

Conversations Over a Brew

Strong Women: Carrie Reichardt and Claire Rigby

Transcript

Recorded on Thursday 2nd November 2023 in St Helens

N - Nat

CA - Carrie

CL - Claire

48:00

[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. For the first episode of this four part series, we meet up with Carrie, and Claire Rigby. Claire is a local historian who played an integral role in the research for the St Helens mural. Claire also runs Momo's, a cafe and community hub in the centre of St Helens. In the following conversation, Carrie and Claire chat with me about the histories and creative processes behind a mural, as well as speaking to the importance of keeping history alive through asking questions and listening to each other's stories, particularly to those of the women we know.

[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]

CA: Hi, I'm Carrie Reichardt. I'm an artist that specialises in public art and I'm from London.

CL: Hi, I'm Claire, from Momo's, St Helens, a small community cafe. I make cups of tea all day and tell people stories about history that's happened in St Helens.

N: But also you're a local historian as well, right?

CL: I am a local historian. Only just getting going, just getting started. Digging out all the stories that have fallen from the mainstream history, all the forgotten people, all the people that have fallen through the cracks, that don't make it to the books. I go out and find them, whether that's the working class woman or the one at the top of the hill on the land of the gentry, Cowley Hill, we'll find them all, one at a time.

N: And so you've been involved, or you've been a key researcher, in the Strong Women's project. And I guess, would you mind telling us a little bit about the Strong Women's project and how you brought it to St Helens?

CA: I was brought to St Helens to do a piece of public art, and I had the luxury of coming up here for five days to do research and development. And during that time I was googling and I happened to find Claire's... there was an advert to say that she was giving a talk about suffragettes in St Helens. And as soon as I saw that, I thought, well, there are suffragettes. And so in a way it was discovering the stuff that Claire had already done, all that research that woke me up to the idea that there were these strong women and the idea that there was a witch here. And to be honest, everyone I met when I was taken around to meet all the community, community activists, the local councillor, they were all women, you know, it was obvious there was this kind of like, it was very strong women that were taking me around and leading me around this place. And so once I knew there were suffragettes, once I knew there was a witch, I thought, there's something to really get your teeth into here. So then the idea came about to make this piece of public art about strong women.

N: That's interesting. So it wasn't, um, a Heart of Glass commission that originally said, "let's make this about strong women." It's from your primary research coming up here. So you identified these themes -

CA: Yeah. So they said, "You can come here and you can see what themes you would like to do." Obviously, I always like to do things about women because I'm a woman of a certain age, so I understand what it's like to be invisible and forgotten, though I'm hard to forget. But, you know, I'd come up here with the idea of just coming to see, but it was just, it just honestly, from the moment I got here, I just met all these very strong women, and I'm very conscious of the fact that there isn't that much public art about women. There just isn't. It's one of those things. Like the classic thing is there are more statues that have the name John in London than there are of women in the whole of the UK. So, you know, on that kind of premise. And then when I went round and I discussed people, and then when I actually met Claire and realised that, like, she's a walking library in herself, that there was so much that we could do and there were so many stories that hadn't been told. And when she told me about various people and you think, well, is there a photo? And she'd be like, "No, we don't have a photo of that person." You think, well, this is a really powerful thing to do, that if we can put women and especially women that do care work or do activist work or women that have been forgotten, if we can make something powerful and put that on to the streets and put that, make that public, it would be a great thing to do.

N: Can you tell us a little bit more about the research project and linking in with Carrie? And your role within the project and feeding in.

CL: Yeah, well, I've been doing Victorian history, St Helens Victorian history now for four years and delivering two hour talks about various aspects of St Helens. But when I was doing the research, it was a lot of the same names that were coming up again, similar to what you were saying, Carrie, it was, you know, William Windle Pilkington again and again and again, David Gamble. Again and again and again. And I was like, these people were married, these people had daughters, these people had aunties, they had cousins. Why is no one even talking about them? What's going on? So when I was doing things like, particularly the Women and Children's Hospital that opened in 1881 here, and then the Nurses Institute that came after here on Corporation Street, um, I started to get to know the women individually just through the census. So you'd pick something up on the census and then you'd be able to run with that. So, for instance, I'm going to use Constance Bishop as an example. So her dad, a very successful businessman, did lots of philanthropy work throughout the town. But when I caught her on the 1911 census, and she's actually living in Liverpool at the Victoria Settlement, training to be one of St Helens' first social workers. Now, she did not have to do that. She could have sat in the parlour all day long, knitting, sewing and gossiping. But she didn't. And there's this whole era of women around about that time that actually decided to break out from the parlour and into the world of work. And that's how I picked up the suffragettes is through them, and the work that they did, but not only the women that were doing the work and had the boots on the ground like Constance Bishop and Christine and Constance Pilkington. Who were they helping? Who were the women that they were helping? Because you don't get anything for the working class women, you will not get any kind of information. So you've got to put things out there and you've got to ask questions, and then you'll find that family members will come through, "That's my great grandma you're talking about there. This is what my grandmother told me about her." And this is how these stories get told. And it's through women's conversations that we have, because the men were down the pits for 12 to 16 hours a day, in the dark, in the noise. They're not gossiping, they're not talking. But they're coming up out of these mines, because that's what St Helens was - a mining town -and out of these factories, like the glass factories. And the women are the ones that are out there, on the donkey stone on the step and telling the stories. So the only way to find out about information about women is by finding great-granddaughters and things like that. And it

