

## Taboo and sensitive heritage: labour camps, burials and the role of activism in the Channel Islands.

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**Abstract:** In this paper we propose the concept of taboo heritage as a way to describe a legacy of war so sensitive that it never undergoes heritage creation. Attempts at creation, such as heritage listing, renovation or excavation, are blocked by local authorities. We also examine the transition from taboo heritage to sensitive heritage, the next step along the ‘heritage continuum’, which we propose can only occur through the combined efforts of the passage of time, the role of activists and official authorisation. We take as our case study two of the British Channel Islands of Jersey and Alderney, occupied by German forces from 1940 to 1945. Labour camps were built in both islands, where the dead were also buried locally. We explore how the existing legacy of these events is still taboo heritage in Alderney, but has achieved partial progress in the transition to sensitive heritage in Jersey.

**Key words:** settled heritage, sensitive heritage, taboo heritage, Channel Islands, labour camps, burials, bunkers

### Introduction

Sensitivities surrounding difficult, dark and disturbing pasts should be respected by heritage practitioners; this much is uncontroversial. But what happens when these sensitivities prevent heritage from being constructed or uncovered? Should the events in question be allowed to fade and be forgotten, the crimes and suffering of the past remaining uncommemorated and publicly unremembered? Should perceived sensitivities stand in the way, decade after decade, and when (if ever) should outsiders or activists intervene?

The aim of this paper is to discuss the role and potential of activists (often outside heritage professionals) to introduce new heritage to places where it has not been requested at a grass-roots or governmental level. In this paper we examine the case study of the Channel Islands, occupied by German forces from 1940-1945, where victims of Nazism have long been marginalised. We address how challenging narratives and examining the physical traces connected to the occupation – namely the labour camps and burial places of deceased labourers - has raised a number of ethical questions concerning our role as heritage activists. We use this case study to identify and explore the associated concepts of sensitive and taboo heritage, which we see as existing on a continuum (Figure 1), with uncontroversial ‘settled heritage’ at one extreme, ‘taboo heritage’ at the other, and ‘sensitive heritage’ sitting in the middle. For the purposes of this paper, we apply each of these three positions on the scale to the heritage reaction to military occupation, but this is not to say that its application is restricted to this arena. It is important to state that the position of heritage on this continuum is not fixed; it can and will change over time. But the transition is rarely achieved without two further factors: intervention in the form of a heritage activist to champion its cause; and endorsement by a heritage or government authority to permit the process of heritage creation through projects such as memorial erection, survey or excavation, heritage listing or restoration.

Figure 1: The post-conflict heritage continuum, copyright Gilly Carr.

Settled heritage   ←————→   Sensitive heritage   ←————→   Taboo heritage

We have borrowed the concept of ‘settled heritage’ here, defined by Sharon Macdonald as the ‘sedimented, publically established and valued distillation of history’ (2009a: 93 & 103). In the Channel Islands, this is a heritage response to occupation or conflict that has been accepted by a community and has great popular support, and in this sense can be seen as the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) (Smith 2006). For the Channel Islands, this resides in restored bunkers, memorials which celebrate the liberation from German forces, and museums which show off the spoils of occupation in the form of German militaria (Carr 2014). Settled heritage in the Channel Islands is also sometimes a compromise position, adopted and promoted in order to divert attention away from or avoid discussing more difficult topics. In this sense it can be considered, at times, dissonant, because it can disinherit people from their past, causing discord (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). As Smith argues, dissonance is unavoidably inherent within the AHD (Smith 2006, 88).

