Elizabeth Roberts and the legacy of the Working Class Oral History Archive

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In 2014, the Regional Heritage Centre (RHC) of Lancaster University embarked on an ambitious project to digitise the transcripts of three significant oral history projects carried out by Elizabeth Roberts, and latterly by her colleague Lucinda McCray Beier, in the 1970s and 1980s. Focusing on the recollections of family and social life in Barrow-in-Furness, Lancaster and Preston from 1890 to 1940 and 1940 to 1970, the collection of 584 interviews with over 260 respondents – totalling three million words - was renamed the Elizabeth Roberts Working Class Oral History Archive. Incorporating the original indices and biographical details of each (anonymised) respondent, it offers a rich resource for historians of working-class life in North-West England, and of social history more broadly. The index includes topics ranging from abortions to world war experiences (although the wars were seldom the focus of discussion) through fairs and ice cream. Popular digital searches include such themes as accidents, schools, weavers, family planning and pace egging. Contained in the interviews is vital information about long-lived customs that are now dying out from our communal memory.

Oral historians are always working against the clock, losing more primary sources with every passing day. Their work remind us of the ephemeral in a history otherwise determined by endurance and survival – of artefacts, of documents. As Oliver Westall wrote in 1976, 'As a result of [Roberts'] interviews, the experience of a generation in two Lancashire towns [Barrow and Lancaster at this point] will not now be lost to future generations.'[1] Before the digitising project long-term preservation of the original reel-to-reel tapes was assured as they

are held in the sound collections of Lancashire Archives, but the transcripts were in poor condition, and access was limited to those who could visit the archive in situ. Raising £45,000 of funding, the RHC launched a dedicated website of digitised, searchable transcripts in May 2018; more material has been added since, with the goal for completion falling in 2021.[2]

At the launch of the digitised platform, I was invited to explore the significance of the archive and its instigator, as well as having the privilege of an 'In Conversation' session with Elizabeth Roberts herself. This article revisits those observations for *Transactions,* offering a brief background on the position of oral history in the discipline before tracing the impact of archive and author. It is not an attempt to offer a full overview of the critical reception of Roberts' research and its impact on the historiography of its subject matter, but rather to reflect on the significance of the archive. The methodology for this exercise in exploring the splashes and ripples caused by an individual and their research has involved blending conventional and current research methods: working in the archive itself, reading Roberts' publications, and exploiting the potential of databases and search engines, including Jstor digital library, the Scopus abstract and citation database, and Google Scholar, the web search engine that indexes the full text or metadata of scholarly literature. This allowed exploration and provided evidence of the journey taken by the archive in other authors' publications that is also discussed here.

The archive would not exist at all without the labours of Elizabeth Roberts, of Lucinda McCray Beier, and of course of the individuals of Lancaster, Barrow and Preston, who gave so generously of their time and memories. The intertwining between researcher and research subject is inherent even in the simplest definition of the practice of oral history: 'interviewing eye witnesses'. There are at the very least two people present in the creation of this source,

sometimes three when couples were interviewed together – and the interactions between the witness(es) and the interviewer means that oral histories are always a co-production. The interview testifies to the skills of the interviewer. Hugh McLeod noted the 'degree of skill and sensitivity shown by the two interviewers, Elizabeth Roberts and Lucinda McCray Beier' which perhaps explained why 'the veracity and impact of the material are unusually high.'[3] The oral historian Paul Thomson concurs, noting Roberts' 'very very high quality early oral history, very good interviews, excellent, interesting interpretation.'[4]

In his authoritative exploration of oral traditions as an historical source, Jan Vansina defines the sources for oral history as 'reminiscences, hearsay, or eyewitness accounts about events and situations which are contemporary, that is, which occurred during the lifetime of the informants'[5] Oral history was, of course, the first kind of history. The significance of oral sources goes back to Herodotus in the 5th century BC who gathered – or claimed to gather – most of his information from oral tradition; and to Bede, who acknowledged in his *History of the English Church and People* completed in 731 AD the 'countless faithful witnesses who either know or remember the facts'.[6] However, prose, and especially following the invention of the printing press, the printed word, came to dominate historical practices, certainly in the west. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that oral history began to make its way back into those historical methodologies: Allan Nevins, a journalist turned historian, founded the first modern oral history archives at Columbia University in 1948, seeking to create a record of those Americans who had led significant lives, and aided by the availability of reel-to-reel tape recorders.[7] As Mabel Lang points out, at that point 'the idea that history could be oral was apparently strange enough to modern minds nurtured on documents so that the office was more than once referred to as the Office of Oracle History'![8]