just opened up this huge world of, well, "Why wasn't these rich women not getting married, for instance, like the same as the working class women?" It's because the working class women needed the man to be able to do things for them, because they just couldn't do it. A lot of the working class women, they're not going to go marching with the suffragettes because they're at home and they've got laundry to do with the dolly tub for eight hours a day. They've got kids to feed, they've got this to do. So it was a great balance between finding the women that were marching on behalf of these women and getting their stories told, because if it wasn't for these women coming out of the parlours, these women with money and influence and the men at the back of them, because a lot of people, when you bring up suffragettes, they just go, "Oh, it's just man bashing. Oh, it's just man bashing." But it's not, not, not at all. Because the suffragettes would never have been able to do what they could do without the men in their lives. And it kind of, they go together like a jigsaw piece almost, rather than this whole fight that we seem to have going on at the moment where, you know, we're fighting for equality. But, we go as a compliment to each other, and that's worked very, very well through time, is working together as a team. And getting those stories out from these women and onto a wall or into a book or into another story, because we're going through another generation now that's passing away. And we don't have that sitting down story time anymore with the older generation of women, we spend more time on our phones, don't we? We spend more time like scrolling Twitter or Snapchat or whatever the common thing is now, I don't know. So those stories are starting to get lost over time because no one's having the conversations with grandma anymore. And I think having Carrie come and producing such an immense piece of work like that, is it brings those conversations back. Because now I've got my mum on there and I've got my great-grandmother on there, who I did know at 15. So she's always going to be remembered now, and it's something that my son can take his daughter to and go look at this piece of work here. And that's your great, great, great, great grandma. And it says survivor. So she's going to say, well, "Why did she survive? What did she survive from?" And her story is now embedded in a wall in Parr.

N: So, you mentioned loads of great things there that our listeners might not be fully aware of. So the wall in Parr you're talking about, is a mural Carrie co-created with communities in St Helens, but mainly in Parr. And so would you like to speak a little bit about that process and what that wall is.

CA: Well, that was done over a year's period of time. The first bit I came up to do research and development with various community groups, but then I came back over, you know, I think it was about 20 days of work. And during that time, the local community were able to make 450 ceramic hearts. And each heart is dedicated to a strong woman they know, whether that's their mother or their sister or someone famous, Sister Duffy, who always comes up.

N: And the local community - it was mainly women, or was it just women you were working with?

CA: No, we worked with everyone. I mean, a lot of the groups were women anyway. They were like mother and baby groups and things. But, you know, we were in the pub, we were inviting everyone to do it. So it was for everyone to take part in and to have their own little piece. So we had 450 ceramic hearts that are now embedded in that piece. And then it says 'Strong Women' in huge letters and printed onto the tiles of that it has all archival imagery. Like Claire was saying, it has a picture of her gran, but, you know, it's full of little snippets of stories of people and pictures that is supposed to be enough that you go, "Oh, that's interesting. I think I'll go look that up". And act as, I suppose, as for role models for future generations, we were trying to use a lot of imagery that break down that kind of gender role idea of what people look like, because we forget, you know, we don't, we have an idea that the current period of time is how things are. But then when you look back and you can see these women, teenagers like 16 years old, holding a huge glass cylinder that you wouldn't even imagine they could hold, showing these pictures of women working in the ammunitions factories and showing how women have always been in the front of industry or different areas, and to bring that all to life.

N: Yeah, it's an amazing piece. You spoke really eloquently about St Helens and its super interesting history. When you came to St Helens, is the history here, did you find them unusual? Is it a very special place?