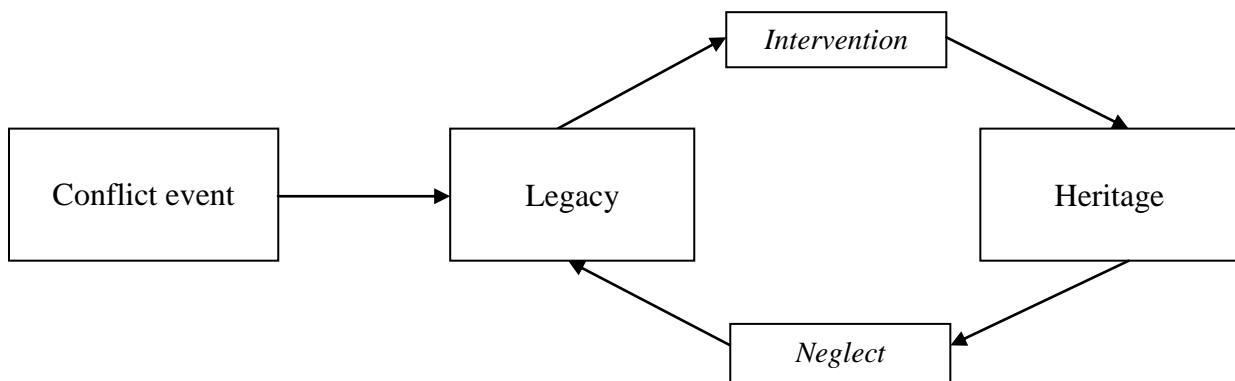
*Sensitive* heritage, on the other hand, is controversial. It is often *difficult* because, while meaningful in the present, it is ‘contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity’ (Macdonald 2009b, 2); or *dark* because of its ‘associations with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre’ (Stone 2006, 146). It can also be *negative*, because it has become ‘the repository of negative memory in the collective imaginary’ (Meskell 2002, 558). A plethora of additional categories and qualities under the umbrella term of sensitive heritage have emerged in the literature over the last 20 years. These identifications include *unwanted heritage* (Light 2000), which has been denied or airbrushed out of history; and *places of pain and shame* (Logan and Reeves 2009), those scars of history that bring shame upon us in the present. Other examples include *traumatic heritage* (Pantzou 2011), with its implications of gradual healing over time leading to a positive transformation and change; and *uncomfortable heritage* (Merrill 2010), which is associated either directly or indirectly with human death, pain and/or suffering, but which is distinguished by a focus on good practice in heritage management strategies rather than exploitation of its dark qualities for economic gain. Crucially, however, the heritagisation process is still possible in some form at sites of sensitive heritage if practitioners proceed with care, even if the results of that process of heritage creation are divisive. The range of sensitive heritage is clearly wide, blurred and overlapping in its definitions; a full discussion is unfortunately outside the remit of this paper. Our focus, rather, is on what taboo heritage brings to the table that the other designations have not already achieved.

What makes *taboo* heritage a departure from the busy marketplace of existing terms is that it represents that which is avoided, denied or shunned. Attempts by the activist to create or facilitate such heritage are blocked by the community and / or officials, and it is therefore absent in any form. It is this lack of heritagisation that makes taboo heritage conceptually different to those which are sensitive, and which has resulted in heritage creation or recognition. This is not to say that taboo heritage cannot also be sensitive (as, indeed, our case studies are); simply that it is all of these things to such an extreme that the very mention of it is avoided and heritage recognition is prevented.

It is pertinent to ask whether something can be labelled ‘heritage’ at all if it has not yet come into being as a heritage ‘product’, and all attempts in this direction have been blocked. In the case studies discussed here, this proto-heritage (in the form of labour camps and burials) exists beneath the soil; tell-tale traces can also be seen poking above the ground here and there. There is some popular knowledge concerning the labour camps in the Channel Islands, transmitted through rumour, rural myth, and folk legend (which perhaps functions as a form of ‘intangible heritage’) rather than more formal means, as is typical of taboo heritage. As both the authors are archaeologists, we harbour a desire to excavate and reveal that proto-heritage as an ethical responsibility to the dead, but it is this endeavour (or, more accurately, struggle), that has revealed the sensitive and taboo nature of these sites.

We suggest here that a more appropriate way to understand the pre-heritage status of these sites (given that they may never become heritage) is to re-imagine them as a *legacy* of occupation or conflict (Carr 2014, 12-15). A legacy of conflict can achieve heritage status only through intervention, such as through excavation, restoration, renovation, or heritage listing, as shown in Figure 2 below. ‘Legacy sites’ do not inhabit an *a priori* status as ‘heritage’ by default, simply through existing in the present. Similarly, a site that has achieved heritage status can return to legacy status through neglect. Therefore ‘taboo heritage’ might be more accurately labelled ‘taboo legacy,’ as its existence at the status of heritage is forbidden.

Figure 2: The lifecycle of the event, legacy and heritage, copyright Gilly Carr.



The model of legacies and heritage proposed throughout this paper – and *taboo* heritage itself - takes into account the cultural processes and performances associated with acts of remembering, forgetting, commemorating and re-presenting the past. Heritage is just as much ‘what goes on’ and what people are prevented from doing at sites as it is about the sites themselves. So much so, that it was in the process of pushing at the margins, and discovering where and why they existed, that we discovered the concept of *taboo* heritage.

### Labour camps and burials in the Channel Islands

The case studies explored here relate to the first and third largest of the five Channel Islands: Jersey and Alderney (Figure 3). The heritage situation relating to the German occupation in both islands is rather different. The two islands have travelled along different trajectories of memory and heritage since 1945 (Carr 2014), primarily because of their different wartime histories. Accordingly, the war narratives of the islands also differ, and it is this that has created a different post-war response to occupation heritage. But how has this impacted that which is visible or invisible in the landscape today?

