'Talking Pictures': Digital Storytelling and Performance in Heritage Communication

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Abstract
The article investigates digital storytelling in the context of heritage communication. Digital communication *augments* the symbolic, aesthetic and social aspects of heritage and reveals the deep affective value of narration. Storytelling combines oral narrative (mode) in the form of a script (genre) but uses a variety of media (blog, web page, social networks) to create meaning. Emotive language represents a key element in the construction of individual and collective identity. The discursive aspects involved in storytelling are illustrated by the work of Daniel Meadows, an English photographer and participatory media specialist who pioneered digital storytelling techniques in Britain. Influenced by Ivan Illich's ideas as presented in *Tools for Conviviality* (1975) and the activity of the Center for Digital Storytelling at the University of California, Meadows produced fictional stories that focused on the participants' creativity, dramatising traditions and life-stories. The article describes how the visual combined with narration foregrounds an affective and experiential approach to heritage. By turning a photobook into a digital story, Meadows enhances the performative aspect of his work, and he realises Illich's understanding of human relations as emotive, non-rational, and flourishing in a post-industrial society where communities implement their own identity by sharing.

Key-words: storytelling, heritage communication, digital culture, performative discourse, photography.

1. Heritage, communication and storytelling

In Medieval Latin, *hereditagium* indicated anything given or received from the ancestors as a legally held possession. In the modern age, the notion was extended to specimens of art and literature that could conceptualise an emerging idea of culture. The second half of the 20th century deconstructed heritage in Western

societies, questioning its ethics and relationship with nationhood. With the new Millennium, the notion was extended to domains such as nature and the environment. Heritage was also turned into a valuable commodity and became an independent area of research comprising disciplines such as museology, archaeology, tourism studies, anthropology, cultural and critical discourse studies. From the start, researchers opted for an interdisciplinary approach and focused on material culture as an essential aspect of heritage (Harvey 2008: 19-36; Howard 1994; Waterton, Smith, Campbell 2006; Motz 2016: 184-213).

Heritage refers to historic sites, conservation and identity. It shows how people build discourse around a place, a notion, material or immaterial objects such as images, sounds or experiences. From private memorabilia to family inheritance and traditions, heritage is represented by artefacts that become meaningful when 'staged' as specimens of memories and emotions. By 'domesticating' the past, heritage is placed at the basis of social cohesion so that the values of a community are 'exposed' to be accepted and recognised as such[1]: language empowers symbols and objects that, being narrated, become specimens of culture (Giaccardi 2012; Staiff 2014).

By drawing from semiotics and discourse studies, research has made distinctions between tangible and intangible heritage, conventional and digitally born realisations of heritage (Loulanski 2006: 207-233; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2014). Mobile technologies enable users to participate and develop new mediated forms of heritage, and this is stimulating investigation in media language and information technologies applied to the field[2] (Albert, Bernecker and Rudolff 2013). Items shared on the web testify to both individual and communal identity as a legacy to future generations (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013). Research has also highlighted that web communication 'augments' the symbolic, aesthetic and social aspects of heritage by exploiting the affective value of narration, thus playing a pivotal role in defining contemporary art culture (Cameron and Kenderdine 2007; Ciolfi 2012; Ryan and Thon 2014).

[1] *The Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (Council of Europe 2005), http://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-Heritage/faro-convention, last accessed March 22, 2018.

[2] http://www.digitalmeetsculture.net/our-mission/, last accessed March 22, 2018.

The pervasive presence of media culture underlines the intersection of individual (hi)stories and their being redesigned as personal objects of memory. In this perspective, physical artefacts are crucial in defining the right environment for the creative usage of the past: social interaction is based on the exchange of 'tokens of memory' that objectify meaning, aiming at the status of objects of art themselves. The act of narrating the past around material objects by using diverse media is what I understand as a form of performance that addresses the emotional self of communities (Wu and Hou 2015). By drawing on the work of Waterton and Watson (2010a; 2010b; 2015), and their use of discourse analysis in heritage studies, I will discuss the intersection of language and the visual in Daniel Meadows' *Talking Pictures.* This work foregrounds the relevance of pictures *combined with* narration in this process of performing heritage. His storytelling, rooted in Ivan Illich's radical resistance to modernity, anticipates current digital practice of building and sharing apparently unmediated stories as tokens of reality. The digitalisation of his projects and the consequent change of medium sharpens the emotional significance of the stories examined, and this can be inscribed in the frame of performativity (Sandby 2005; Boiger, De Leersnyder, Mesquita 2016).

Digital stories as forms of heritage were conceived well before the advent of the web. During the 1970s and 1980s, arts practitioners and educators across disciplines challenged the notion that art and culture should be reserved for the gifted or the professionals. Artists acknowledged that ordinary people could give their creative contributions to a national identity. The Arts had to be made accessible to all, especially those traditionally left behind in an age of social and political conflict (Mulholland 2003).

