him to have a go himself. He recalls being about 8 or 9 when they bought him a Kodak box camera and with this he took his first photographs, using black and white wind up film. His father would develop the negatives and make a print, using their old bathroom as a darkroom, blinds up at the window. Jim took pictures of his local area, around the Rowley Hills and quarries, the spoil heaps, the scramble bikes, friends and family. There was a gap in taking pictures from the end of his school days, when he was 15 and more interested in rock'n'roll and cafe life. He didn't really start taking photographs again until after he got married and had children.

He says, 'I wasn't into local history so much when the black and white pictures were being taken. It was just about thinking, 'Oh that looks interesting, I bet that won't be there forever, let's take a picture.' I never really posed a picture. But I never associated it with local history or a wider history at that time. Around 2008, I started looking through these photographs again, but it wasn't until coming across the Living Memory project that really got me started. I'm not a person that's outgoing and I tend to horde things and keep them to myself. I never had the idea that these would be ever shared. But since then, I thought well, these are worth keeping, but tell me how do you that? They've been handled a lot over the years, there's a few scratched but they're not in bad condition. I've only starting writing down what they are recently, putting on some descriptions.

As I've grown up I do find that things seem to change so quickly from one week to another. In some areas and I think well, I went down there yesterday and that building's now gone. A building I've seen there for many years, just gone. The oldest negative I've got is from my brother's christening and he's 87 now. We moved house four times and stuff got lost. My brother managed to recover some. He was a draughtsman at Tube Products and he was the one who put them away in these folders and boxes. He had a 35mm camera. My Dad took pictures as well - well, he didn't take a lot actually. He had a bad hernia and so he didn't like going long walks. Most of Dad's photography was around the house, people in the garden, people visiting. My Dad would leave the negatives lying around in an envelope like on a windowsill and my brother would go round the house from time to time, picking them up. We were very lax in documentation or in dating things I'm afraid. We never thought it would be used by anybody else, it was just a family thing. That's the trouble with this collection. I can tell you who all the people are or where it was, but there's no documentation, it's
all up here...'

Top: a scramble motorbike practicing, taken from Bury Hill, 1951; photograph by Jim Rippin.
Bottom: Jim and his father with model airplanes, 1935 and 1957.

The Frank sisters from next door, Wallace Road, 1950s; photograph by Bill Rippin.

Ned Williams
The View of a Collector

Photograph of Ned Williams, 2019.

Ned Williams is a collector, interpreter and oral historian. He was born in London, and first came to the Black Country in 1962 to study. He worked at Wolverhampton's Wulfrun College and then with the Workers Educational Association. He joined the Black Country Society not long after it was formed in 1967. Soon after he began to investigate the history of a local railway line visible from the windows of the college where he worked, which resulted in the publication of 'By Rail to Wombourne' in 1969.

Since then, he has gone on to produce dozens of local history books over subsequent decades, whilst assiduously collecting a range of historical material including a wide range of recorded interviews from local people. His books have included 'Cinemas of the Black Country' (1982), 'Shop in the Black Country' (1985), 'Black Country Folk at Werk' (1987), 'Fairs & Circuses in the Black Country' (1994), 'Black Country Chapels' (2004), 'A Century of The Black Country' (2007). Many of his books are out of print, but others still can be found at: http://www.nedwilliams.co.uk/books1.html. He makes regulars presentations to a variety of groups to share materials from his collections.
This interview from 2019 gives an insight to the motivations and varied interests of a collector. 'As a child I was very curious and did like exploring and being told or shown things, collecting all the stuff in my head that people passed on. My father took me to the Festival of Britain in 1951. (We were living in the East End at the time.) I grew up with only the slightest awareness of the phrase 'Black Country' and had little idea of what it was or where it was. At the age of 18, by coincidence and chance, I came to Dudley, to the teacher training college. I found that really exciting. All my childhood desires to explore things were heightened by the fact it was a foreign country to me; something new and exciting. On that first day I came to Dudley, it was by train in 1962, so I had to change trains at Snow Hill and instead of getting on the Dudley train I got on the Stourbridge train. I had to then get off at Old Hill and take the bus to Dudley. Looking out of the windows, coming up to Netherton - this was the time of full employment and the heyday of all these forges and workplaces - you could see into them, the doors were flung open. It seemed a hive of activity. It was so different to what I knew.

