

## **Conversations Over a Brew**

Strong Women: Greig Campbell and Sam Best, with an excerpt from an interview with Lynne Best

Transcript

Recorded on Thursday 13th July 2024 in Liverpool

N - Nat

G - Greig

S - Sam

L - Lynne

**52:40**

## [INTRO MUSIC]

**N:** Conversations Over a Brew is a series of intimate, recorded conversations exploring the stories and ideas of the people we make art with. This podcast is about the power of listening and conversation, and how making art can bring us together and create change. In this series of Conversations Over a Brew, we get behind the scenes of the Strong Women project, a mural project highlighting the untold stories of local women. It has been created by mosaic artist Carrie Reichardt in collaboration with communities in St Helens and Knowsley. In this episode, we meet up with Sam Best and Greig Campbell. Both Sam and Greig are historians who use oral history as a research methodology. In the following conversation, Sam and Greig chat about working with volunteers to record the stories of women from Knowsley. We also hear from Lynne Best on her memories of picketing Halewood Council to demand a supermarket for the town.

## [THE SOUND OF A KETTLE BOILING FADES IN, THE CLICK OF THE SWITCH INDICATING IT IS BOILED, WATER BEING POURED AND THE CLINK OF A TEASPOON STIRRING TEA IN A CUP]

**N:** Hello, Sam. Hello, Greig. We're here today to speak about the Strong Women project in Knowsley, which follows on from the Strong Women project in St Helens. Sam is a local historian and Greig is a historian based in Liverpool, and both are specialists in oral history. So I'll pass it over to you, Sam, if you'd like to introduce yourself a bit more.

**S:** Yeah, I'm Sam. I'm a local historian, with my focus mainly being on Halewood, expanding slightly into Knowsley, but my key focus is the Halewood area.

**G:** My name is Greig Campbell. I'm a Black Country born, Liverpool-based historian. Yeah, I focus on the methodology of oral history and I tend to do community based, participant-led heritage work across the North West.

**N:** So could you speak a little bit more about your roles in this project? And where oral history comes into that?

**S:** My role and Greig's role has been to discover some stories of strong women from the area; getting their version of events down on record for people to listen to now, for people to listen to in the future. And I think oral history is important in projects like Strong Women, because we're mainly interviewing working class women - voices you don't usually hear, their experiences and how they think and feel about it. So I think that's a really interesting piece to go with the public art that it's going to be accompanied by.

**N:** And had you worked this way before?

**S:** I've done it once before with Greig on the Giz A Job project that's currently on in Central Museum. Sorry, Central Library. So I am new to this. So this is only the second time I've done it.

**N:** And Greig?

**G:** So my role was training facilitator and general dogsbody on the oral history side. Yeah. So I trained a cohort that participated in the project, trained them in very basic oral history methods and interviewing techniques. Within that training session, it was sort of - we spread it over two days, two half day sessions. And it started off with, it was a little bit sort of methodology heavy, a heavy looking at the history of oral history, its importance. And different methodologies, different examples of projects that have been disseminated and delivered in the past, typically working class based projects. And then the second half of the training was actually a bit more practical. It was about actually sitting down, "How would you construct questions? How would you design an interview?" Different methods within the interview setting, best practice and interviewing techniques and how you can hone them. And then after that, once the volunteers went out there and did their wonderful interviews, I've been doing sort of a mentoring sort of approach and offering feedback sessions, and we just did one yesterday as well. So yeah, that's where I did in terms of the training. To add to what Sam said, I mean, my background is in oral history, I've been teaching for about two decades and I'm a working class historian. My approach was motivated very much by the fact that when I grew up is a working class kid, all the voices that I'd heard in the sphere of history and the histories of the people I read about were often the elites of society - the top of the chain, the kings, the queens, the lords. And I very rarely saw any voices such as my own in the histories that I've read or the TV shows that I watched. So oral history for me as a young historian growing up in the Black Country was an opportunity to learn about myself, my community, but also platform the voices and the experiences of marginalised groups. And if you look at the historiography, women are, you know, in many other sectors of society, but including the heritage and the historiography, they are often marginalised. Their voices aren't present. So obviously that attracted me to this project.

**N:** Thank you. And just for our listeners, the cohort that you talked about that you trained up was a group of volunteers who interviewed people in the area, in the Knowsley area, to gather oral histories to complement the Strong Woman project - that is the mural that the artist Carrie Reichardt was building or has been making with local people in Knowsley to platform to histories of the women in the area. One quick question for you, Greig, was how does it match up with what you know to be the working class history that you worked with and is there anything particular about Knowsley? And for you [Sam] as someone who is from the area, what for you is particular and special or standout about the area?

**S:** Knowsley is a new area. It formed in only 1974 and the places that make it up - there's no cultural or geographical sense to it. But there's lots of history and lots of history that people don't think about. I run a Twitter page and once posted a picture of Halewood from, I think, the 40s, and someone literally said "Halewood didn't exist then. So people don't know that there's this fascinating history and fascinating history of strong women. You know, Halewood has got a huge car plant, and the women from that plant went on strike in 1968, which ultimately led to the Equal Pay Act. And we don't know that there's films like Made in Dagenham that celebrate the women from the Dagenham plant that walked out.