In Britain, the Oral History Society was founded in 1973, developing out of discussion at an informal conference at the British Institute of Recorded Sound in 1969.[9] Before that it had largely been local historians and folklorists who had been most conscious of the value of memories to research that which had proved elusive to the written record. The impetus also came from the newly-emerging discipline of labour history – how else to find anything about the domestic and working lives of the majority of the British population who did not leave behind a written record? The 'new' source material was not accepted across the discipline. As recently as 2001, Arthur Marwick dismissed 'oral testimony … [as] inherently (given the fallibility of human memory) a highly problematic source'.[10] Such rejection conveniently forgets that fallibility is a characteristic of much of the conventional evidence available to historians; that oral history is sometimes the only way to access knowledge that leaves no written evidence; and that it is in the juxtaposition of sources that historians find a degree of reliability. When the nature of memory is itself part of the subject of investigation, the meaning of reliability takes on a new light - how and why something is remembered – or forgotten – can itself be fascinating. In May 1977, Elizabeth Roberts published an article on working- class standards of living in Barrow and Lancaster based on oral testimonies in the *Economic History Review*, the quarterly publication of the Economic History Society, an achievement worth noting given the period and the status of the journal: 'I think I'm still possibly the only person that had an oral history-based article in the [Review]'[11] She described this publication as a turning point for her work being taken seriously by colleagues. Of her journal publications, this article remains one of her most cited, with 20 citations logged in Scopus (Elsevier's abstract and citation database launched in 2004), and 41 by Google Scholar. In it, she fought back against the scepticism against eye-witness reliability: 'oral history cannot be lightly dismissed as unreliable: we should remember that, for example, until a decade ago it was possible to use oral evidence to send people to the

gallows.'[12] Furthermore, in his introduction to the discipline of history, John Tosh cites these interviews, and her 'fine study' as the example of the *reliability* of oral history when individuals are asked to describe routines of daily life and the fabric of ordinary social relations.[13]

This chronology suggests just how cutting edge and significant Elizabeth Roberts' research has been. Yet the beginning of her project in 1971 can be described as tentative, even reluctant. In an interview for the British Library's Oral History of Oral History, she described how she came to the project when embarking on her PhD through John Marshall (then the Director of the Centre of North-West Regional Studies at Lancaster University)[14] who suggested oral interviews as a response to her vague declaration of intent: 'I want to do something about women'. She was initially 'absolutely appalled' at the idea (partly motivated by a dislike of technology), she 'couldn't think how on earth this was going to be valuable'. Armed with a small cassette player in 1971, she grew the project following a grant awarded by the Social Science Research Council and a heavy reel-to-reel recorder acquired in 1973/4.[15]

That project, 'Social Life in Barrow and Lancaster, 1870-1925' (the locations selected because Roberts had lived in both places and had connections to build on) 'transmogrified from [being] just about women into being about families and working-class life in general' because these groups were not represented in official records.[16] It was followed by two related projects which extended the focus both temporally and geographically: 'Social Life in Preston, 1890-1940'; and then, in the 1980s, she collaborated with Dr Lucinda McCray Beier for her third oral history project, 'Family and Social Life in Barrow, Lancaster and Preston, 1940-1970'. The interviews formed the basis for numerous publications including her monographs *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working Class Women, 1890-1940* (her

most cited work according to Google Scholar) and *Women and Families 1940-1970,* (a book she was very proud of despite the fact it did not get the acclaim of her first).[17] She later confessed that *"*If anyone had said to me in 1971 'Twenty years later you'll be writing a second book about this' I would have said 'Absolutely ridiculous'".[18] In 2008, Beier published *For Their Own Good. The Transformation of English Working Class Health Culture 1880-1970,* one reviewer noting how successfully Beier conveys her subjects' voices.[19]