Digital storytelling developed from the ideal of a democratised culture rooted in the activist movements of the 1960s. It began as an art literacy project resting on the belief that the artist is a 'curator', i.e. someone who leaves in the hands of the audience the creative task of making art meaningful. The artistic process was flipped to subvert traditional notions of authorship. The movement played an important role in community media arts by taking advantage of technologies among small groups of contributors, especially those at risk of exclusion. It conceptualised 'popular' culture as national

heritage and standardised a format that was later adapted to new media (Samuel 1994; Silberman and Purser 2012).

Digital stories are short (3–5 minutes) autobiographical multimedia narratives in video format, combining personal photographs and narration. The participants themselves voice the story, and sometimes music is added (Lambert 2002). In general, digital storytelling aims at encouraging social interaction. There exists a double level of interface: contributors are not just originating their material, but they are editing it too, which means that they are not 'told' or 'done' by the medium. They keep their agency and ownership over the (online) self-representations by personally selecting, curating and arranging their pictures in multimedia format (Marlar 2010).

The 'offline' plotting and scripting of the story and the 'online' life of personal images as stories, collect the emotive experience of staging memories as a social event. Participants tell stories as opposed to history and, for this reason, they look (photograph) and sound (story as told) authentic. Authenticity engages the public (Silverman 2015: 69-88).

The narration provides cohesion to a set of selected memories that are subject to a process of decontextualisation (fragment extraction) to be recontextualised (story assemblage). Images are embedded in a linear sequence and locked into a unique, 'singular' form of self-representation. Pictures complete the written story by making meaning more explicit or suggesting a further level of signification and creating layers of implicatures, especially metaphors, or at times, irony (Pier 2004)[3].

The verbal framing explains feelings, concerns, details of social life as evident, inevitable, cathartic: this makes them what Barthes defined *biographemes* (Barthes 1980; Dant and Gilloch 2002; O'Meara Kitchens 2015).

Nonetheless, the author of the project, the characters (co-authors and subjects at the same time) and even the end-viewers play intersecting roles in the storytelling system (Table 1). In fact, digital storytelling is a foregrounding process performed by multiple actants: the author exposes his/her project and its mechanism, while

[3] http://digistories.co.uk/digistories-2/how-is-a-digital-story-made/, last accessed March 22, 2017.

the teller is (apparently) empowered and free to act on the story. The author of the project and the character/subject share the same aims. When circulated on social media the viewer can also play a role in the process.

The table below describes the roles and function of the participants in the storytelling process:

TABLE 1
General description of roles/functions

AUTHOR	CHARACTER(S)/SUBJECT	SHARED AIMS	END VIEWER(S)
overlapping roles		< >	
plans the project	accepts to be part of the story	representation of heritage	decide(s) to watch the story
selects characters [manages the complete project]	selects memory/ experience/ feelings/ ideas to be told [manages fragments]	spotlight on self (empowerment/ self-approval)	select(s) the story that may stimulate a response
defines plot (macro narrative sequence of stories) [+ complex]	defines relevance in plot (time sequence of narrative) [- complex]	reinforcement of identity	watch(es) the story (online, offline, select(s) device)
comments on the story (voice-over)	comments as part of the pre- and post- editing	Networking	may comment on the story and share comments
takes picture(s)/ makes video (defines space and setting) [+ complex]	takes picture(s)/ makes video (defines personal space and setting) [- complex]	to represent social difference through claims to truth or by relying on universally understood signs (cultural keywords)	may decide to collaborate/emulate/ investigate topic etc.

With the proliferation of affordable digital video cameras, user-friendly editing programmes and global distribution channels,

manipulating moving images is fast and easy: variability, mutability, modularity are inherent to new media and pair up with the plasticity of storytelling. The flipping of roles, the apparent simplicity and casualty of the stories, the sharp points of view that profile the subjects that dramatise the stories are the reason for its success in heritage discourse[4]. The example of Daniel Meadows illustrates the point.

2. Daniel Meadows and the Tools for Conviviality

In the late 19th century, cameras were used to investigate the condition of the population during a period of social change. The idea that photography could document reality was conceptualised as a form of visual 'hyper-truth' capturing slums and the hidden truths of urban life. During the 1920s and 1930s, photographers abandoned the idea that a picture should look like a painting and embraced realism, producing works with a sharp focus and an emphasis on formal qualities (Marien 2006; Wells 2015). For the modernist image-maker, the photograph served a strong and articulated pedagogic purpose, i.e. documenting social issues to stimulate public debate. This approach continued during and after WWII, encouraging visual research into the lives of the 'common people'. Photography would serve the social sciences as well (Parr and Badger 2004).