Figure 3: Map of the Channel Islands, copyright Caroline Sturdy Colls.

While labour camps existed in the three largest islands of Jersey, Guernsey and Alderney, the only SS-run concentration camp was in Alderney: *Lager Sylt*. Human rights abuses and war crimes against the labourers, most especially those from Eastern Europe, took place in all three islands, but the key difference is that the majority of the population stayed and were occupied in Jersey and Guernsey, but left almost *in toto* in Alderney. This meant that the post-war identities formed differently. The population of Alderney was divorced from its landscape through evacuation, returning to a destroyed island that they quickly wanted to

reclaim for their own. The traces of the camps were quickly erased, whilst the fortifications built by slave labourers were put to pragmatic use. The population in Jersey and Guernsey, on the other hand, stayed and witnessed the presence of camps and ill-treatment of the workforce of the Organisation Todt (OT). In Alderney, almost the only people to witness the crimes against the OT and SS workforce were other workers and the perpetrators themselves.

The OT was a paramilitary engineering organisation tasked with the construction of the concrete bunkers of the Atlantic Wall, including in the three largest Channel Islands, among its many projects. The presence of the civilian population in Jersey and Guernsey arguably prevented worse crimes from taking place. They were also able to offer humanitarian aid to those foreign labourers brought to the islands (Willmot 2014).

While the history of forced and slave labour in Jersey and Guernsey is not uniformly a negative one because of the role played by those who helped them, it is still a very difficult subject for many islanders because of the anxiety that more could have been done by both them and their local governments to help these people and stop the abuse by the OT. Some local people also worked for the OT because of the high rates of pay. Thus, labour camps are also potential places of pain and shame as identified by Logan and Reeves (2009).

Traces of labour camps today in Guernsey and Jersey are not as visible as those in Alderney. One of the authors has elsewhere classified the remains of camps in the Channel Islands as falling into one of five types, depending on what survives (Carr 2016a and Table 1 below). While the majority of those in Jersey and Guernsey fall into Type 1, where war-time or post-war destruction means that nothing at all remains to be seen on site today, most in Alderney fall into Type 4, and are represented by substantial traces which have not been substantially reused, and therefore hold the greatest potential for archaeology (Table 1).

Table 1: Classification of camp types (after Carr 2016a)

<b>Classification of camp type</b>	<b>Condition of camp in landscape today</b>
Type 1	Nothing remains to be seen, discovered or accessed archaeologically
Type 2	Slight traces remain although the site is reused for other purposes today
Type 3	Slight traces remain but the site is abandoned or not substantially reused
Type 4	Substantial traces remain and the site has not been reused; great potential for archaeology
Type 5	The camp reused pre-existing buildings, which still stand today

Paradoxically, the visible presence of such traces may have added to the resistance to seeing them as heritage: they provide a glimpse of that which triggers negative historical associations. As Viejo-Rose (2015, 10) metaphorically phrases it, these sites act ‘as bookmarks indicating key passages’ in the narrative of books that some local communities would rather were not read. The majority of these sites are certainly not currently seen as worthy of commemoration or marking, although a few exceptions exist (Figure 4).

As will be discussed in more detail below, the remains of the labour camps and burials in Jersey are no longer as taboo as those in Alderney. They are, in fact, in transition from ‘taboo’ to ‘sensitive’ heritage. The different trajectories taken by the islands, especially since the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of liberation, resulted in Jersey coming to terms with its dark past and confronting old taboos (Carr 2016b). This has yet to happen in any other Channel Island.

Figure 4: Commemorative plaque on the entrance posts of *Lager Sylt*, erected by a former prisoner, copyright Caroline Sturdy Colls.

### **The taboo / sensitive heritage transition in Jersey (Gilly Carr)**

Jersey has travelled the furthest of any Channel Island in terms of breaching old taboos since 1995, although the island's heritage authority, Jersey Heritage, is still well aware of the sensitivities surrounding formerly taboo heritage. While those taboos have been faced head-on and articulated publicly in the political arena, Jersey Heritage has, since 1995, adopted a more cautious approach, acknowledging rather than promoting the darker sides of occupation heritage.

When it comes to labour camps, the long absence of any heritage (or even a visible legacy) has had the effect of kicking memory into the long grass, causing a silence and a forgetting among much of the population. The silence has not been total; Jersey has its own guardians of memory who have kept the legacy of the forced and slave workers alive. These people can wield substantial power and influence in a way that would not be possible in a larger nation, where the potential for anonymity and the drowning out of dissenting or non-mainstream voices is greater (Carr 2015).