But more people should also now know that the women from Halewood walked out, and their actions still have a massive impact on our lives today. So there's lots of strong women from Knowsley that should be celebrated. And as Greig was saying, you don't hear them working class voices. You don't hear or read about people in your own area. And I think Knowsley has got so much to celebrate, and we should be hearing it and reading about them histories.

**N:** What was the first? Was the Knowsley plant or the Halewood plant before Dagenham?

**S:** So the Dagenham women walked out first. But the women from Halewood walked out in solidarity with them, ultimately bringing production to a standstill. So it was massively important that they walked out and we just don't hear about it. And they had to walk out again in 1984. And again, they fought for women's work to be valued in society and these women should be celebrated.

**N:** And yeah, I guess over to you Greig, what stands out or is particular about this area or isn't - that is the same?

**G:** The outsider's view? I'm terrified in what I respond here because Sam's staring at me across the table. Throw a cookie at me. I love Knowsley, it's amazing. So my relationship with Knowsley, it's very Kirkby focussed, to be honest. And I often I mean, disclaimer I don't know, how do you feel about this Sam? I often feel like the history of Kirkby kind of overtakes the history of Knowsley. Is that fair to say, from an outsider's view yeah, it seems to dominate, doesn't it?

**S:** Yeah. Kirkby and Huyton they're the bigger areas. So yeah, I would say they dominate.

**G:** So I'm gonna add that to that problematic narrative by only focusing on Kirkby. But hey ho, that's my experience. So I worked in Kirkby at the art gallery for only a fleeting time. Immediately after the pandemic. I left because my father wasn't feeling too well. And also, I got funding to do the Giz A Job project, which provides an oral history of the 1981 People's March for Jobs. And I'm currently finishing off that now - a bit of a plug there. But the reason I say that is actually there was a close link between Kirkby and actually the March. A lot of the marchers are actually from Kirkby, so I got to know Kirkby in a very short space of time. And yes, so as a working class historian with sort of Marxist tendencies, I do rally against sort of exceptionalism when it comes to working class experience, because firstly, it's just not very socialistic or collective. That said, now I've got that disclaimer out of the way. Of course it's unique. Knowsley is unique, Kirkby is unique, Halewood is unique. Every area has its peculiarities. I think the creation story is, what Sam referred to then, is very interesting because it is a new area. If you look at traditional working class regions and communities, they have decades and centuries to develop an identity and it becomes quite organic, you know, industrialisation, deindustrialisation, it's all part of this identity. Diasporic communities coming in, you know, the fallouts that have the class based systems of these communities, they often nurture a unique and peculiar identity. So obviously Knowsley has that, but it's kind of been crammed into a really short space of time, you know, and I think there is a pre-history to Knowsley, you know, during

its pastoral greenland. But really Year Zero was sort of that period of the 40s, wasn't it, when they sort of became, you know, Kirkby became not quite a new town, but it is a new town. And that's funny in itself. That makes it unique. You think of the five or six new towns that were built by the government in the post-war period. They were explicitly new towns. But then Kirkby, it kind of is on paper, but it isn't a new town. But yeah, it has a very unique history, it's a very young area and the people are really interesting. I think it has a real from my point of view, and I don't say this to patronise people because I'm not some sort of like, middle class academic coming into an area and giving it my sort of like, obnoxious analysis. I'm from a marginalised working class community in the West Midlands myself, and it reminds me very much of where I grew up. It's got a real survivor streak to it, a survivor's instinct. A lot of the people who moved there moved in the immediate post-war period. There's some infamous stories about infrastructure alongside the housing and all the needs of the community weren't met. They literally just built a housing, many housing estates and moved people there. But within that, a lot of the people there, particularly the women, the house builders, tended to develop quite an activist streak. And you look at these some of these iconic incidents in the history of Knowsley led by women, protest movements. You've got the Ford story, but also you've got the Kirkby rent strike. And the key role in these stories of like community, working class activism are often led by women. And I think that's quite unique in Knowsley, like to link that role of women as community leaders, civic leaders. Yeah. So it's a really interesting area. And also like all good working class communities, it's an area full of characters. That's what I learned very quickly. You know, there's this real sort of like, unique identity to people from the area. And I think it should be celebrated and ultimately recorded and documented as well, which is why, obviously, this project is perfect for that.

**N:** Speaking of which, I know you've both been leading interviews and helping people with their interviews. And is there, have you is there any characters in particular that you would like to talk about?

**S:** I've met some wonderful women. I think that strength of community - so all the women I've interviewed, they've been fighting not only for themselves but for their community. I interviewed Lynne Best, and at one point in the early 21st century, Harewood didn't have a shop. 20,000 people and not a shop. And for 18 months, they were out picketing, making sure people had shops. And she said that the council potentially would have put houses there. And now we've got a shopping centre - something so basic, you know, every community should have shops. And yet without these women fighting, we wouldn't have them. And I also thought was quite remarkable - when I was interviewing these women, they all said to me, "Isn't there someone more famous? Isn't there someone who's more worthy?" And yet they've done these amazing things for the community and they still don't think their voice, their experiences, are worthy. So that's why I love this project. They should believe that they deserve this platform too.