In Britain, the post-war period saw the establishments of extensive programmes for the redevelopment of old, sub-standard housing, especially in the areas around Birmingham and Manchester which attracted the interest of documentarists. The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of a movement that addressed the communities affected by the housing plans to develop projects to recreate a sense of inclusiveness in the new suburbs. Photography along with drama played a significant role in these projects. Cameras documented the projects and were offered to the public as a specimen of creative tools

[4] Scholars involved in oral history and heritage look at the web as a massive archival location. The web stores countless projects of oral archives that may also use storytelling. As for the UK, examples are provided by the British Library programme, https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/oral-history, Warwick University, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/ias/activities/funded/researchnetworks/oralhistory and the Birmingham Black Oral History Project, http://www.bbohp.org.uk/, last accessed March 22, 2018.

that could be used autonomously. Community-based photographic projects promoted visual literacy to show how 'locality' could be made meaningful. The lives of those who traditionally stood outside history come to be 'icons', portraying themselves against mainstream representations of British society (Grosvenor and Macnab 2015: 117-135).

In this context, the Manchester School of Art produced a group of independent researchers – Martin Parr, David Chadwick, Daniel Meadows – who engaged in 'radical' photography. In 1972, Meadows started his activity by renting a disused barber's shop in Graham Street, Manchester, and opening a free photographic studio where he produced portraits of local people. After only eight weeks of activity, he ran out of funds and the studio closed but, as a result, he had started to collect emblematic stories (Meadows 1975: 9-10). The following year, he was funded by the Arts Council to travel on a double-decker bus around England to take free portraits and collect personal testimonies. The bus named *The Free Photographic Omnibus* was turned into a house and studio in which to process and display pictures. The portraits collected along with samples of street photography were published in 1975 as *Living Like This* with a series of interviews, social comment, and an account of the journey. The result was a representation of a reinvented English folk culture – the one which was soon to crash as the 1980s witnessed the triumph of global neo-liberalism (Williams 2010).

The decline in community-engaged funding that came about with Thatcherism was mirrored by the increased acceptance of photography as a Fine Art form, an academic discipline and an entrepreneurial practice, witnessing the emergence of a market for photographs as collectable commodities. Nevertheless, Meadows continued to carry on his projects by collecting images of people as spots of Englishness. He contributed, albeit unconsciously, to fixing a conservative view of heritage as deeply rooted in the decades that saw the organisation of the welfare state (Meadows 1988: 10-14).

Environmental and social degradation, and institutional failure to face unsustainable growth in Western capitalistic societies were at the basis of the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In this perspective, Meadows contextualised his work by referring to Illich's *Tools for Conviviality*. Illich conceived virtue as a moral custom or 'lifestyle' that is rooted in Western culture:

> "Austerity," which says something about people, has also been degraded and has acquired a bitter taste, while for Aristotle or Aquinas it marked the foundation of friendship [...]. For Thomas "austerity" is a complementary part of a more embracing virtue, which he calls friendship or joyfulness. It is the fruit of an apprehension that things or tools could destroy rather than enhance *eutrapelia* (or graceful playfulness) in personal relations. Simplicity, plainness, authenticity are necessary to achieve justice and social equality. (Illich 1973: 13)

In Illich's vision, modern institutions develop tools that contradict their ends rather than supporting humans to achieve authenticity. The consumption of mass-produced articles is a perversion of an ideal view of equality. In this perspective, photography documents the emotional connection that naturally coheres people. It is a 'positive' tool. Images have the power to highlight stories and 'amplify' stance: they may not bring about social change, but in the form of visual storytelling they expose unseen or ignored realities and can provide evidence of human needs. Photography visualises injustice to achieve equity.

Backed by his private school background, Meadows constructed his topos of 'common people' as subjects and, at the same time, objects of heritage. Being fascinated by 'the ordinary' and inspired by an interest in communities, he rendered the story of the English working and middle classes and their 'austerity'. He dramatised an idealised English counterculture rooted in the myths of the past. This is the result of his reading Illich's radical view of society, where access to technical tools extends the ability of an individual to be 'within' society and experiencing heritage:

> An individual relates himself to action to his society through the use of tools that he actively masters, or by which he is passively acted upon. To the degree that he masters his tools, he can invest the world with his meaning; to the degree that he is mastered by his tools, the shape of the tool determines his self-image. Convivial tools are those which give each person who uses them the most significant opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision. Industrial tools decry this possibility to those who use them, and they allow their designers to determine the meaning and expectations of others. Most tools today cannot be used in a convivial fashion. (Illich qtd. in Hoinacki and Mitcham 2002: 130)

Photography and storytelling are given to the public to be 'convivial'. Meadow's photographic work has a strong authorial stance, yet, his subjects recognise their position in society along with their role in history, and they are critical of it, thus presenting themselves as independent and free from external manipulation. They appear more aware of their social situation and point of view than expected and act in a sort of extra-diegetic 'posture', as they know very well that they are performing their story in front of the camera.