The significance of these projects for the discipline of history was multiple from the outset: not only were they based on the gathering of sources largely ignored by academia until then; Roberts was interested in the working classes; she interviewed women; and to fulfil her focus on women's history, she also interviewed men, commenting in an interview in 2008 that she had spoken to men and women in almost equal numbers.[20] The dimension of regional history should also be noted. As Andrew Jackson points out, local and regional history was evolving in the second half of the twentieth century as the role of 'antiquarian study' ceased to dominate the discipline. Local history focusses on 'place, community, scale, boundary, time, period and context … and the more challenging theoretical, conceptual and methodological questions for local historical research posed by the likes of postmodernism, globalisation, regionalism and microhistory.'[21] That implies that oral history and local history are natural companions, given that as Philip Gardner has suggested, 'The force of the spoken word … always rests upon its intimacy, together with its rootedness in the local, the personal and the particular. It is this which gives to oral testimony its capacity for depth and authenticity.'[22] In a key text on oral history, *The Voice of the Past,* Paul Thompson repeatedly returns to Elizabeth Roberts and her archive. In a discussion of the contribution oral history makes to the evidence drawn upon in economic history, for example, he argues that these interviews reveal 'how many factors have been misconceived or completely left out [of calculations for

statistical indices of the standard of living].'[23] He subsequently cites the 'long-sustained oral history research on three Lancashire towns' which allows 'decisive refutation' of previous suggestions that the exchange of help within families was a 'calculated response based on self-interest'.[24] The Roberts archive offered instead evidence that help was frequently given when no return was possible, and was more influenced by social values and affection than any rewards the helpers – often women - might gain for themselves. He also cites the vividness and eloquence of the interviews. His final reference is an expression of concern regarding the urgent need to digitise the archive. Luckily the recognition of the significance of the archive was shared by the Regional Heritage Centre, and the generous donors who helped the RHC reach its funding goal that enabled the digitisation project to be undertaken.

Conducting oral history requires historians to reflect on their motivations in writing history and on the influences that their approach has to the sources they educe. Elizabeth Roberts reflected on how the local narrative challenged existing assumptions, both those in the field, and her own, regarding definitions of class identity and of gender relations; 'It took me some months of interviewing to realise that the women being described in the interviews could not be described [as down trodden]. I learned a valuable lesson about the need to look closely at the evidence and at how it matched or contradicted my assumptions [and those of] a certain type of feminist historical writing with its view of Victorian and Edwardian women as either simply passing time until their deliverance from male domination, or working actively towards such an end.' In the Preston project, she 'again had to look at my assumptions about the role of working class women in a town dominated by the textile industries and indeed my interpretations of statistics, notably the apparent but misleading link between high infant mortality rates and high levels of women in full time work.'[25] These observations show her self-reflection, the impact of that skill on her historical interpretations, and the importance of

oral testimony in developing local knowledge specifically, and historical knowledge more generally.

One of the greatest challenges for the oral historian is how to define his or her own role in relation to the sources, but as a reviewer in the *Economic History Review* commented, '*A Woman's Place* will be read with interest for the illuminating accounts of working-class experiences, but equally for Dr Roberts' erudite gloss on her material … Her achievement is to record working-class lives as they were lived and her success in doing so establishes her as one of the most accomplished practitioners of oral history.'[26] That involved resisting the imposition of singularity: instead she offered, 'a picture of a wider working–class reality, which is all the more vivid for its sensitivity to the ambiguous and the unexpected.' Her work has been cited most often in publications addressing working class history, urban poverty, industrialization, work and leisure, diet, girlhood and women's history, consumption, welfare, migration and the North West. When the *Oral History Journal* celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2005 (making it the oldest oral history journal in the world), it republished 24 articles 'to celebrate and revisit some of the most memorable, influential, and ground-breaking contributions', which 'reflect the various trajectories and trends in oral history research, theory and practice over the last fifty years, and as such, stand as testament to the diverse, evolving and inspiring nature of oral history.' Elizabeth Roberts' article, 'Working-Class Women in the North West', originally published in 1977, is included in that collection to represent recovery history, the endeavour to record the experiences of working-class, women, black and ethnic minorities, and other groups hidden from history.[27] She appears alongside the most important oral historians of the past half-century.[28]