CA: Well, for me, it's always brilliant to go to any place because, you know, my mum used to drag me around stately homes when I was young and I always hated it. I just wanted to go to the gift shop and get my bookmark, which was my, like, payoff. But now I'm older and now I come and now I find it fascinating. And in some ways, there's always a similar history that you find, because I've worked in places like Aberdeen and you find strong

women, you don't find them in the history books and you don't find any monuments to them. But if you dig a bit, or go deep, you'll find them, because like Claire said, that, you know, working class women had to work incredibly hard, and even middle class and rich women had to defy their social position at that time to, to break out of a mould. And so you do find these kind of similar stories. But one thing I did note and find when I came here, I really got a feeling that there was witches, that there were these kind of, you know, lots of strong women that have that kind of it's palpable in a way. I did really feel what the two things I felt about St Helens is, a) I thought, "Oh, yeah, you can tell this place had witches and there's something in the water with football, women's football." It's another thing, you know, you can see it. I think that might even be a legacy from that kind of idea of... Because essentially a witch is someone who's a non-conforming female at that time and did things that, you know, they didn't like.

N: Most of this, most of the work happened around Parr. Was there something particular about Parr that where all this work came together?

CA: That wasn't my decision. I think that was a decision made by Heart of Glass that we would work in Parr. Um, so that, you know, we just happened to be in Parr. But Parr is a very interesting place anyway, because, you know, it's supposed to be this deprived area, which it is. But the strength of community there was, it was lovely for me to see, you know, that all these different community groups that worked together, they were the most appreciative people to work with, you know, they were a joy to work with. And so it's always lovely to go into these places and to work with a community and see their strengths, you know, and have that play out.

N: And now the mural is in Parr on the side of the Conservative Club. Yeah it's great isn't it?

I know, that's great. Because when we first went and we went to the mother and toddler group, and we first kind of put this idea that we might do a piece that was about women. I remember one of the women saying, "Can we? Do you think that's all right? And it's like, of course it is. You've got one about the miners here. And, you know. And so it was in a way, you were carrying a whole community along to the idea that it was acceptable. And we could by the end of it, it's like on the side of the working man's club. So it was a lovely,

organic project that just grew out of a few seeds. And then it brought all these people together, like Claire.

N: And then you run a cafe called Momo's, which is in the centre of St Helens.

CL: It is, yeah.

N: And that's a community hub.

CL: It is a community hub.

N: How did that come about? And do you see this as like a legacy of just all this history of strong women organizing things?

CL: Well, I think it kind of has to be because Momo was my grandma.

N: Oh, right, okay.

CL: So, yeah. Momo is, um, Ada. Her real name was Ada. And she was the matriarch of the family. So what she said went, right. It doesn't matter who goes into her house. If she says that something's not happening. It was not happening. She lived in a very, very small two up, two down at the back of the town hall. She had five kids. Um, all of those had many, many kids. So we'd all just pile in on a Saturday and it'd be, um, corned beef hash and beans for tea for everyone. And unfortunately, she passed away in 2016 and it was like, we can't go to Momo's for a brew anymore. I was like, "Oh yeah, we can." So I decided that I was going to open a cafe just so that I could say, "Do you want to come to Momo's for a brew? Because I just needed, she just needed to stay. She was too big of a character. She was too formidable of a character to just disappear like the rest of the women's stories. Um, so now Momo's is opened, it is her legacy. And we just ended up, it kind of snowballed. It was only supposed to be a small little coffee shop that sold cake and croissants and things like that, but the people just fell in love with it. They just fell in love with it. And they just kept coming and coming and coming. And then we had a bit of a disaster with the flood and we had to move and we lost absolutely everything. I thought, I thought the dream was over, I'd let Momo down, and all the people came together across St Helen's, all the women came together. They'd run all kinds of events. And they basically

picked me back up and found me a new venue. And we opened up the new venue. And every single thing that you see in my cafe has been donated by the people of St Helens. That's why none of the paint matches, because it's just where women have gone. "Go get me that paint out the shed son. Go up the loft and go and get that paint and we'll go and take it for Claire." And then that's how it's built. So Momo's been built by people of St Helen's, and I feel like I'm forever indebted to them. So you had, like, streams and streams of men and women and children that were just coming through with a paintbrush and going, "I can give you half an hour on the way before picking the kids up." Um, and it's just, it's just built from that. So I feel like I'm going to be forever indebted to telling the story of other women, to women in St Helen's, because it all just kind of fits nicely in a nice little circle of escaping the parlour.

CA: But isn't Momo's a famous building anyway? It's the -

CL: It was the Beechams building.

CA: That's it.

CL: It was the original Beechams building before they opened the big one. Um, that's over the road, which is, I did a poll and apparently it is the most iconic building in St Helens.