In Jersey, the Spanish Republican community have been particularly active, specifically Francisco Font and, later, his son Gary Font, in guarding the memory of slave and forced labourers. The Spanish Republicans came to Jersey as forced labourers with the OT. Having escaped Franco's Spain after the civil war and taken refuge in France, they were interned and handed over to the OT by Vichy when the occupying forces in France demanded labourers for building projects (Sanders 2005, 193).

When brought to Jersey, some of the men lived in labour camps and others in private accommodation paid for by their wages; forced labourers were comparatively well-paid, although there was little to buy in the shops. They were, however, able to purchase bowler hats to help protect their heads during their labouring work. After the occupation a handful of Spaniards, including Font, stayed behind in the island to marry local women.

Font's prominence came from his position as spokesperson for the forced and slave labour community. This involved leading the annual ceremony on Liberation Day at the Strangers' Cemetery at Westmount in St Helier, where 101 of his fellow OT workers were buried after their deaths through starvation, ill-treatment or industrial accidents. This ceremony probably began in the early 1960s. It was originally prompted by the visit to Jersey in 1960 of a Soviet timber ship, the *mv Jarensk*, whose crew members were taken to the cemetery by the tiny local Communist Party, and who also paid for a small memorial plaque for their deceased compatriots. Although at the time the cemetery still held the bodies of the deceased, they were removed in 1961 by the German War Graves Commission (*Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge*) to the Mont-des-Huisnes German war cemetery in Normandy, France (Ginns 2006, 154-155).

The annual ceremony that Font organised with his Spanish Republican friends was private. He carried a portable plaque in a wheelbarrow to the cemetery each year where flowers were laid and Spanish civil war struggles were remembered.<sup>1</sup> In 1970, Font tried unsuccessfully to garner support for a memorial plaque at Fort Regent, location of a former labour camp in St Helier. Even the Jersey Jewish Congregation – co-victims of Nazism – unanimously decided not to support him.<sup>2</sup> Font was successful, however, in his quest for a permanent memorial at the Westmount cemetery, and this was erected in 1971.

Since the 1970s, additional plaques have been attached to the memorial site, so that French, Spanish Republican, Polish, Jewish, Belgian, French North African and Byelorussian workers are now remembered alongside those from Russia. After Font's death in 1979, his ashes were

buried at the memorial. His son took over as Master of Ceremonies at Westmount in 2001, receiving the baton from members of the local Communist Party who had taken over from him. Gary Font has been instrumental in moving the commemorative ceremony away from a quasi-political meeting for Spanish Republicans and the Communist Party, a gathering so taboo that it was shunned by others and even spied upon by MI5 during the Cold War.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2001, Gary Font has banned political speeches and invited the Bailiff, Lieutenant Governor, foreign ambassadors from the UK, and island dignitaries to attend. It is now an inclusive, more mainstream part of Liberation Day, although it has not entirely shaken off its controversial reputation. Only around one in ten of those who attend the celebrations in the centre of town attend the commemorative ceremony at Westmount. While still a sensitive site, any taboo associated with the burial site of the foreign labourers has been overturned through grass-roots activism, the passage of time, and the authorisation of local government.

When I was first shown around the remains of the camps in Jersey in 2009 by two occupation veterans, surviving traces were very limited. The concrete entrance posts of *Lager Wick* were so heavily covered in ivy that they were indistinguishable from the trees in the nature reserve where they stood. I would not have found them without the help of these two men. A return visit to *Lager Wick* in 2012 also revealed five metal posts along the nearby road, each with fragments of barbed wire adhering to them.

That year I formed a local advisory group with the aim of garnering the support of stakeholders in advance of an excavation of the camp. After also visiting the camps in neighbouring Guernsey, it appeared that, as all other labour camps in the two largest islands had been either destroyed or built upon, Wick was the only camp that showed any suitability for an archaeological project. As Wick was a wetland nature reserve for rare breeding birds, had been listed as an SSI<sup>4</sup> since 2009, and had not been built upon, I anticipated that it might prove fruitful for excavation.

While most of the stakeholders were of the opinion that I was wasting my time and that I would find nothing, Gary Font was supportive. He suggested that the concrete entrance posts should be recognised as heritage and that visitors should be able to wander up to them and touch them. Others were worried about the disturbance to the wild birds that this would entail. The landowners, too, emphasised the higher position of birds in relation to the forced labourers in their desired hierarchy of the interpretation and understanding the site. To prioritise the cultural heritage of *Lager Wick* risked, in the eyes of the landowners, disinheriting the wildlife and creating dissonance. As in Alderney, there are people in Jersey who are more comfortable with the natural heritage of their island rather than certain legacies of their cultural heritage e.g. the German occupation.