The reason lies partly in the mundane. The historical significance of the latter should not be underestimated. When she went into working class homes and discussed food, and clothes,

and work, and family – around 250 pre-designed questions – she was giving us a unique source, without which this information would be lost forever. As she said herself in *A Woman's Place*, while the lives of working-class people, particularly men, had been extensively written and spoken about by historians, social observers, reformers, sociologists, politicians, civil servants and clerics, 'it is rather less common to hear or read about how working-class people saw their own lives; they were and are less likely to keep diaries, write letters or enter items in account books than their more prosperous, educated and leisured contemporaries. In the absence of this personal documentary evidence, oral evidence is vital.'[29] The women she interviewed may have been ordinary, that is to say, with little public prominence, but, she noted, 'they were truly remarkable in the extent of their real achievements' She identified their contribution to the family, to their neighbourhoods, in economic and social contexts. As the reflection above suggested, she resisted approaching her subjects through the model of patriarchy, in which women's lives are defined by oppression, because, she argued, it failed to acknowledge women's sense of self, of agency- their perception that their exploitation was the consequence of class conflict and poverty, suffered also by their menfolk. When *A Woman's Place* was reprinted, a reviewer described how 'Roberts reasons respectfully with the research of fellow historians, but she takes her cue from the words of her respondents [on the survival of kin, the centrality of the wage to women, the spread of birth control knowledge among married couples, the moral economies of the communities which made up industrial Lancashire].'[30] And in doing so, she redressed a different imbalance of power; that of the interpreter over the interpreted. She also consistently resisted any attempt to construe these women as victims: 'The respondents I was fortunate enough to interview were survivors and had been forged in the fire of very hard lives. They did not regard themselves as victims and I could not patronise them by promulgating this view.'[31] The fundamental challenge to more conventional history that the Elizabeth Roberts

archive offers is that it allows the subjects of the historical investigation to speak for themselves. She persistently promoted the importance of this also when engaging with the work of other historians, pointing out that one author was not going satisfactorily to answer the research question at the heart of her book because 'The people who might be able to illustrate the question, working-class women themselves, were peculiarly absent.'[32]

The existence of the archive and the commitment of the Regional Heritage Centre to make it available to researchers also ensure that the materials have a life independent of their first interpreter. The archive features in publications on holidays, atheism, gambling, cigarette smoking, sex education, pubs, fatherhood (and perhaps all three as it transpires that some men preferred going to the pub to pacing the maternity ward); childbirth; motherhood, the Catholic Church; adoption, the role of local newspapers, controlling or expressing feelings, and even one on the significance of bananas in reminiscences of the Second World War.[33]

One specific case study illustrates the value of the materials in contexts and historical debates not initially foreseen when the archives were collated. In 2017, a group of historians were working on a digital project mapping the impact of the First World War on to the streets of Lancaster ('Streets of Mourning'). While my colleague Ian Gregory generated statistical analysis and created interactive maps, I was drawn to the archive in order to understand just what kind of a community it was that was impacted by the losses in the war.[34] Historians quibble over the statistics of how many families were directly bereaved in the Great War, with Adrian Gregory arguing strongly the estimate should be revised downwards to about 10% of the population: this archive, however, suggests that the question of direct bereavement is not the key to understanding post-war mourning and grief.[35] In the narrations of conversations on doorsteps, at communal water taps, and in neighbourly support systems, it is apparent that any losses sustained were experienced by the community as well as by the

related individual: ‘it hadn’t been going so long when Tom went and then young Ben. It broke half of George Street when he got killed.’[36]

The subject matters approached through oral history have continued to grow, from women’s and social history, to identity formation – sexuality, ethnicity – the history of medicine, the history of emotions. As seen above, oral history is now sufficiently well established to appear among the methodologies listed in introductions to the discipline of history, let alone merit numerous publications on its practice and significance. And its growth is not confined within academia. In past decades its value has been recognised in a wide range of contexts. Oral history is also significant for therapeutic reminiscence work, for community organisations and for political activists. In Britain oral history has provided insights into an increasing variety of policy concerns, ranging from the regulation of supermarkets, to credit and debt in working-class communities, and aging. It has found a home in museums and heritage sites, on the radio and on television, and increasingly in digital and web formats. The scale of this range of possibilities for dissemination could not be foreseen when these interviews were first conducted.