CA: And it's worth stating you've got, like, a library at the back.

CL: Yeah, we do have a library. We have a heritage centre. We have a sensory room because we cater to a lot of people with all kinds of disabilities, whether that's an invisible disability or actual physical disabilities. So the whole building is accessible so anybody can come. Like I said, we've got breakout rooms, sensory rooms. I call it the rave room. So if life just gets a little bit too hard, you know what I mean? And the kids are pecking your head and you know what I mean. Hubby's, whatever, or your mam's doing this, then they can just come to Momo's and they can just sit and be quiet. They can either sit in the garden, they can read a book, they can read some of the old newspapers. And it's just a place to escape the drama of life. Um, and I just wanted to create that nice homely environment. So when you walk into Momo's, it's like walking into Momo's house. So that's what people say, "I like coming here because I feel like I'm walking into someone's living room. It's nice."

N: Yeah, it really does feel like that. And it really feels like it's a collectively owned space.

CL: Yeah.

N: It's beautiful.

CL: It is.

Have you, thinking about your work coming to St Helens, had you worked in this similar way before? With building a mural collectively through those kind of long-term workshops?

CA: Well, no, this was the dream job in a sense, because normally you kind of pay lip service to archive work or working with the community. There's not usually that much time. But this really had like 25 days dedicated to me being here, working here. So it's a luxury to have that amount of time to work with people. And because I was coming up here over a long period of time, it made me feel like this is, really like, embedded in the community. And because I was working with people like Heart of Glass who are embedded and working with people like Claire, you know, it was very authentic in what we were doing. It felt that it was the best use of my skills, because I can come and facilitate and I can help make workshops and do the work. But to really be out there working in all the different bits of the community requires people on the ground to be able to bring me in. So it was a really lovely project in that way. It was very well set up that I could come here and spend quality time and come back to the same groups of people, and they can go through the entire process from not just making a clay ceramic, but having a go at the mosaics and having some input into what goes into it.

N: And passing on skills, right? Through this process you took on a mentee, Claire, not Claire who is speaking, a different Claire and who is sat here in the room as well.

CA: Yeah, I mean, because that for me, that's one of the most important things is because I know I'm conscious. I'm from London. I can go to these places, I can do a lovely job, and then I leave. But the whole point of this job was to leave a legacy, a legacy where women would be more noted. We'd put that on the wall, but more importantly, that someone like Claire could come be mentored, who's already set up, now running ceramic workshops,

doing exactly what we wanted to do, which is that she now has the skills to provide similar classes and to provide similar things that I did. She can continue it. So you're really leaving behind a really fantastic legacy for St Helens, that means they can go on to do similar projects.

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

N: And you'll be doing something similar again in Knowsley as well.

CA: So it's a sister project that's now running. So from now till next summer we'll do a very similar project, but we'll be based in Knowsley.

N: Do you know much about Knowsley or is your knowledge all about St Helens?

CL: I'm currently working on pulling out, because I've pulled out 26 witches in St Helens Carrie, not one, there's 26 of us.

CA: That needs another mural.

CL: I'm currently pulling out witches, um, from Knowsley, but I actually went to Knowsley, to Whiston Town Hall only about three weeks ago to do the St Helens suffragettes talk. And they are aware that you're coming and they have got a whole group of women and a historical group and it's the Women's Guild Historical Society that want to get, to come and do clay hearts. So we're all ready. I'm ready, I know everyone.

CA: Just need to find a witch.

CL: Well, I've got one. I have found a witch, just not the name, yet. Coming soon. Coming soon.

N: So is this a real hot spot for witches?

CL: Well, yeah, we're in Lancashire. Lancashire is the land of the pagans.

N: More so than Yorkshire? And more so than any other county?

CL: Uh, not so much. The thing is, we have a lot of focus on the southeast because of Matthew Hopkins. So because Matthew Hopkins had never come to Lancashire, there are people that say that he does. However, that's not true. There's no evidence at all. All the dates of which people said that Matthew Hopkins comes to Lancashire.

N: Is he the Witchfinder General?