**N:** What do you think - you've both spoken about the lack of infrastructure when these areas were built. Why do you think that was? Was it some is it the case of like some

boffins just going boom, we'll just build some houses. People live in houses. We're not thinking of anything else.

**S:** Yeah, most definitely. I think after the war with what Liverpool went through with the destruction, it was just a tick box. There was slum housing. You need to get people out of slum housing. They got people out of slum housing, but they got people out of slum housing with nothing else. But that box was ticked. They were done.

**G:** If you become a bit of a dare I say it, overly romanticised story, isn't it? But you had the classic sort of tenements, back to back tenements of the North End in the same way we're sitting in one in the south end now in Dingle. But you have those classic, you know, that stoop community. And then they were ripped apart. They were offered a dream of these improved sort of these improved existence, but they would have to sacrifice their old lives in order to get that. But when they sort of moved, I don't think the dream was necessarily the dream they'd been sold. But in saying that, I mean, I've read oral histories not necessarily connected to this project, but as part of a work we did in Kirkby and Knowsley. And, you know, I don't think it's that binary. I think a lot of people did leave sort of the North End slums, Scottie Road area. They did get moved there. Okay. There was a lack of municipal sort of support infrastructure. They built the houses and that was it. And that is problematic from a civic planning sort of point of view. And obviously we blame the bureaucrats for that. But people still loved having their new houses. You know, it was still like, you know, mod cons and things that they'd never had before. But what they didn't get was, yeah, as you say, all these other things that you need to make a community. And I suppose the difference here, and I'm not a civic planning expert, but I suppose this is a difference between people designing a community that they don't have to live in themselves. So it's great on paper. They've got these beautiful maisonettes, indoor toilets, which would have been the dream to someone moving from the North End in the 50s and 60s. We'll build an industrial estate for them to work in. But life isn't just about sort of sitting at home and then going to work. You know, you need pubs, you need community centres, all these things. And they did build them eventually, but it seemed to be almost an afterthought. So the reason I say that, I think what's quite interesting, it goes back to what we both just said there from the very start, the point of creation, places like Kirkby and these and Halewood - the women had to take a strong role because they had to fight. And that's that word that Sam used there. The working class women have to fight. Well, working class people all their lives have to fight just to survive and exist, let alone to flourish. Women even more so because obviously within that dynamic, they're even more marginalised as women. So suddenly they arrive at this new place, they've got a new house, but then they realise all the amenities that they need to actually have a life and existence weren't there. So from the very start, the women of Knowsley, the women of Kirkby, the women of Halewood had to fight tooth and nail to get the support and the investment that they needed in their communities, and that set a precedent. And, you know, the generational legacy of that is you still have these women in the area who are strong fighters and an amazing ability to organise as well I always feel. I mean, we made a joke off the recording earlier about if there's ever a problem in Knowsley, often women will say like, "Should we set up a community action group?" or, you know, "Should we set up a

Facebook group or should we have a town meeting? And it's incredible, this energy that they have, but it's almost in their DNA to organise, collectivise and to fight. And it's often, as I say, led by women.

**N:** And so you're saying the architecture of the area or the lack of, created this matriarchal culture or do you think that came from elsewhere?

**G:** It's probably a bit of reciprocal, isn't it? A bit of both, I'd say. I'd say there's probably a matriarchal culture anyway, just by the basic fact that that's the social dynamics of the time. You know, women would tend to stay at home. You'd have a one income family. And Kirkby, I mean, the one thing they did build as well as the houses was they did build you know, that plant branch based economy there. So there's lots of warehouses, factories built there at the time. But often initially it'd be for men in places like Ford, but then the women have started getting jobs as well. So that's another thing that you have in places like Halewood and Kirkby, you have women who are actually bringing in income. You had the Bird's Eye factory as well, didn't you, in Kirkby for years as well.

**N:** And was that quite new for the time?

**G:** I'd say so, yeah. Yeah, definitely. It was quite unique. So I think about, like, my upbringing is like all my parents' generation, often the women wouldn't work because I grew up in an area of heavy industry like that, one income. I'm not sure it's the same in places like Kirkby where women were working in the 50s and 60s as well. And you have the armaments plant as well during the war, which was famously dominated by women.

**S:** Yeah, I think in Halewood Ford always employed women, and it opened the same year that Torrington Drive Estate started moving people into in 1963. They did move straight into these new houses with a job on the doorstep. Even if they weren't paid equally, they still had the option to go to work. My nan worked in Ford when she moved to Halewood.

**G:** Yeah. I mean, it's interesting that, isn't it, because it's problematic as well because a lot of the businesses, companies that were sort of invited and attracted to being set up in this new town, this new region in the 50s and 60s and 70s and a lot of it was under the auspices of Harold Wilson, who was from Huyton, wasn't he?