Oral history also offers an immensely rich creative impulse. Mirador secured £36,400 from the Heritage Lottery for ‘Walking in Others Footsteps’ which included six arts projects inspired by the archive. Pippa Hale recreated old-fashioned toys in ‘Skip, Play, Repeat’ which, when played with, told stories from the archive about play. The film ‘Give Me Today, Anytime’ (Jon Randall and Tom Diffenthal) won the Arts & Humanities Research Council Inspiration Award in 2018. It featured interviews with people of Lancaster, Preston and Barrow about their domestic life, combined with voices from the past from the Elizabeth Roberts Archive, offering a moving and witty record.[37] Not only did the archive offer the

inspiration, but the projects showed the potential in the dialogue between past and present experience.

Rob Perks, Lead Curator of Oral History at the British Library, said of the archive that 'Its significance as a pioneering oral history collection cannot be over-estimated.' With the digitisation of the archive and the ease of access that digitisation permits, that significance is likely to keep growing - for academics, for serendipitous researchers, and for those in the creative arts. Ensuring that the accessibility of the archive is widely known is one more step in the history of the Elizabeth Roberts Working Class Oral History Archive, and the final purpose of this article.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

[1] Oliver Westall, Introduction to E. Roberts, *Working class Barrow and Lancaster, 1890 to 1930.* (Lanc. Univ., Centre for North-West Regional Studies. Occasional paper; 02). (Univ. of Lancaster, 1976). There were ultimately of course three towns covered by the archive, Preston, Lancaster and Barrow: Barrow is still part of the Duchy of Lancaster, but since 1974 has been within the administrative county of Cumbria.

[2] For the donors, please see the credits page on https://www.regional-heritage-centre.org

[3] Letter from Hugh McLeod, School of Historical Studies, University of Birmingham, to RHC, 26 February 2008. Sam Riches is quoted on this in https://www.lancasterguardian.co.uk/retro/lost-voices-lancashire-life-are-be-heard-again-652193

[4] ORAL HISTORY @50 'The life history of Oral History from editors' memories of its origins and developments', 9.

[5] J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985), 29.

[6] Bede, *HE; Venerabilis Baedae Historiam ecclesiasticam gentis Anglo-rum*, ed. C. Plummer (Oxford. 1896, 2 vols, reprinted 1961) Preface, vol. 1.

[7] D. A. Richie, *Doing Oral History* (New York, 2014) 5.

[8] M. L. Lang, 'Herodotus: Oral History with a Difference', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society,* 128:2 (Jun., 1984), 93-103

[9] Oral History Society, History of Oral History. https://www.ohs.org.uk/about/history-of-oral-history/ Date accessed 23 August, 2019.

[10] A. Marwick, '"A Fetishism of Documents"?: The Salience of Source-Based History' in H. Kozicki, *Developments in Modern Historiography* (Hampshire/New York, 1998), 126.

[11] Interview with Elizabeth Roberts in February 2017 conducted by Jean Turnbull (transcript in possession of the Regional Heritage Centre). My thanks to Sam Riches for making this available to me. In 2009, Siân Pooley published an article in *The Economic History Review* 62, 2, 405-429 on 'Domestic servants and their urban employers; a case study of Lancaster, 1880-1914' which had as its source base the 1881 census, census enumerators' books, advertisements, letters, diaries and oral history accounts. The latter were drawn from the Elizabeth Roberts Oral History Archive, in which 19 individuals born between 1879 and 1910 discussed domestic service.

[12] E. Roberts, 'Working-Class Standards of Living in Barrow and Lancaster, 1890-1914', *The Economic History Review*, 30:2 (1977) 306–321. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2595149. Accessed 8 Jan 2020. Here 306.

[13] J. Tosh, *Why History Matters* (Basingstoke, 2008) 315. A second edition is due in April 2020.