CL: Yes. The Witchfinder General. All these dates, he wasn't even born. So this is why Lancashire was a bit of a hot spot, because there was great hiding places. Because the Witchfinder General wasn't going to come. Um, but it didn't really work out that way. But we got a lot of, because Lancashire was pretty much marshland. Um, a lot of I mean, the Vikings came and they put the dykes in. Aethelflaed came in and brought her people to put in some of the dykes and stuff. So there was lots of, like, different ways for them to hide and to get away. Far more than down south, really, where they were being literally hunted. So they had a bit more freedom. And I don't think it was as harsh here. I mean, we did have the Pendle witch trials and it did, um, it happened again in 1632, in Lancashire. Um, but we wasn't actually that bad here. And one of the reasons is due to religion. Lancashire was really pretty much a Catholic place, and the Catholics and the pagans got on for a long, long, long, long, long, long time until King James came along and sort of upended it all. So I think that's why women were allowed to be a little bit more free with their own religion and things like that, because the Catholics had a bit more time for the pagans, because they'd been around longer than the Protestants. And I think that's just generally why it was more of a hotspot here? Because they got away with it more. It was more forgiving.

N: And so, in the mural features, is it Isabel Robey?

CL: Isabel Robey, and Mother Pope's in there as well.

N: So and so these are the St Helens witches?

CL: Mother Pope and Isabel Robey, they were the famous ones, yeah.

N: And in a conversation I've had with you previously, Carrie, and I think you mentioned that you came across loads of women and girls named Isabel, which you think might just have been -

CA: Because of the amount of hearts. I know that the only name that came up a lot was Isabel. It was spelled differently, but there were about five Isabel's on those hearts, which is just a thing. When you think, I wonder if that name is...

CL: Isabella Rigby, who's buried in Hindley. She was tried as a witch. Killed as witch, murdered, as a witch. And she's buried it. So that's another Isabel. Yeah. You're right. Yeah. There's lots of them.

N: Thinking about the murals that you're making and have been making this across your career. Where do you see murals and street art and the role in representing or re-presenting women's history?

CA: I think it's extremely important. As I said before, you know, culturally and historically, there are not many monuments or pieces of public art that celebrate women. And I think we all know that there's visual pollution everywhere. We see advertising all the time, which is usually often aimed at women to make you feel crap about yourself. So I just think it's very important, especially in the public space in, in, in like street art or having it on the streets. I just think it's got to be empowering for young girls to come and see a piece that celebrates all of the achievements they've done in the past and what they can do, and like the one in St Helens, has a whole thing about, say, the football. It talks all about the football, which is something I didn't know anything about. I didn't know anything about women's football. I had no idea it was banned in the 1920s. I had no idea that, you know, it was hugely successful. And so, you know, that piece is deliberately telling you about the past and about famous footballers like Lily Parr that everyone knows of, but Lizzy Ashcroft that people didn't. But it also tells you that the Knowsley and St Helens under 15s are currently the national champions. You know, so it is that kind of linear between the past and the present, and to try and give really positive role models and to show, you know, positively all the different ways that women can, what jobs they can do, what professions they can have, that they can aspire to be footballers or nurses or social workers or whatever they want. So I think you can't underestimate how important it is to be able to see women reflected positively in the public space.

N: And you mentioned something quite key there where you said, we're completely oversaturated with visual media and advertising, and that is often something so throwaway and might just live on our phones or on a billboard for like two minutes. And what you've described or what you make are these beautiful, long standing murals and the processes behind them, the actual making of the ceramic artwork, and the coming together collectively to make it, none of it is a throwaway process. This is built over time and to last.

CA: So I think there's something about ceramic, I really do. I think things that are painted, as much, I love paint, painting, trust me. I love to see street art and paint, but it fades, you know, it will eventually fade. There's something I think, innate, you know, there's something about us as people, we've always discovered clay. Every civilization has worked with clay. You can chart history through it. So I think we have an innate kind of feeling towards ceramic. And so I personally think that when people see things made in ceramic, it has this kind of power to it. It has a presence to it. It makes it feel more important. So to have this mural on the wall, that's all been made in ceramic, and it's going to last as long as that wall does. I think it gives it status in a way that a painting doesn't. And the very fact that it's the idea of it in a sense, is that you have all of these little community pieces, all these individual pieces that make up a collective and tell little stories. But from a distance, it's just a really powerful, impactful piece.

N: Yeah, you really get the sense of that. Like when you, like you say, you stand back and it's a strong woman and it's about a community. And then you go in and you've got these individual stories. And you highlighted one just before, before we started talking, about that really beautiful account from the child speaking about the grandmother rescuing them from care. There's so much nuance and so many powerful stories in this one big piece.