**S:** Yeah.

**G:** So, you know, he built the Ford plant factory factories, didn't he? He certainly helped develop them here. But the problem was often he was attracting or they were attracting companies like transnational companies such as Ford, and they didn't necessarily identify with the local area. So, for example, if you think about companies such as Meccano in Binns Road in Liverpool, it was set up by Hornby, who was a, you know, a much loved Scouser, the owner and the company and the directors had an implicit link to the community in the local area. You didn't get that in Knowsley. So as soon as, as the financial crash, these transnational companies, they have no commitment to places like Halewood. They have no personal commitment or ties to places like Kirkby. So as soon as

that, sort of like the economy bottomed out as a recession, these branches, they'd often be closed by, you know, executives who were sitting in an office in New York. So again, but that adds another tier to that, that sort of activist story of Knowsley because women and men of Knowsley, but particularly women, they weren't just fighting for investment in municipal sort of offerings and the community and investment. They were also fighting for their jobs as well. So there was a campaign to save Bird's Eye. I know that before it closed down. Obviously you've mentioned the one in Ford as well, but there's actually a few examples where workers have mounted really well organised anti-closure campaigns. And often they are led by women as well. So I think you have that work activism, that protest, that culture as well in Knowsley which is quite interesting.

**N:** And those work led campaigns, were they quite unique in that way to be led by women?

**G:** Yeah. I mean, not unique. That's really unfair. But in terms of their story being told. But that goes back to that domination of men. I mean, like, you know, I'm a labour historian as well as a social historian. In fact, I'd probably call myself a labour historian first and foremost. And, you know, I'm guilty of this. We often tell stories of the very few people who write about what could loosely be described as deindustrialisation is a topic which is the focus of economic and industrial decline, and I focus on how workers respond to that. Often the stories that are told are the stories of men. So we think of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders, you know, Jimmy Reid and all those guys. Men led that campaign. Male dominated industry, shipbuilding. If you think about on the docks in Liverpool, male dominated, if you think about what my PhD I wrote about a steelworks in my hometown of Bilston and a campaign led by the workers to save the plant. Of course, steel - male dominated. So there are in history great examples of women organising, particularly to prevent closure at a particular factory or a workplace. But the stories don't often get told because historians tend to gravitate towards the stories of men fighting against closure, often because they're more militant, perhaps, or perceived to be more militant. But the cost of that is you have these amazing examples and case studies of women fighting against closure, of fighting for their right to have a working life, but they don't often get recorded, which is why oral history is really important.

**N:** Prior to this project Sam, had you worked with female histories before and your knowledge of the area of Knowsley, had you had the chance to kind of put your knowledge of the female histories of Knowsley into context before, prior to this project?

**S:** No. Not solely. So my background is that I had two children quite young, and I got back into history after doing my undergraduate degree via the kids. One of them had been given homework on how to research local history. And instead of focusing on Liverpool, which the other kids had, we focussed on Halewood and I was discovering little snippets of information that I didn't know about an area I've lived in all my life. So I just tweeted it just off the cuff and got some interaction. So then I started researching Halewood as an area more and collecting things and tweeting them. And that's how I got into local history. And then my masters, I focussed again on local history, but not the local history of Halewood. And it was about protest or protests against a reservoir. So that was men and women. So



there's some background there and how process organised themselves and stuff like that, but not solely on women from Knowsley you know.

**N:** And how did you come across a project before that really platformed female histories or is this quite unique?

**S:** This, to me is quite unique, I think platforming the women from Knowsley. Local history is often hearsay. So it's heard of strong women from Knowsley doing certain things, but not in a big way. Not, you know, I hadn't read. I hadn't seen public art dedicated to any of these women. I still don't think I've seen or read many things. Just going back to the Ford strike. Everything I read is heavily focussed on Dagenham. There's a huge gap that needs to be celebrating the women from Halewood.

**N:** And when you're working with the volunteers you gathered for the oral history and speaking with people about this project, what are people's reactions?

**S:** I think there's a warmth to the reaction. Local history is so important for that connection. I think people really want to hear about the local area. They realise that there's so many human experiences and it connects us. And people from Knowsley don't know kings, queens, big battles. It doesn't mean as much to you. So hearing that there's these women who fought for what's right, and that's what a lot of the interviews that these women who are fighting for what's right, fighting for the community. I think it's inspiring and I think it's inspiring volunteers and all the women in the area, and I hope it continues to do that.

**N:** And have you made a heart?

**S:** I have, yes.

**N:** Who have you dedicated it to?

**S:** My daughter Hope. And I've dedicated one to the Ford sewing machinists.

**[A BRIEF RELAXING AND SOOTHING MUSICAL INTERLUDE PLAYS, SIGNIFYING THAT WE ARE HALFWAY THROUGH THE PODCAST]**

**S:** This is Samantha Best for the Strong Women project. The date is the 3rd of June 2024 and today we are interviewing?