I joined the college just before the term began as I had volunteered to help assemble furniture the new student quarters and dormitories. We'd work in the mornings and in the afternoons one of the college tutors would take us on a guided tour of the area. I then had a motorbike, so that helped in exploring the new world in which I found myself. By the end of the first year I got very hooked on cinematography, I went along to the cine section of the local photographic society. A friend from college had an 8mm cine camera for his 21st birthday and we put all our energy and money into making films. We could just about afford about 4 minutes of film a week. We started making little story films with other students. In the winter of 1965/66 I bought a Canon 35 mm
camera and some slide film. I started taking a few slides but rarely used it to take black and white photographs. It made me think about photographically recording the built environment, streets and factories etc. I started then taking a few shots around Dudley, very tentatively, making every film last as long as possible. Most of the time it was too expensive. Now I really regret not taking more photographs at that time.

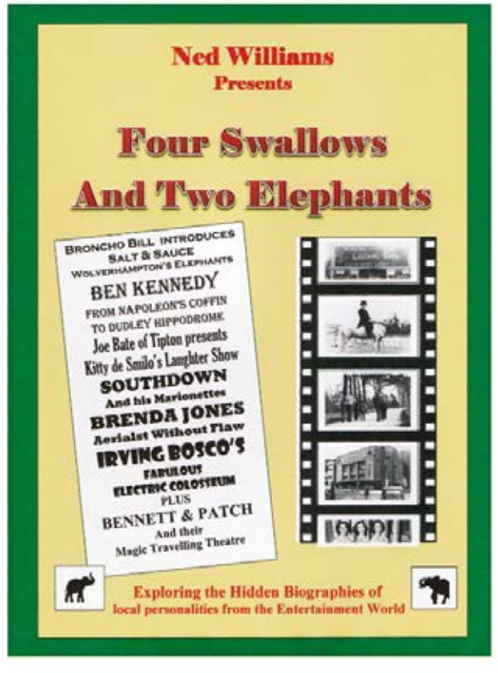
My parents had encouraged cautious and careful spending on things. As a teenager, if I took a camera on holiday I'd take one film with maybe 8 or 12 exposures and expect that to last the summer. I didn't have schooling in how to take photographs, or what camera format was best to use. I had started by photographing trains, focusing on little obscure bits of the railway scene and went looking for the remains of lines that had disappeared in the 1930s. I took photographs of a piece of concrete sticking out of the ground where a platform had been or where a trackbed with no track on disappeared into the woods. They were sort of non-pictures! At first I was interested in transport, then it was streetscapes, landscapes, shops, then houses, industrial buildings etc. I'd go up and down the canal towpath on my motorbike to explore the Black Country. So one thing led to another. I became interested in trade union banners, and that interest took me to almhouses and workers' housing.

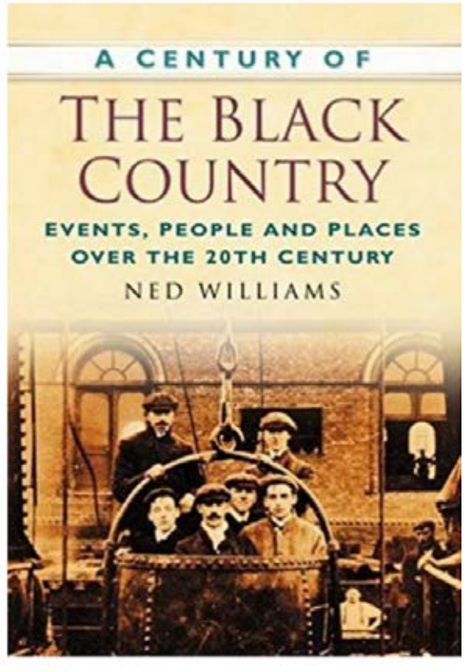
A key thing for me was the formation of the Black Country Society. I joined in the early days - that really got me going. Member Number 184, I think. A colleague of mine was Treasurer, so I went to the meetings with his encouragement and then joined. It was a marvelous thing; an organisation in which to share our interests. The Black Country Society formed a Photographic Section, under a chap called George Bowater, and organised a couple of exhibitions and started collecting photographs and encouraging people to take photographs with competitions and exhibitions. That all helped get us focused. Alan Price ran the Photographic Section for a while as well. Eventually, Keith Hodgkins and Dave Wylie took over the responsibility for the photographic section and they brought a new energy and enthusiasm and commitment to it. They would do