After discussions with the island's planning department and further meetings with the landowners, I conducted three seasons of excavations at the site from 2014 to 2016 with the aim of raising awareness about labour camps in the Channel Islands and to learn more about the everyday life of the French and Spanish Republican forced workers who lived in the camp. The project was a success: the excavation yielded much information and the associated blog was followed by people from 50 countries. The local public lecture on the dig was full, and the local media followed the excavations closely. However, the excavation was not uncontroversial; I detected a distinct censoring of my results. Four examples of this will suffice.

In 2014 I stripped the concrete entrance posts - an iconic symbol of the camp - revealing rings of barbed wire up to a height of just over seven feet (Figure 5). I was told by a local historian that the barbed wire was put up after the war to keep in the cows that grazed on the site of the demolished camp in 1945 and 1946 and that there had been no barbed wire around the labour camp. Later, after I asked the local planning authority and landowners whether the entrance posts could be kept stripped of ivy as a form of memorial or heritagisation, I was

told that this was not possible because it would encourage people onto the site which would disturb the birds, who had priority, and that their habitat should be allowed to grow back after the excavation. In the second season of excavation I found a mug with an eagle and swastika on the base. While this made the front page of the local newspaper, the interview I gave about the forced and slave labourers was overshadowed by my additional offer to local people to come and help excavate. Finally, in 2015, I was sent an artist's impression of the camp for an information panel: it portrayed the camp as clean, neat and tidy with neither forced labourers, barbed wire, nor entrance posts visible. In short, the most taboo elements of the site, my project and the excavation were being edited out. While I, as a heritage activist, had worked to reveal and talk about formerly taboo subjects and objects, I had achieved only partial success locally. At the time of writing, heritage listing for the camp is being pursued, but this is not expected to be a smooth process after the landowners indicated that they 'did not feel that it was necessary'.<sup>5</sup> In May 2015, the Jersey Evening Post ran an online poll asking the population whether *Lager Wick* should be preserved. Just over 73% said that it should.<sup>6</sup> So while ordinary people seem open to making the transition from taboo to sensitive heritage, the heritage authorities in Jersey are more cautious. This underlines the fact that the transition from taboo heritage to sensitive heritage takes the combination of the passage of time, an activist, and agreement by the authorities in order to be achieved. This was as true in Jersey for Francisco Font as it was for me, 45 years later.

Figure 5: The entrance posts of *Lager Wick*. Copyright Gilly Carr.

### **Taboo heritage in Alderney (Caroline Sturdy Colls)**

The brutal treatment that the forced labourers suffered on Alderney, and the physical evidence linked to this, has been ignored, hidden from view, downplayed and, in some cases, destroyed. There has been little interest locally in finding and protecting the remains of the SS and labour camps, or the burials of the foreign labourers that exist as a result of the Nazi occupation. *Lagers* Sylt, Helgoland, Norderney and Borkum now reside within wasteland, a housing development, a holiday campsite and waste depot respectively. Likewise, the forced labourer cemeteries are unmarked; one in St. Anne now lies under a car park, the other is on a States-owned common. Although human remains were exhumed from these two sites in the 1960s, the thoroughness of these exhumations is questionable (Sturdy Colls 2012). The condition of these sites is both a product and indicator of the fact that the internment of labourers and their burials have been, and still are, seen as taboo legacies of crimes that many people do not wish to discuss. The brutal treatment of foreign labourers was first seen as taboo by the British government immediately after liberation. When faced with the evidence of mass violence (during site visits), it appears that the War Office realised that the occupation story ran contra to the accepted British war narrative centred on the victory of the Allied nations (a narrative discussed in Macdonald 2005).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, conscious efforts were made to downplay the nature of the crimes and the camps were quickly levelled over.

Likewise, Alderney's local war narrative immediately focused on the evacuation of the island's 1500 inhabitants, military activities, the liberation in 1945 and the post-war rebuilding of the island after the Homecoming. To the returning islanders, the surviving traces of the camps and burial sites were (understandably) taboo because they provided a constant reminder of the crimes perpetrated on their land (and in some cases in their homes). To remove these reminders, and in an attempt to ensure that Alderney was not forever associated with mass atrocity, further attempts were made to erase traces of the occupation. The remaining elements of camp barracks were used for construction projects and land was ploughed over. The lack of visible evidence was then used to further assert that the taboo

aspects of the occupation were in fact not true. For example, the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) noted in 1952 that the markers in the cemeteries where the foreign labourers were buried were dilapidated and, in some cases, they had vanished completely. When the States of Alderney were then asked if they would like to erect new markers to commemorate the atrocities, they responded by saying that ‘there is no guarantee whatsoever that the remains are actually buried in the particular space indicated’.<sup>8</sup> Were it not for the actions of individual activists in the years that followed, there would be no obvious indication in the landscape today that foreign labourers were housed in Alderney. The Hammond Memorial (erected via private sponsorship), a plaque on the gates of *Lager Sylt* (erected by a survivor in 2008) and a plaque on the Alderney Museum (date and origin unknown) provide subtle reminders of the taboo aspects of the occupation, though only the memorial at *Lager Sylt* is located at the site of the atrocity to which it refers.