CA: The way that I see my public art, is that anything in the public domain, you know, people are going to be going back to it over and over again. And so I've always liked the idea that in one way you can have your Instagram photo in front of it and you can just have strong women, but you can go back and you can look for the detail. And also the wonderful thing about ceramics is that it changes over time, depending on the season and depending on the weather and if it's raining, it will look one way. The thing about that mural there is that you have to be there at a certain time, when the sun goes to a certain point and all the gold, and it suddenly is magical, there's gold there, which will only catch at a certain

moment of time. So you have this piece of art that changes with the seasons and with the weather. It's multi-layered, so you can go there and spend hours looking at it, or you might just go there and say, that's nice and have your photo taken in front of it. But that story you're talking about, where we asked the local school children to write about, you know, who was a strong mother, who was a strong woman. Every single one of them talked about the mother figure. It might not have been the mother, but that very sweet one that talked about her grandmother saving her when she was going to go into care. And it's just like it's so powerful and so moving, but you're only going to see that if you bother to stand in front of that piece for half an hour and read it. So I love the idea that, you know, people can come and they'll see something different every time.

N: Would you mind telling us about Steve?

CA: Yeah. I mean, like I said earlier, one of the most interesting parts for me, because every time I do this, I learn a little bit more about history. You know, women's history was to learn all about the football. And because, you know, everyone says Lily Parr. But I didn't know who Lily Parr was when I came here. But to have an understanding about women's football, to have an understanding that in the 1920s, the 16 year old kids, girls, were playing, I think Lizzie, Lily Ashcroft, Lizzie Ashcroft. Her first match was in front of 50,000 people. She was 16. They got paid, um, ten shillings and a packet of fags, which is also really funny. A packet of Woodbine and a bottle of stout a week. But also when you learned about these footballers, you know, they were playing in front of huge crowds, but, you know, in their spare time, they were all working in the mental hospitals and they were nurses and things, and that you could see how women are different to men. They were, you know, the most famous footballers at the time, but they weren't getting paid anything particularly. And the football, you know, the football stopped them essentially because they were making up to, I think it was £1 million they were raising for striking miners. That's why they stopped it, because it was too successful. They were making money for miners as they banned them from all football games. And that kind of killed, killed that women's football. So to discover Steve Bolton, who didn't know himself, he didn't know himself until 2019, that his grandmother was one of the most famous footballers of St Helens. She was a miner's daughter from Parr, Lizzy Ashcroft. He discovered in 2019, when she was dead, she went to his house and discovered two suitcases. And inside was all her medals and all of her stuff. And now he spent the, ever since then he's been going around. He's had a film made. He's like a walking historian now about women's football. And so that story, you

know, even though that was out there to bring that to life and then to put that on the wall in Parr, and then to discover that she'd actually lived in the house opposite.

N: Opposite the Connie club? No way.

CA: Yep. Because Steve came, it was to be the first time he came to the unveiling. It was one of the first times that he'd been in Parr for a very long time, because he lives down south now. He met all his cousins and relatives. They all came. He was able to tell this story. He'd tracked down the house and it was literally opposite.

N: What an amazing coincidence. And how did you come across Steve in this process?

CA: The funny thing is, because a lot of my research is now online, I used to pre-COVID, I would have gone to the libraries, gone to the archives, looked through papers. I didn't have to do a lot of that because Claire's already done that. But I went through a) all of those Facebook's, which are like 'St Helens memories'. But I also went on to the archive and they just had a place where, a community archive, where anyone could post something. I googled Parr and came up with Steve, who'd put a picture saying, "This is my Granny in front of her house. She was a, you know, an international football star. She was a miner's daughter from Parr." I thought, "Oh, this is great." So I went on Twitter, found him, sent him a message, and it was about half ten at night saying, "Hi, I'm an artist. I've just discovered your Granny. Can I speak to you?" And he sent me a message saying, "Ring me now, I can't sleep." And so we spoke on the phone and he was like, "Oh my God, this is amazing." You know, he was so happy because, you know, all of the stuff that he was doing, I was able to take that information and then put it onto the wall. And so I think the thing about that whole project is that it was a) it was very organic, but you couldn't help but feel like there was something special going on because it was bringing together things that just kind of magically appeared, you know, it had a very special feeling about it. Like I said, I feel like the witches were like directing us or that something special was happening.

N: Thinking about the project as a whole or your role as a historian in St Helens. Would you like to add any other thoughts?

CL: I think we need another one like I, because history is just a constant moving thing.

N: So maybe this is what you need to lead on.