things like have a Black Country Photographic Day and each year they would designate a different area to record. You would go along with your camera, and they would give you a film and tell you some streets to do. There was lots of argument about whether we should use colour or black and white, and what would happen next. They would give you the film and wanted you to give it back and they would get it processed and decide what would happen to it. I took my own film, so I could have my own set as well as giving the Society a set of duplicates. Working with them was inspirational during the 1980s.

There was also tape-recording section in the Black Country Society, with the idea of recording people's memories. I think that archive has disappeared. No-one knows where it went. It is worrying, what will happen to all this stuff. I think we've reached a crisis. Archives can't cope with what they've got let alone anything new coming along. We don't know where to turn now. I've inherited other photographic collections which other people have given me; their life's work. There's the common problem of how do you index it? And then what do you do with it? I've got some interesting fairground photographic collections and I've been able to sleep at night thinking, well the National Fairground Archive at Sheffield University can have all my stuff and the material I've acquired from from two other collections, but when I mentioned it to one of the Trustees he said, 'Well, they've re-staffed the archive and they now have an Acquisitions Committee and will now only accept collections if approved by that committee. At the moment they are turning virtually everything down, not on the basis of merit but because they haven't got anybody to do anything with it.' I thought am I going to have to throw all my stuff away after all? It's horrible. Not enough staff, not enough enthusiasts. The other sad thing is that there aren't enough young people taking an interest in these things and following on from what we've done.

I've got masses of 'stuff'. I've got images and notes on CDs, in scrapbooks, boxes full of negatives, boxes up there of prints year by year, hundreds of interviews on cassette tape, a box full of prints from about 2000 and all subsequent years. My study is full of things, there's rooms upstairs full of things! Who knows what will happen to it all?'





Top: Ned Williams with his daughter in the early 1970s
Bottom: Two of Ned's many publications

Top: Paul of Lewis Street, Bilston, 2002.
Bottom: Jade and babies, Dobson Funfair, Tipton, 2000.
Right: Costa Del Lye, 2000.
All photographs by Ned Williams.

Bob Mansell (1936-2005)

Photograph: Bob Mansell, at Smethwick West Station in 1990.

Part of the Bob Mansell Collection.

Summary
Bob was born in Smethwick and lived there all his life. From the late 1950s he ran a well-known cycle shop in Oldbury Road, which he had inherited from his grandmother and prior to that his grandfather, when it had originally been a second-hand shop. He was introduced to cycling when he was only 12 months old, when he was taken to Wales in the sidecar of a tandem bike by his mom and dad. In the 1970s he started going into schools to speak about road safety and bicycles, working along with organisations like the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents. It became so popular that a 'cycling in schools' programme followed on and he was asked to teach in the schools full-time, which he did until he retired in 1987. In tandem with his cycling pursuits, he was a keen photographer, amassing thousands of 35mm slides, a collection now held by his wife Cath and their daughter Juanita Williams.

Bob's collection offers a singular perspective, that of images related to the joys of cycling, both as a sporting and leisure activity, taken in a period of the 1960s and 1970s. Technically accomplished, capturing a 'decisive moment', the photographs of the bikes and the cyclists themselves may have been his main concern, alongside the social activities around the sport, but we are also able to see many fine views and different perspectives of the changing landscapes through which his subjects are situated – another personal portrait of the Black Country itself.