Unlike the camps, which were always intended to be temporary in nature, the fortifications constructed during the occupation were built to last. Therefore, by contrast, after the war their removal was practically impossible and their visibility meant that they could not be ignored. The fortifications now dominate historical accounts about the occupation written by local historians. Instead of being considered taboo, they are described as impressive structures that testify to the might of German engineering. Although they are far from protected by heritage legislation, they are viewed as economically valuable by the local population e.g. as storage facilities, tourist sites and even nightclubs. The position is not that dissimilar to that which prevails in Guernsey and Jersey, where many bunkers are restored and protected as part of the Authorised Heritage Discourse.

Alderney’s war narrative has remained largely unchanged since the end of the war and conscious efforts have been made locally to keep it this way. That said, the elements it includes can still be termed *sensitive*, as opposed to *settled*, heritage for two reasons: first, the evacuation and rebuilding following liberation were traumatic for the returning islanders, some of whom still live in Alderney; and second, because it is possible for discussions of the official war narrative to easily cross the line into the taboo should the labourers who built the fortifications be mentioned.

Therefore, the slogan ‘Don’t mention the war’, which hangs over the bar in one of the pubs in Alderney, seems to epitomise the view of a sector of the population; the occupation may be acknowledged but certain aspects should not be discussed. This was certainly the reaction I received when, in 2010, I initiated an archaeological investigation in Alderney. Because I directly set out to examine the lesser-known aspects of the occupation connected to forced and slave labour, I immediately met opposition. Members of the local historical society were particularly vocal about the fact that they did not want to discuss the foreign labourers; many were dismissive of their suffering, suggesting that their experiences had not been as terrible as their testimonies suggested.. Almost all members were unanimous in the assertion that archaeological investigations were a waste of time as there would be no evidence; some argued this was because there would be nothing left to find, others because it (e.g. mass graves) never existed in the first place **The local authorities were (understandably) concerned that research about the occupation would revive painful memories for members of the population that had returned to Alderney following liberation. Initially, it appeared that I had to choose between not offending the local population and providing a voice for those who had died on Alderney, and who could not speak for themselves.**

Ultimately, a compromise was agreed. I would use *non-invasive* methods to examine the sites as opposed to an excavation, on the basis that these methods were deemed less taboo and less likely to bring taboo heritage to the surface (physically and metaphorically). Five seasons of fieldwork have led to many important discoveries. Structures, boundaries and fortifications have been located, documented and visualised in three dimensions at *Lager Norderney* and



*Lager Sylt* (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2014). This revealed new insights into the layout of both camps, and the living and working conditions that the foreign workers experienced (Sturdy Colls et al. (a) forthcoming; Figure 6). Hundreds of the fortifications built by the foreign labourers have been documented and graffiti, including the inscribed names of prisoners, have been located and recorded; thus, it has been possible to investigate the lives (and deaths) of individual workers whose names were otherwise unknown (Sturdy Colls et al. (b) forthcoming). Investigations at one of the former foreign labourer cemeteries using non-invasive techniques have also provided evidence for the existence of further burials and mass graves (Sturdy Colls 2012). As in Jersey, the successful completion of this work required a combination of time, negotiations with the relevant local authorities and affiliated communities (e.g. the local historical society) and a persistent activist.

The fact that archaeological work was allowed to go ahead meant that some taboos have been breached in Alderney. However, the archaeological work and associated programme of historical research has, in many ways, made the legacies of the occupation even more taboo, since it has uncovered evidence that both confirms pre-existing rumours concerning mass burials and attests to the severity of the crimes committed. The result has been that some groups and individuals have fought even harder to limit discussions concerning these aspects, and applications to excavate continue to be turned down. Others have simply chosen to ignore the results – something which has seemingly been made easier in the absence of an excavation - and continue to promote the long-standing official war narratives in order to silence the more difficult aspects of the past.