CL: It does. Maybe this is why, um, Carrie, Carrie came and blessed us with her presence, and we got Claire all trained up with the mentorship because we... This is not. This is only just the beginning. I think we have more work to do, because every week I find a new woman, like the lady that I was telling you about that caught rabies. The working class woman that changed hospitals in St Helens forever. Because it was an absolute scandal. We have some more amazing women, like, um, Sarah Cowley, who every single person in St Helens knows the name Sarah Cowley because of the Cowley High School, uh, but nobody knows her story. And it's just, she lived right here. Right here. And it needs a mural. It needs something. It needs, you know? I mean, we need to tell these stories because St Helens is very good for getting things like statues up and getting people recognized. But there's not been, like, I just seemed to have organically gone down the women's history route. It's just been an interest that's taken me that way. But no one's done it before. Everyone's got their own little thing because you've got the Saints rugby club and people are like super focused on that. Or they'd be super focused on Pilkington's, and nobody's done it before. So now we've just, it's like unveiling some kind of magical box.

CA: And I also think like, especially the way that Claire presents history, especially her own emphasis on things. I think the thing is, these little individual stories tell you so much about the history of that time, because she talks about the Pilkington's, where it was Claire that told me there was five daughters, wasn't there, and four of them never got married. And then you ask, well, why didn't they get married? Because they wanted to keep the money and they wanted to do things with it. And I think that little bit of history and that little story about one woman also tells you an awful lot about the status of women in those periods of time, like what's the other one? The woman, the MP who never got married and things.

CL: Yeah, yeah. That was Ellen Bishop you're talking about. Yeah. Ellen Bishop. So she didn't get married because her dad had left her the shares of the railways, not knowing, like it would just go boom. Because in 1833, that's when the railways come to St Helen's. Dad passes away in 1841, says, "Oh, here you go. You can have the shares." Anyway, it goes boom. And she ends up being a millionaire, like. And her brothers who got the business ended up being poorer than she did, and she just ploughed her money into

schools. So Holy Trinity School in Parr got opened. York Street School, in Parr, in Windle got opened.

CA: And it's the same with the Pilkington daughters, isn't it? You know, everyone knows the father. Everyone knows the person who owned the factory, but they don't, you know, this idea that, like Claire was saying earlier, it's the women who actually made, that set up the hospitals, set up the schools, you know, and that history gets lost. But it's so important because as well as honouring those women, it's telling you where women, where we were at that period of time. And so I think you have to have an understanding of how hard women have had to fight to get where they are, because it's easy to forget.

CL: Because we had a massive wave of young girls being criminals in around about 1900. They were just getting locked up all the time. So we have William Windle Pilkington, he's out doing all this wonderful stuff, and he's in every single history book. And everybody who lives in this town knows about Peters Street Community Centre, the Girls Institutes, and everybody will say, oh, yeah, that was a gift from William Windle Pilkington. All William Windle Pilkington did was sign the form and cut the ribbon. It was his daughters that created the whole thing that ran it from, um, being just a foundation stone into being one of the most successful community centres that we've ever had. And it was all women-based, but it has a man's name on it. And that's a shame, really, because it's just lost through time and history and by telling the stories. Like nobody, if you walked into anybody and said, "Do you know who Christine Pilkington is?" to anybody in St Helens ten years ago, they'd have said no, but they all know. Now they all know she did it.

CA: And I think that's the type of stuff because like, I can't remember the facts and figures, but up until the 70s, a man could rape their wife. Do you know what I mean? In the 80s it was, you know, yesterday when we were in Knowsley, a woman was telling us how she worked in Bird's Eye Factory in '85, and she had to have a pregnancy test before she started there. That's 1985. We're not even going back that far. But we can forget all that because people do. They just take it for granted. And I think one of the things for me is it's so important for younger generations to realise how hard it was, and you're not going back. We're not going back to the witches, you're going back to the 80s or the 70s. And so you have to have an understanding of how hard women have fought, how much they've had to give up to do certain things. And that story has to be told, so people have a recognition. Because rights can be taken away. Do you know what I mean? We've seen it

in America with abortion and things, you know. So I think understanding how hard it's been and understanding what women have done and paying due attention and giving respect to the women who do the caring. Because, you know, we know that 90% of single parents are women. We know, when I came round here, I said all of the community activists were women. It's women that often always take those roles caring for children, caring for the elderly, caring for the sick.

N: And setting up the institutions, the schools, the hospitals you mentioned.

CA: Then their fathers or their brothers get the glory. And so, you know, we need women to feel empowered and to know that they've done loads. It's just not there in the history books. It's not celebrated.

N: So what are we saying, we're saying that you're going to lead all the murals about women in St Helens?