'The bike was definitely the centre of all his life. Nothing else mattered. Anything went wrong he just jumped on his bike and go off for a ride, then he would come back and he'd got it all solved in his head. He was always cycling and once he had found a camera, well, everywhere he went the camera went with him. So on all of his holidays abroad, and while he was out with the boys he took photos. While he was ill we did actually get rid of hundreds of slides because he had just sat there saying 'Nobody will be interested in these.' So we chucked hundreds away. But I had got the bookcase the lower half of a bookcase filled with hundreds of thousands of slides that I had to go through. Anything that was happening that was a little bit out of the ordinary - or even the ordinary things - he was just interested in everything. The bicycles, the railways, steam engines, the canals the botany, the birds, anything could take his interest. He would get enjoyment out of observing things.' – Cath Mansell

Top: Bob racing, 1960s. Bottom: Car in main line canal, Spon Lane, Smethwick, 1980s.
Left: Hailstone Quarry, Rowley Rag, Sandwells deepest hole, 1980s.

Top: Bob Mansell Cycles, 504 Oldbury Road, Smethwick. Bottom: Boys out cycling, probably in Tipton. 1980s
Left: Bridge at Tividale Locks, with boys from Holly Lodge High School.

Other Collections:
Albert Wilkes (1903 - 1993)

From the age of 24, Albert Wilkes worked with his father in a photographic business in West Bromwich, specialising in football and cricket photographs. As the Second World War broke out, he was called up to the Army and later served with the Army Film and Photographic Unit. He was allocated to document the D-Day landings in Normandy in June 1944, following the progress of Field Marshal Montgomery in the battles to liberate France, then on into the Netherlands and Belgium. At the beginning of 1945, he was in the Reichswald Forest as the Allies fought their way towards the Rhine. In April, along with others from the AFPU No. 5, he entered Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp. Albert followed the British troops all the way to Berlin, and was wounded twice in the course of his duties, though not seriously. He attended the Potsdam conference in July, photographing Stalin, Churchill and Truman in the Cecilienhof garden. He then photographed the Victory Parades in Berlin and the Court Room under construction in the Town Gymnasium in Lüneburg, before the start of the trials of the Belsen guards. He was also tasked with travelling across Germany to document the post-war reconstruction efforts in the British sector, including the provision of food, water, sanitation, and the new infrastructure of roads and bridges, documenting the return of peace. After he was demobbed he came back to West Bromwich, where he continued his photographic business until 1970, when he retired and sold the football archive to Colorsport.

During his time with the AFPU, Albert produced a remarkable body of photographs, some of which are in the Imperial War Museum collection, many of which have never been seen before until West Bromwich Local History Society staged an exhibition in 2016. The Wilkes family hold a unique collection of hundreds of contact prints made by Albert during his travels, though no-one knows what happened to his original negatives.

Photograph: Albert Wilkes in Germany, 1945.

Top: Albert with his wife Olive and son Brian, West Bromwich, 1946.
Bottom: Examples of Albert's contact prints from original negatives.

Holland, 1944, photograph by Albert Wilkes; note the red pen of the censor at work.
www.westbromwichhistory.com/people-places/the-photographers-story

Lance Corporal Selwyn Ray on right, from West Bromwich, part of a Maintenance Unit of the Royal Armoured Corps; 11th February, 1945, near Kleve, Germany. Photograph by Albert Wilkes.