In contrast, among the general population of Alderney, there has been much support for the work. Some people who considered themselves activists long before the archaeological project, spoke out in support of it. Others became interested in protecting this heritage after the project began. Although vegetation has largely reclaimed the sites, visitors have now created routes to structures, which they are now aware of due to publications, online materials and evidence made visible by the archaeological work. The foreign labourers' experiences now have more of an online presence, as more people are discussing this aspect of the island's history, and this will likely increase as more results from the archaeological work are made available. Teachers and students, both on Alderney and mainland Britain, are now more aware of this history because of lectures, workshops and a conferences that I have been asked to deliver. Some members of the States of Alderney are now also advocating the protection of *Lager Sylt* and its transformation into a more developed memorial site; although this has currently served to prevent excavations and other archaeological work.

Therefore, it does seem that some aspects of *taboo* heritage are moving towards *sensitive* heritage in Alderney, thus the foreign labourer experiences are no longer totally silenced. However, the legacy of past approaches to the history and physical evidence of the occupation means that a complete transformation to *sensitive*, let alone *settled* heritage, is likely to be a long and arduous journey.

Figure 6. The toilet block at *Lager Sylt*, which was hidden beneath vegetation prior to archaeological investigations. Copyright Caroline Sturdy Colls.

## Discussion

These case studies have highlighted the difficulties faced by heritage activists who have fought to facilitate the transition of taboo heritage to sensitive heritage with varying levels of local success. The situation has been more difficult to achieve in Alderney because the legacy of the camps is what John Price (2005) has identified as 'orphan heritage', with no clear successor or community to argue for its significance. This was not the case in Jersey, but

even there it took a visit to the island by Russians and the German War Graves Commission in 1960 and 1961 respectively to reawaken the Spanish Republican community into remembering the places of death and suffering of their wartime colleagues. These two events combined to produce for this community what Alexander Etkind calls a 'memory event'. For Etkind, a memory event is 'a re-discovery of the past that creates a rupture with its accepted cultural meaning. Memory events are secondary to the historical events that they interpret, usually taking place many years or decades later' (2010, 4). In Alderney there were no successor communities to prompt the population to 'rediscover' their past. The exhumations of the two cemeteries by the German War Graves Commission were not 'memory events', but rather an additional opportunity to further disassociate the forced labourers physically and metaphorically from the island. Alderney lacked a long-term activist until now, and while local historians exist, they choose to focus on safer heritage such as bunkers – or at least to ask only safe questions of them. Many of these people have acted as anti-activists and tried to block the heritage activists from achieving their aims on their territory – no doubt a small community problem. There is also a lingering taboo caused by the suspicion of further mass graves in Alderney. While 'knowledge' about them resides in rumour and myth, a characteristic of taboo heritage alluded to earlier, their existence is officially denied. This continues, despite historical and non-invasive archaeological investigations confirming their presence; by failing to grant permission to excavate any sites pertaining to the occupation (including the camps and burial sites), the local authorities in Alderney are able to maintain the status quo.

Communities undoubtedly have the right to grieve, heal and come to terms with a traumatic past in their own time before considering heritage responses. But if that process takes a long time, then knowledge can be lost which hinders commemoration and heritage creation, which is why the role of archaeology is so valuable. Rather than letting memories fade, archaeologists feel a responsibility towards the custodianship of the past, especially so if they have a personal link to particular pasts or sites, perhaps generated through fieldwork. The knowledge of historic crimes against humanity garnered from the physical evidence that they uncover can arguably lead to a moral obligation to intervene in the process of forgetting in order to provide information for families; to provide the basic human right of a dignified and marked burial site; and to ensure that individuals are not forgotten or human remains put at risk. This is especially important in places where survivors or descendants of victims do not exist, leaving archaeologists as one of the only groups of people left to defend the rights of the dead.

When dealing with difficult heritage, it is important to remember that we have a responsibility to both the dead and the living. Although in our case, our activism is unlikely to cause another war, we are always mindful of its potential impacts upon the various communities and individuals with a connection to our sites. It is always better, therefore, to negotiate with local communities rather than to force undesired heritage upon a place. Consultation and transparency from both sides will create a more amicable environment in which to discuss future plans and can result in changes to local attitudes (Sturdy Colls 2015b). Even if ultimately there is still a difference of opinion between different communities and activists (as in our case), at least there is ongoing dialogue. In the medium to long term, it is probable that legacies will fade and disappear if heritage strategies cannot be agreed upon. It may take only a matter of months of non-intervention for heritage to vanish altogether should any form of natural or anthropogenic landscape change occur. Therefore, it is essential, having committed to projects concerning sensitive or taboo pasts, to closely monitor the changing physical and social environment.

When disagreements and delays ensue – or when archaeological interventions are deemed inappropriate due to the potential negative impacts on the current population - alternative

methods of commemoration and education are possible. These include the creation of digital visualisations, online tools, blogs, articles, television programmes, workshops, lectures, exhibitions and educational activities, which can reach new audiences without physically imposing these strategies on local communities. All of these methods have been successful in the case studies described above. Likewise, on-site activities in the form of educational visits can ensure that knowledge concerning *taboo* and *sensitive* heritage is not lost. Different types of alternative approaches to sensitive heritage commemoration and education have been discussed elsewhere (Sturdy Colls and Colls 2014; Sturdy Colls 2015a, 2015b).