CL: I'm passing it on to Claire because, Claire, we need to have a Sarah Cowley mural, and we definitely need one for the ladies on Victoria Park, that was basically bringing us schools, bringing us education, fighting for the young girls of St Helens not to go down the route of crime and prostitution, because that's what was happening, that's all a lot of women had going for them, because it was just tragedy in those mines. Men were dying left, right and centre. We had the big explosion in Haydock that just took out complete families. So, because in St Helens you'd have one mine and everybody, everybody in that family member would work down that mine. So you'd have grandad, you'd have uncle, you'd have brother, you'd have your son, you'd have everybody. So when that mine blew, there was whole streets in Haydock with the curtains drawn, and then you'd have whole streets of just women now and, these women, you know, I mean, those women of Haydock that survived that massive tragedy. There's stuff there for the miners, but there's nothing there that would echo what happened thereafter. And I think we need to understand and we need to get other people to understand what the effect was that came after. Because, yes, it was a tragedy. Yes. I mean, that little boy that died down there aged ten, that nobody ever knew his name. It's a tragedy. But that little boy had a mum and he probably had a sister. And the way that they rallied round in that community in the 1870s, when they didn't have nothing themselves, they had nothing, and they all had to come together and rebuild that community from the ground up.

CA: And we saw that when we were in Parr. One of the things I remember most is being in the Working Men's Club and one of the people there who did a clay heart said to me, "you know, I moved to Parr, I had nothing, nothing. They gave me a council flat, but I had nothing. And within one week this woman here made sure I had a sofa, I had a fridge." You know, you can see that still happening. It will be the women that will be the ones who are organising. You know, it's the women who make sure that there's breakfast clubs and there's, you know, school uniform places or, you know, so I think it's important to honour that and to show that and to pay respect to that.

N: And it's the women behind the bar in the Conservative Club. They're running the men's club, too. Yeah. Everything is run by women.

CA: Yeah. And you know, to really celebrate that, that survival instinct because it's mothers and women.

CL: It is survival instinct because we are an industrial town and you're going to get accidents no matter what. So even if hubby doesn't die down there, he could be maimed. He could be doing anything. So she's going to have to spend all ten hours of Monday at the dolly tub for her own children, and she's taking in laundry for everybody else, and she's dealing with the sick husband, and there's no benefits. There's no welfare state at this time. But they did it. They got on with it. And I mean, look, we're all here aren't we? The great-granddaughters of these women and still fighting.

N: But still, that narrative hasn't changed much, like there might be slightly different conditions, but thinking about recent history and austerity and what that means and COVID too.

CA: Or you can look at COVID. It was during COVID that it was said that women will be behind in their pensions for another 30 years.

N: Exactly. And it's the women doing the caring, so.

CA: So I'd like to think that this piece will encourage many more pieces, but it might encourage even other places to, you know, to have work that celebrates the achievements of women.

N: And keep these conversations going that acknowledges women's conditions. More murals.

CL: The powerhouses of the northern woman.

N: There we go.

CL: I think that comes from the witches, though.

CA: So do I! This is what I'm saying. I think it's.

CL: It's like 400 years of history because the witches of Lancashire were given that little bit more freedom to, I don't know, hex and vex. I don't know what they were doing up there or just making a simple brew from peppermint tea is that it's given us that fire in that belly that's just never going to go out.

CA: And that you were saying, do you have similar stories? I did a project two years ago in Ormskirk, and I didn't know anything about that place. And then I discovered there was this Viking called Ormr. But the other thing was they had, you know, it's famous for gingerbread, you know, that's the most famous thing there is gingerbread. But what's not that, the story that's not passed on it was gingerbread sellers. There was a whole time where there were these famous women that sold gingerbread at the station, and they looked like witches. And if you see the packaging, it's like a woman with a hat and a cat. And they were referred to as beautiful witch-like women.

N: When was this? The 1800s?

CA: Must have been about the 18th. Yeah. And then I found this tiny little book that's from 1975 that told the story of the gingerbread sellers, but from like a Sun-perspective, in the sense that it was really, hey, look at what these women and it talked about these women that had made masses of money that would get so drunk they'd be carried in a

wheelbarrow back down into town. And there is this whole wonderful, foreboding women who are, you know, in charge of all this money. The same in Aberdeen, where before they killed them as witches, they run all the breweries, the women run the breweries. That's one of the reasons they were all named witches. And they took it away, you know. But you can see there are all these very strong women, and you can definitely feel it around this area, you know, and it's that they always tried to suppress strong women I think.

CL: Not in Lancashire I don't think, I don't think we'd let them.

CA: Hopefully. That's what we're saying. You can see it coming through that kind of real survival strength of character. You know, some of the women I met in Parr, you know, have had very hard lives. But my God, they came with humour. They came with humility. They were like the love-, a joy to work with because they're so funny. You know, I think that's one of the reasons I got on with them, because, you know, we all had similar type of humour and things, but you can see that kind of fighting spirit.

[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.

48:00

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