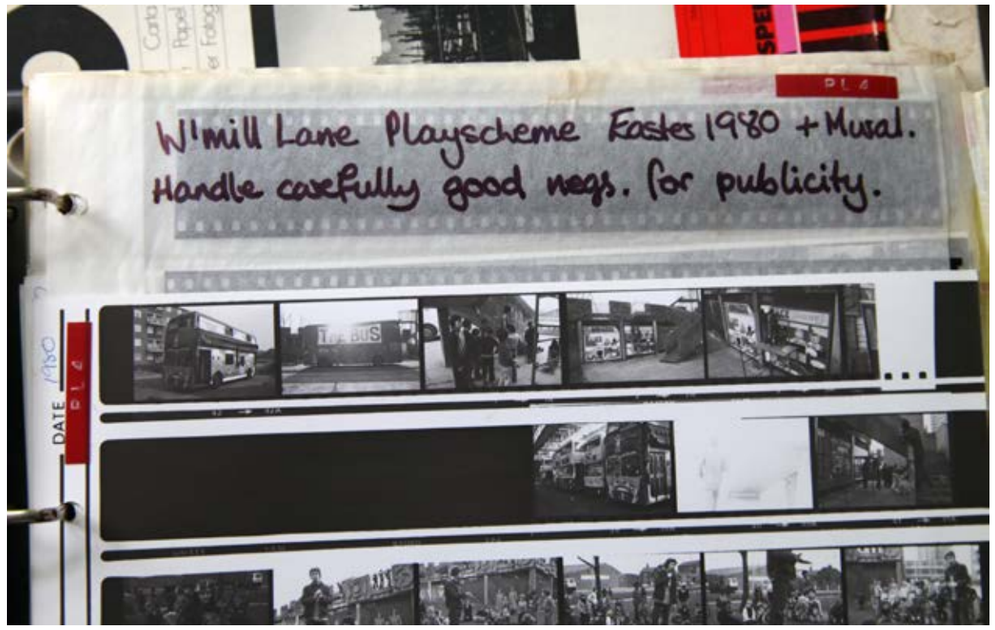
Other Collections:
Jubilee Arts (1974-1994)

Sandwell Community History and Archives Service for the Metropolitan Borough of Sandwell is based within Smethwick Library. It also has outreach stores held in West Bromwich and Dudley. It collects and preserves original archives and published material relating to the history of Sandwell.

They have partnered with a wide range of organsisations over the years to add to their collections – for example, Sandwell Irish Community Association, who collected oral histories stories around Irish migration to the area; Apna Ghar project, oral history materials from Black Country Touring and Foursight Theatre Company, who gathered stories of women of South Asian origin locally to produce a performance piece. Of particular interest is the Jubilee Arts photographic archive 1974-94. This contains a substantial collection of negatives and slides - over 20,000 - along with standard 8mm film, VHS video and miscellaneous print materials. The photographs were taken by Jubilee Theatre and Community Arts Company, primarily as documentation of their projects in Sandwell and the Black Country, and sometimes further afield. They were made by both professional and amateur photographers, as well as communities. Here in this particular collection, we find a complex portrait that reflects not just the specific locality but British society since the early 1970s. Today, these images also provide a remarkable record of local people and places, providing a valuable historical document of political, cultural and social change. Jubilee VHS and betamax video materials have been transfered to the Media Archive of Central England for specialist preservation and storage.

A substantial website made in 2015 made by artists from Laundry offers a fine selection of these materials for viewing: www.jubileeartsarchive.com

Photograph: Mural Work at Oval Road, Tipton, 1981.



Negatives and contact sheets from Jubilee Arts collection.

'We have a wide range of collections representing the history of Sandwell, parish records, business collections of significant industries such as Chance Brothers or Patent Shaft, along with maps, newspapers, as well as archives from the old county boroughs of West Bromwich, Tipton, Warley, Rowley, Wednesbury and so on. Quite apart form the Jubilee Arts materials, We have a fine collection of photographs, some 18,000 listed, many deposited by members of local photographic societies over the years. There's an online catalogue, which covers the four Black Country boroughs at www.blackcountryhistory.org. Our Archives are kept under controlled conditions to nationally set standards. They offer us a snapshot of our past. To understand the world today, it's important to be able to investigate our history and background. It's amazing what you can sometimes find in a box just marked Miscellaneous.' – Ian Gray, Archivist

Top: New game session, West Bromwich 1979, Jubilee Arts Archive.
Bottom:Windmill Lane, Smethwick playscheme, 1980, Jubilee Arts Archive.

'For me personally, the Jubilee Arts material shares the history of the community, the people who lived here and who live here now. It's the personal stories in our borough archives that I find the most interesting and valuable. For example, we have a blueprint from the Black Lake Colliery disaster of December 1871, which shows the positions of bodies found and names the men killed, including a 12 year old boy, Thomas Haden. Or, we preserve materials like the papers for Leonard Morris of Langley, who was a Sergeant serving with the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry in France in World War One. He was killed in 1917. We have photographs of him and his wife holding his daughter. We know the street they lived on. There are letters from his friend to his wife after he died in battle, remembrance cards, all of which give a great insight into the life of one individual at that particular time.' - Maureen Waldron, Archivist

Contact sheet, 1980, Jubilee Arts Archive.