**L:** Lynne Best. We just got things moving and we started protesting outside, outside the council offices. And they kept saying, you'll get your shops in the end. But we knew that we weren't. There was no plans for them. And then my husband Steven made a big banner thing for us, and it said, "How long?" That's all it said on it. "How long?" And it meant how long have we got to wait for an answer? So we used to do the pickets every Monday, 9 till 12, and we'd bring all the chairs round out the hairdressers, we'd make the tea, we'd make, give them all biscuits. And now we had to in the winter we had to bring blankets for them because it was that cold. It was snowing one time, you know what I mean? It was

absolutely freezing. But they still come and they used to do raffles. I used to go round to all the shops that were left, like Dave's Chippy and the newsagents, and get prizes off them because we just give them a raffle ticket, you know, you didn't have to pay for it, but they won a prize every week. So more and more were coming. So it ended up that we used to have about 50, 60 people, and it was more older ones because we were retired, because obviously the young girls with babies couldn't do it and they were going to work and stuff like that. But yeah, and then we just started having meetings in St Mark's every Thursday. Every other Thursday, sorry. We'd all go and see where we went from there. And then in the end, they did start listening to us because we were asking people not to go in and pay the rent or the rates. We were going "Well just come back tomorrow. Don't pay, because we're just trying to make a stand here." You know, and people would and then they'd stand with us then. You know what I mean? But yeah, we had some laughs like. And then they started listening to us. And then a project manager came to see me, Dale Milburn, and his name was, he was lovely. And he, he was just like "You are going to get the shops, you know, we've got a thing. You are going to get them." I was like, "Well, there's nothing in black and white." And then he started, he started being on our side, to tell you the truth. And and the more the shops were sort of closing down, closing down. He was saying, "Well, what do you want to do now?" I said, "Well, you can't let people just have to go the Asda." We were still open. Dave's Chippy was still open. And so we said, "Well, we'll go and see if we can get people on board." So we ended up, we got a fruit and veg van. We got a mobile and we got a meat man that used to come every Friday and do like a big thing of meat. Cheap. It was cheap, you know what I mean for them. And that's how we survived. And Dave's Chippy stayed till the very end. Even we left before Dave's Chippy. And so yeah he did help us. He did. And then every time we were, we were all still moaning about him like. But but he was a nice fella. And then every time something happened he was coming and telling us. I don't think he should have been, but he was coming and telling us what was happening next. And then the next thing he'd say, "well, we've got Aldi on board." And we were all like, Aldi? We love, I love Aldi now, but you know that that time ago no one was fussed on it, you know. But then he said "But we're getting a little Tesco as well. And what about Home and Bargain? Will you accept it? What about Iceland?" and we were going, "Yeah, yeah." So it all come about that way and that's why. So we did picket for about, I'd say 18 months to two years every Monday. So we got it in the end. And I don't think if we wouldn't have done it, we wouldn't have got it - there'd have been houses there now because that was what they wanted. And they took the Labour Club, didn't they? And they built a few houses there.

**N:** From the interviews that you have, conducted or supported, and you've been listening to recently and has anything from those people stories informed what you already knew or provided a new lens through which to see the area and do any particular people stand out and yeah, can you speak to that Sam?

**S:** Yeah. So I witnessed the deterioration of Halewood throughout my life. It just gradually got worse. And interviewing Lynne about the fight for the shops, I didn't know until I

interviewed her that it was a community led project, they were fighting. I thought we got the shop because it was always planned. It was always designed. We needed them. And she was telling me that they were meeting with the council. They were stopping people from going in to pay the rates. It was a well-organised and lengthy protest and I had no idea. And this woman is my auntie. So to find out that, to find out how organised, they were making banners, they were going to council meetings, they at one point wanted to reject Aldi because it wasn't cool to shop there in the early 2000s. It was amazing and that the council actually wanted to put houses there, and they just refused to let that happen. And at one point they had like inside knowledge, a councillor was telling them what the council were going to say. He shouldn't have been. So they could put up a bigger fight. And with interviewing Jo, I was amazed at how she came about. She's always been involved in politics. Her dad was the first independent councillor in Knowsley Borough.

**N:** So who's who's Jo and who's Lynne? I know Lynne's your auntie.

**S:** So Lynne Best is part of a women's group who fought for the shops in. I think they started their campaign in 2006 and they fought for - we had no shops. They'd completely fell into ruin. And she was a hairdresser in Ravenscourt in Halewood.

**N:** And all kinds of shops? Or was it just specifically the supermarket?

**G:** Hadn't they built an Asda which had kind of consumed -

**S:** No. So Asda is in Hunts Cross, so if you didn't drive you couldn't get there. And Lynne was saying that, you know, it's easy to get to by car, but if you're a pensioner there's not even a regular bus.

**G:** But isn't that interesting. So when we talked earlier about, you know, that community organising that's implicit amongst women in Knowsley. And it started off from that idea that there was a lack of municipal facilities delivered apart from the housing and the school, the schools, etc. that's like the 60s and 70s. But actually in the mid 2000s, you've still got women having to lead a community campaign just to fight for what I consider to be a very basic component of civic design - shops for sort of communities. It's not that like a crazy demand, but the fact that they're still having to fight 40 years after the, 50 years after the original fight for these things, it's still going and it's still being led by women.