Alternative approaches by activists might also act as a catalyst for transitions from *taboo* to *sensitive* heritage on the basis that they may force discussions concerning those aspects of the past that have previously been ignored. When digital heritage media is employed, the transition may occur on the basis that, whilst it is still seen as difficult or negative locally, the nature of digital heritage means that it is a *fait accompli* and, as such, can no longer be ignored. Likewise, even when *taboo* or *sensitive* legacies continue to be ignored at local level, ‘accidental heritagisation’ may occur as a result of archaeological activism. For example, the pathways through the vegetation that were created by the archaeological field team in Alderney have continued to exist more than two years on because visitors and passers-by have been drawn there through curiosity or because they have spotted the barely visible remnants that the archaeological work uncovered. This has, in turn, inspired the laying of flowers, online discussions and educational visits to the site; thus, activism on our part has prompted personal and collective memory practices, and resulted in another unexpected legacy.

In both Jersey and Alderney, new taboos have been created and others have shifted as a result of archaeological interventions. In Alderney, discussions surrounding the camps have become less controversial because the issue of mass graves is becoming increasingly more so. In Jersey, whilst the island has become more comfortable with looking inwards at its own history, it is not yet wholly comfortable with the idea of outsiders looking in. In the Channel Islands as a whole, many old taboos remain at local level following activist interventions and, in some cases, the authors acknowledge that this is the right approach whilst the islands continue to work locally on how to best address their occupation heritage. In the meantime, our activism has at least raised a broader awareness of the fate of the forced and slave labour beyond the islands, and we continue to be part of discussions regarding future approaches. Our prolonged association with the sites on which we have worked with such care and investment has resulted in us both feeling, rightly or wrongly, some sense of ‘ownership’ in their future. Beyond our professional interest, as British citizens we also consider these sites to be ‘our’ heritage too. We both have a vested interest in these places and would feel disinherited should our work be in vain and should our voices be entirely silenced. Such are the risks when working with taboo heritage.

The dynamics of memory in the Channel Islands are likely to change once again the coming years due to the recent creation of the United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial Foundation (UKHMF) whose desire is to address Britain’s relationship with the Holocaust. In doing so, it will not be possible to ignore the crimes perpetrated on British soil. As Macdonald (2005, 51) has argued, ‘the Holocaust has already emerged as one of – or perhaps the – pre-eminent foci of ... political and moral activity’ in Britain in recent years. Yet, we may be about to embark on a new era whereby, alongside the more comfortable aspects of Britain’s response to the Holocaust, we are forced to confront the remaining taboo and sensitive aspects of this past at national level.

Heritage activism and a rapid and easy agreement on the part of local authorities do not always go hand in hand, especially when the sites in question are taboo. However, when this taboo relates to crimes against humanity, we have suggested methodologies that utilise a

sustained approach, new technologies and non-confrontational, or off-site, strategies, which can garner the approval and interest of local communities. And it is this latter factor, in the end, which can provide the intervention long-term, after the outsider activists have left, and sustain the legacy of conflict as heritage.

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## Figure List

Figure 1: The post-conflict heritage continuum, copyright Gilly Carr.

Figure 2: The lifecycle of the event, legacy and heritage, copyright Gilly Carr.

Figure 3: Map of the Channel Islands, copyright Caroline Sturdy Colls.

Figure 4: Commemorative plaque on the entrance posts of *Lager Sylt*, copyright Caroline Sturdy Colls.

Figure 5: the entrance posts of *Lager Wick*, copyright Gilly Carr.

Figure 6. The toilet block at *Lager Sylt*, which was hidden beneath vegetation prior to archaeological investigations, copyright: Caroline Sturdy Colls.

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<sup>1</sup> Interviews with Gary Font, 10 May 2011 & 22 September 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Jersey Jewish Congregation to Francisco Font, 15 January 1971. My thanks to Gary Font for showing me (GC) this letter.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Gary Font, 10 May 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Site of Special Interest, an ecological designation.

<sup>5</sup> Email from landowners to GC, 4 April 2016.

<sup>6</sup> <http://jerseyeveningpost.com/news/2015/04/04/grouville-dig-turns-up-ceramic-plate-with-swastika/>, accessed 6 September 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Documents from the UK National Archives, WO311/11, WO/311/12 and WO311/13.

<sup>8</sup> Documents from the UK National Archives, FO 371/100916