Paul Ford
The View of an Archivist

Paul Ford is an archivist at Dudley Archives, and formerly served in this role at Walsall Council. Dudley Archives and Local History Service collects, preserves and makes available archive and local studies material relating to the Dudley borough. They hold original archive material including business ledgers, maps, school records and local authority correspondence and minutes - they also have over 15,000 books and pamphlets as well as around 26,000 images relating to the borough. The new archives centre opened next to the Black Country Living Museum in 2014 - the centre is also home to Dudley Museum & Art Gallery and the headquarters of the aspiring Black Country Global Geopark. This interview from 2019 gives an insight to the work of an archivist.

‘People collect all kinds of things for all kinds of reasons. As it means so much to them, what they want to see at the end of the day is that it’s preserved for the future. Here at Dudley Archives, we are quite lucky; we have growing room here, being a relatively new build and able to take material. Before you take something into your care, one of the first things to ask yourself is ‘What’s the value of the material on offer?’ You want to go out and assess the material - is it something you have already have in your collections and don’t need to duplicate, like old newspapers or magazines? Once you get a sense of the material on offer and decide to take it in, and any data protection issues, you can ask volunteers or staff colleagues (depending on the complexity) to make a box listing and start going through it. It depends on the resources you have available at the time. We do have a Friends Group here and a number of volunteers that will come in and work on various projects – for example, scanning photographs.

Photograph of Paul Ford, 2018

Council archives collect the material of the council. That’s why we exist in the first place. A lot of people think that we collect things through rose tinted spectacles, but a lot is actually required by law. That comes first, but then we can take in anything that we that feel adds to the history of the borough. We want to make it a more inclusive archive, so it’s not just about Council minutes from 1850. But beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I have come across some magical items that some people would not take a second glance at, but when you do a little research then it opens up something new. I had a colleague in Sheffield who found an autograph album and said, ‘Look, this is clearly related to your area of the West Midlands, are you interested?’ She sent it down and it sat on my shelf for about three weeks before I opened the packet. When I did I found it was related to a lady from the Victorian-Edwardian period and it was not just a bunch of names. It was 25 years of someone’s life; it had poems, beautiful oil paintings and various contributions from other people. With research, I eventually cracked the code of who she was, where she was born, where she lived locally and what happened to her. When I do a talk - it’s the most popular one. When I was a kid I would be wrapped up in the stories of all the Kings and Queens and battles, but later on you realise that social history and people matter far more. That’s the magic for me, not necessarily the grand charters. Intrinsically those items are brilliant of course, but personally I’d swop them for a school log book from the 1870s and the stories it can tell.

For an archivist and historian, the magic of photography as a medium is that it can appeal to everyone. A photograph pulls you in straight away. You can identify with things. You can start dating it from, say, what kind of top hat someone is wearing. That’s why archivists are keen to take in photographs - they are so useful in so many ways. I’ve got a friend who says he’s no interest in history at all, until you get him talking about football and the pubs that we go into; if I show him some photographs of how the pub used to be, all of a sudden and then he’s really interested.

Oral history testimonies are also fascinating; they offer a personal interpretation of a place and time, but do come with a warning. I use an oral testimony about the Zeppelin raid in 1916 on Dudley and Walsall - I don’t disbelieve what the guy is saying, but I wonder how much is acquired memory over the 70 odd years between when he was tape recorded and when the events actually happened? What he says doesn’t necessarily always make sense. I can use his memory and his words from this experience he had, but they are as open to interpretation as anything in a book. That’s why we love to explore it, we love to play with the various interpretations alongside the actual facts. We know Walsall was bombed, we know his back garden was bombed, those are facts. He’s not making that up, but he is providing his interpretation and the emotional response alongside. Oral testimony and photographs do help provoke that kind of discussion.’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