**S:** There was not a shop. It was. I think the only surviving shop eventually was a chippy. And these women -

**G:** Dave's Chippy.

**S:** Yeah. Dave's Chippy and these women had to get in a mobile once a week that sold meat, a mobile once a week that sold fruit and veg.

**N:** In the early 2000s? It sounds nuts.

**S:** In the early 2000s, yeah. They were doing this fight in 2006. We didn't get the shops till 2012. So that's how recent you're talking. Not a shop, as I say, for a population of 20,000 people.

**G:** So I haven't been able to listen to that interview, but I've read the transcript. Well done, by the way.

**S:** Thank you.

**G:** I know from an oral history point of view, everyone hates doing the transcriptions. You were very enthusiastic with that. But the things that stood out were. Yeah, like it was 18 months, wasn't it? The campaign?

**S:** Yeah, 18 months.

**G:** So obviously that covered two winters. And your auntie was just like, we even had blankets. Yeah, they were just sitting outside the Ravenscourt with a flask, and I loved that.

**N:** And when you said your auntie and her crew were stopping people, stopping people from going in to pay their dues, is that their council tax or their rent? So was there a council tax strike?

**S:** There's a council building where they were protesting. So in Ravenscourt, I think, again, that was an old building. So they literally stood outside and said, "Don't go in and pay."

**N:** So there was effectively a council tax strike. Until, how long did that last? How long did this campaign last?

**S:** 18 months to two years. They fought. Yeah. She said it was mainly old women as well. So women who lived there in Halewood for a long time. She mentioned that a lot of them aren't here. Thankfully, some of them survived to see the shops, but they're not with us no more. And she also mentioned that, you know, this is just before social media, 2006, how hard it was to - they used to have to just go around and put printed leaflets through people's doors, and the crowd got bigger and bigger. Not that it would be easy to organise now, but you forget how useful social media can be when you're trying to get people on board.

**G:** Yeah, we don't underestimate the traditional network and communication sort of networks of older people. Like they seem to like put a bat signal out and organise.

**S:** Yeah. They had just a big banner that said "How long?" And that was it, because we'd been waiting that long.

**G:** So it's really interesting that you sort of like you look at protest, and I think it's completely underestimated the skill sets that are required to actually organise and maintain an 18 month protest, particularly when you don't traditionally come from that culture. You know, you think about trade unionists. My dad could organise because he

grew up in that sort of that culture of trade union activism and organisation. But you think about women on an estate in Halewood. It's like they're not. So what they're doing is they're, a lot of the skill sets they probably developed like, you know, maintaining a home, budget, things like that, that we sort of understate. They then took that to a form of activism. And it's fascinating.

**N:** But also, would you say that the strikes at the car factory, the car making factory, and also perhaps the Kirkby rent strikes, like the area's got a history of female led and organised strike action. And so for your auntie and her peers, would that have also been because it's part of the cultural memories like. And is there something in that that perhaps gave her kind of the and her friends like the confidence or the idea that they could do that.

**S:** I think potentially. But I think there's more. They just don't. When I've been interviewing all the women, they just don't register that they're doing something amazing. You ask them and they just go "It was just because we needed shops". And they don't see it as anything remarkable. But listening to it, I'm like, that's amazing. Like to have the courage, the strength, just the energy. You know, when you're working, you've got kids, a house to run, to get out and fight for something. It's so easy for everyone to say, "Oh, someone else will do that." I mean, I think that's what I'd say, "Someone else will do that." But these women didn't. They were going out every day. One day they said they sat in the snow. I wouldn't be out sitting in snow. I'd be like, "No, it's too cold." But they just do it. And I don't know where they get that strength from, but it's in them. It's just part of the DNA.

**G:** I think if you're fighting all your life, if you're from a marginalised community, then it becomes second nature to you. Almost certainly. But then on top of that, there's one thing saying you have the intention to organise and fight, but then actually having the practical skill sets to do it, and that all the other things that are sort of intangible. So, you know, camaraderie, solidarity, motivation, you know, 18 months sitting outside in, in a shopping precinct, like without any cover. It's quite a long time. I mean, from my point of view, I've always, as a historian, been quite fascinated when, because I do a lot of projects on protest, I've always been quite fascinated by sort of the social dynamic of protest. So what were those women talking about for that 18 months? Like, were they sitting there knitting, you know, a bit of a cultural stereotype there, but they must have been doing something to pass the time. You can't just sit there for nine hours a day for 18 months talking about getting a Lidl like. So I've always been fascinated by that social dynamic. Like during workplace occupations, I'm always fascinated about, well, what do the occupiers do? Sort of just on the day to day stuff. It's not always like lobbying the government to keep your plant open or trying to lobby councillors to get a shop built, right? So I've always been fascinated by that.

**S:** Lynne mentioned this. She said a word where they had a laugh, and I can imagine these women would have known each other for, you know, decades. So she said that there was a lot of old women, so they would have known Lynne's mum. But she did say at some point they had a laugh. And I could imagine at some points it would have been. Yeah, it would have been amazing.

**G:** So I did a project on the Meccano factory in Binns Road in Liverpool by Wavertree, and it was principally led by women and they got threatened with closure. In fact, they got given their redundancy.