[14] For more on the life of this academic, see Oliver Westall's obituary of John Marshall in *The Guardian*, 22 July 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2008/jul/22/9

[15] 'An Oral History of Oral History - where did it all start for you?' 19 December 2017. Last accessed 4 January 2019.

http://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2017/12/an-oral-history-of-oral-history.htm;

[16] Interview with Elizabeth Roberts in February 2017 conducted by Jean Turnbull (transcript in possession of the Regional Heritage Centre). The ELOHA dates the materials held from 1890 because there is little held on the period 1870-1890.

[17] Elizabeth Roberts interviewed by Robert Wilkinson, 2008. British Library, Oral History Collection, C1149/08, Part 6, 30.00 https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Oral-historians/021M-C1149X0008XX-0006V0 accessed 1 March 2020

[18] E. Roberts, Interview by J. Turnbull, interview held by RHC.

[19] L. McCray Beier, *For their own good: the transformation of English working-class health culture, 1880–1970* (Columbus, 2008). Reviewed by Anne Hardy, *Journal of Social History*, 44: 2 (Winter 2010) 604–606, here 606.

[20] Elizabeth Roberts interviewed by Robert Wilkinson, 2008. British Library, Oral History Collection, C1149/08, Part 3, 15.26. **https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Oral-historians/021M-C1149X0008XX-0003V0** accessed 1 March 2020.

[21] A. J. H. Jackson, 'Process and Synthesis in the rethinking of local history: Perspectives contained in essays for a county history society, 1970-2005', *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 2:1 (2006), 5–19; and A. Jackson, 'Local and Regional History as Heritage: The Heritage Process and Conceptualising the Purpose and Practice of Local Historians', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 14:4 (2008) 362-379.

[22] P. Gardner, 'Oral history in education: teacher's memory and teachers' history', *History of Education*, 32:2 (2003), 187

[23] P. Thompson with J. Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History (*New York: (2017), 143

[24] P. Thompson with J. Bornat, *The Voice of the Past,* 173.

[25] Introduction to Roberts in @50, 61

[26] V. C. Burton. Review in *The Economic History Review,* 38:2 (May, 1985), 313-314, here 313

[27] F. Cosson, Introduction, *@50,* 2

[28] The twenty-four contributors include: Virginia Berridge; Joanna Bornat; Anna Bryson; Lindsey Dodd; George Ewart Evans; Sean Field; Harry Goulbourne; Anna Green; Carrie Hamilton; Jenny Harding; Alun Howkins; Angela V John; Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen; Nicola North; Alessandro Portelli; Wendy Rickard; Elizabeth Roberts; Michael Roper; Gabriele Rosenthal; Raphael Samuel; Ulla Savolainen; Graham Smith; Paul Thompson; Pippa Virdee; Bill Williams.

[29] E. Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women 1890-1940*, (Oxford, 1984), 3.

[30] S. Alexander, review of *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working Class Women 1890-1940*, https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/50, date accessed: 15 January, 2020

[31] E. Roberts, response to S. Alexander, *ibid*.

[32] E. Roberts, review of *Abortion in England, 1900-1967* by B. Brookes in *The Economic History Review,* 42:2 (May, 1989), 280-281

[33] C. M. Peniston-Bird, 'Yes, we had no bananas': sharing memories of the Second World War', in M. Addyman, L. Wood, & C. Yiannitsaros (eds.) *Food, drink, and the written word in Britain, 1820-1945* (London, 2017) (Warwick Series in the Humanities).

[34] Lancaster Streets of Mourning, https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/ww1streets/ Accessed 1 March 2020.

[35] A. Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2008), 253.

[36] Mrs H.2.L, interviewed by Elizabeth Roberts, November 1974, Elizabeth Roberts Archive, Regional Heritage Centre, Lancaster University. George Street lost four men according to the Reveille website: Lancaster Military Heritage Group, *Reveille* <http://www.lancasterwarmemorials.org.uk/memorials/lancaster-c.htm#170> (accessed 6 April 2016).

[37] http://miradorarts.co.uk/funding-boost-for-latest-project/8 January, 2018, last accessed 4 January 2020. Follow the link here: http://miradorarts.co.uk/we-won/ to see the film.