**N:** The factory was principally led [by women]?

**G:** Yeah. I think out of 900 employees, I think it was about 820 were women. So all the, pretty much the production staff on the production line, the assembly line were women. So they got told, long story short, they got told they were going to lose their jobs and not to turn up on Monday, and we'll sort out a redundancy. The company had been bought out by Airfix, which is this like faceless multinational based in New York. And they didn't care about the women of Liverpool, so they fired them. The women turned around and said like, "Well, wait a minute. No, this is our factory. We're going to escort you off the premises." They chucked management out, welded the gate shut and just occupied it for three months. And some of the stuff they used to get up to. So the men of the factory, because they were experienced trade unionists, they tended to be out of the factory lobbying the government down in Whitehall, protesting Thatcher. But the women were the ones who had to keep the occupation going. If the if, if the authorities had got in, they'd lost. They'd have lost their power and access to the site. But what I was fascinated by during the project was just chatting to these women and asking about what they did just on the day to day whilst occupying a factory for nearly four months. And some of the stuff they used to get up to was just hilarious. They had a leaving do for one woman, but they'd all lost their jobs, but they had a leaving do because she was coming up to retirement and they had like a party and a "Happy retirement, Mavis" you're like, well, you're all technically retired, but it's stuff like that. And I'd imagine during these protests, the Kirkby rent strike, the campaign for Halewood, just that minutia, that sort of like that social dynamic of how these women got on. What did they talk about? You know, like fascinates me.

**S:** Yeah, it is. Another word that she uses, she said when they used to go to council meetings, I asked how, like they fought. We just used to cause murder. And you can imagine these women just, you know, just an uproar of these working class women just having none of it.

**G:** But I mean, also because Halewood and all these parts of Knowsley are very small, insular, you know, there's not. And, you know, I don't mean this sort of to diminish an area that I, you know, grew to love when I was working there. And again, it reminds me romantically of where I grew up, for all its good and bad. But what I've always been sort of fascinated by is that everyone knows each other. Yeah. So you can't escape it. So you could fall out with someone over a certain point. Like all the councillors would know. The people protesting against them intimately, and probably know each of us fathers and mothers and grandparents going back two or three generations. And that's like, places like have that, don't they? So you're kind of like, you can go to war with someone over a shop, but then you probably have to see them at the bingo on Wednesday. They're like, "Hey, are you okay? Yeah. Yeah, fine. I'll see you at the picket on Tuesday when I'm swearing at you." But I just love, like, I wonder about those inter community dynamics, sort of, you

know, how do you get on? And then afterwards they won, obviously they won the day they got the shop. Yeah. So you know, did these women - was that, are they done? Or did they continue to be activists in other platforms?

**N:** And is there any residual tensions from that time? Does your auntie speak to that?

**S:** No, I don't think so. I think even if there was I think, you know, now it's just we've got these new shiny shops. So I think she was just more the legacy of that. You know, every day she goes to get a loaf of bread and she knows that they're there because of what she and her -

**G:** I think that's what an incredible motivator for community action in places like these is the idea that you're actually not fighting for a shop for yourself. You're fighting, there's a legacy component to this isn't that, you know, and if you're fighting to save a factory that employs people, you're not always fighting for your own jobs. It's the future generations of workers. When you're fighting to have a shop built, you know those shops are going to outlive you and you know it if you're protesting in your twilight years. But the legacy is your gift. That victory is the gift to the community. So, you know, your children can go and use those shops instead of having to leave the town just to get some milk, which is crazy.

**S:** And she was speaking as well about you know, the old people having to travel to Hunt's Cross for just your basics and how having no shops lost the community.

**G:** It's the social dynamic of shopping isn't it?

**S:** These women were going, when Halewood had shops, you know, they'd be there for hours, you know, catching up I'd say everyone knows each other. Cups of teas, you know, there's hairdressers, you know, you could spend the day there and all of a sudden they're having to pay for taxis or buses and seeing no one they know, no one from their community.

**G:** You have these sort of institutions, don't you, in working class communities that sort of bond people. Pubs are the same. Community centres. And they're more integral and important to marginalised communities such as women. You know, because women aren't traditionally going to go and sit in the bar. I mean, they probably do, to be honest, in those days. But, you know, there was a traditional snug, that like physical sort of separation. Even within a pub, the women would go to the snug, the men would go to the bar or the lounge and like, we forget that, you know, on paper you're fighting to keep a pub open or you're fighting to have some shops installed, but it means, oh so much more than that, because it's a platform. It's a safe space where people can sit and chat and, you know, that's why you have these little benches outside markets, don't you? And they're just full every Wednesday morning. And it's just people nattering, chewing the fat, sharing their commonalities and, you know, their shared experiences and just catching up with each other. And if you don't have that, then we leave in isolation. And that's when you don't have that collective identity where you can protest because we're all just looking after our own

stuff and watching our own backs. So like, it means so much more than what it is on paper. Fighting for a Lidl or a shop like it means more to those people.

**N:** Would you say this project, from your experience has started to capture that - some of those kind of interpersonal dynamics of women protesting and just women leading the action?

**S:** Yeah, yeah, definitely. I think it's really shining a light on that. And, you know, I've got a daughter and bringing up and she's 20, but in Halewood you know, to be able to show her these, you know, these women who you're just, you know, traditional history disregards them and you've got the Ford sewing machinists, you've got the women fighting for the shops, you've got female councillors now fighting for what's best for our community. I think that's just amazing to see, especially in an area like Knowsley that doesn't get a good press. You know, one of the most deprived in the country. You know, no schools offering A-levels. We need these ray of light to say you're not what the media's reporting. We're more than that.

**G:** Well, I think that brings back the importance of oral history, doesn't it? So oral history was always sort of maligned by academic elites in Britain. Let's not go into too much detail. You had a period in the 50s and the 60s where you had new history, which was, you know, the likes of Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson, these left wing historians, historians, working class historians, and they wanted to seek to platform the voices of the marginalised, the muted and often the focus would be on working men. And then there'd be a move towards, like other subgroups such as women, wives of workers, etc. But even so, there was a lot of criticism of oral history as a methodology. There was a bit of a snap back from the elites, the academic elites, and even like A.J.P. Taylor, his infamous quote, and I use this during the training where he said oral history was, I'm going to paraphrase, "It was a bunch of men drooling about the past." But even then he doesn't mention women. So even if it's not, it's not. It's not about women drooling over the past or working class women talk about even that. He's in his critique of oral history. It's only men, working class men. So these sort of projects, they're important to not only record but inspire. Your daughter can listen to these interviews and the next generation. So I think there's that legacy and that I think you're talking about interviews. I had the, I listened to an interview with Tracy Ryan, which Pip the volunteer undertook. And what really stood out from that interview was, firstly, Pip was inspired by Tracy. So Tracy's background was that she worked for a theatre company called the Response Theatre Company in Kirkby, and it was set up in the sort of, I believe, late 70s, early 80s. I'd have to check that, but it very much coincided with that period of deindustrialisation, mass unemployment that hit Kirkby more than anywhere for the reasons I said earlier. A lot of the plants that had been installed there in the 60s and 70s were by multinationals who didn't have any interest in keeping it open during economic downturns. So you had all these closures and all these women started to become activists. And Tracy's part of that story and a lot of their activism was through, like spoken word performance art. They used theatre as a way of like, socialist working people's theatre, to protest what was going on in their community and listening to that interview there's two things that really stood out. Firstly, Pip the volunteer was so inspired by Tracy and not just



her work in Kirkby, but her work afterwards. She works now for Blackburne House in town, obviously a facility, education facility for women. And Pip was so inspired you could hear it. She was doing all the things that you often hear from a novice interviewee. And this is no disrespect to her. She was getting excited over herself. You could see she wants to answer the next question, you know. You know, she was like, really almost having to mute herself because she just wanted to say, "Oh, that's amazing" with every response. So it was amazing listening to that. But there was a reciprocal relationship going on because what Pip was doing through her enthusiasm and her line of questioning and just her being there, you could just hear her body language, being excited. It was, you know, it really came through the recording. But she also reminded Tracy of her own sort of achievements and her activism. So you could hear Tracy, like, becoming more emboldened through the interview because she was being given an opportunity just to have a mirror held against her by Pip the volunteer, and by asking these questions and reminding her of these amazing things she's done in Kirkby as a female activist through theatre and other forms of protest. And that's the power of oral history when it comes to women and other marginalised groups, is it inspires people to to learn about their their own histories and the history of women in their communities, such as Pip, but also it reminds the people, the contributors of what they've done and what they've achieved. It gives them a platform. So it was just this beautiful reciprocal relationship they had during the interview, and it was lovely to listen to. So it was really inspiring to me to listen to that interview.

**S:** I see that so, so often. I mean, we ask people to do interviews and they said no because he just didn't think they were worthy. And it's women who are doing amazing things.

**G:** If you've been told all your life that you know you don't have power, you don't have a voice, then you're almost, be it conscious or subconsciously, you become powerless or you convince yourself that you've become powerless. You mute yourself because you're so used to not being listened to. And I think a big thing about oral history, when you use it as a methodology, it's all about me sitting here as a practitioner and saying, like, I'm going to use this amazing progressive sort of democratising methodology in history to platform the voices of the muted and the misrepresented and the underrepresented. But the biggest job in oral history is actually trying to convince the people you want to speak to that they're worthy of being spoken to and recorded because they don't believe in it. And it's really hard. Like, you know, as you said, you said something earlier that you spoke to Lynne and she doesn't quite realise her power. You know, it's just a daily, you know, it's just something they did because they needed to do, which is incredibly modest. But I think it's problematic from an oral history point of view, because you're having to convince people that, you know, they're of value, and we want to record your voices, but they've been told all their lives that they don't have a voice.

**[OUTRO MUSIC PLAYS AS NAT SAYS THEIR FINAL THANK YOU]**

**N** - Thanks for listening to this episode. Check out the show notes for more information about this project. We will be back again soon with another Conversation over a Brew.

52:40

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