When he first used storytelling in the 1970s, oral narratives were perceived as instances of spontaneity, the result of a naïve approach to technology: the stories voiced urban life by focusing on real people rather than on abstract notions of sociality. In this perspective, Meadows has worked to 'conserve' the English way of life as unique, nostalgic and eccentric. Storytelling allowed 'his' people to make visual statements, narrating about loss, the ending of tradition and what it meant to belong to a nation as it was *locally* defined and understood.

Meadows is best known for his collaboration with the BBC storytelling projects[5], but he has also produced his own digital stories according to three formats: 1) first-person scripted stories, pictures, and voice-over about his personal life and experience; 2) scripted stories about his documentary practice; 3) talking pictures (stories made with the voice of the person photographed over a still picture).

Talking Pictures are 21 stories where the discursive aspects of storytelling can be best examined. The photos were shot in the 1970s or 1980s and their accompanying 'stories', i.e. fragments of interviews with the subjects, were published in printed catalogues (Meadows 1975; 1988). In general, the digital layout cuts out a segment of the interview and focuses on a detail, a *punctum* that fixes details or aspects of the subjects (Barthes 1980). Not surprisingly, the format has been defined as "a form which gives the thing its elegance", "tight as sonnets"[6].

Meadows is always an external narrator who borders his meaningful space by shooting the photographs and selecting the

[5] http://www.photobus.co.uk/digital-storytelling/#cymru, last accessed March 22, 2018.

[6] http://www.photobus.co.uk/digital-storytelling, last accessed February 25, 2018.

portion of the interview that is subsequently turned into a structured narrative. Single pictures or frames are unable to represent time sequence, causal relations, counterfactuality and multiple possibilities: the addition of the story overcomes these limitations and provides explanations, descriptions, contextualisation. Moreover, the fact that they are fragments is a powerful generator of curiosity. The fragment triggers a response: the spectator rewinds the story to get more narratively significant details.

The uniqueness of each story is emphasised to stimulate interest more than empathy, as can be observed in the example that follows.

The last chapter of *Living Like This* is entitled *The North* and collects pictures taken in the autumn of 1974 in the Northern Counties. In Newcastle, Meadows (1975: 110 -11) meets the Broxton brothers, Robert and James, and talks about their interest in pigeons. He interviews them in their allotments next to the "pigeon *cree*" where they claim their elder brother John is buried. The two men in their late sixties recall their childhood in a big family of "eight lads and one lass" and their jobs in the collieries. The father flew pigeons, and all the children developed the same passion.

Both brothers provide details of their life, and these features are significant as they give a picture of working-class life in the 1930s. The more minor the detail, the more powerful is the ability to describe the aspiration of a social class.

The texts consist of eight paragraphs corresponding to eight interview turns. Meadows' questions do not appear, and the interviewee seems to be allowed to follow their thoughts and recollections freely. Each turn reports an episode in life, critical *topoi* in the story (the father, the pigeons, the old days) are repeated and encapsulated in phrases that convey empathy.

In the digitalised version (Table 2), Meadows selects the last three turns and focuses on the core of the dialogue, i.e. the intimate relationship with their space, the sense of eternity conveyed by the location itself and the preservation of the tradition of flying pigeons. The allotment, the pigeon and the *persona* of the two brothers testify to their family history, which is enhanced by the storytelling, besides being the focal point of the picture.

The fragments selected show a high degree of indexicality. Deictics play a fundamental part in substantiating this biographeme: repetitions locate *their own* space and their identity as brothers.

Affective language adds force and credibility to the story. Instances of oral language (fillers) and the Northern accent are transcribed as part of the scenery.

TABLE 2
The narrative and sequencing of the images in the digital format

		Storytelling output
minutes	*video*	*audio + subtites*
00:00 > 00:07	scrolled text	Robert and James Broxton in conversation with photographer Daniel Meadows. Easington Colliery. County Durham, England. September 1974
00:08 > 00:10	still picture	Me brother died…
00:11 > 00:18	zoom out	…that's his grave there. You're not seeing a grave, are yer?
00:19 > 00:27	zoom in > left > focus on character's face	It is. Never mind owt else. There's a lot not believe it. He's cremated, and there's his ashes, there
00:28 > 00:40	fade in > center > focus on the two faces	…inside that brick wall, them's his ashes and that's where mine gans when I die, next to him. That's our John's ashes in there. He was cremated but them's his ashes in there. That's a lot not believe it. He was the older brother, aye
00:41 > 00:55	zoom in > right > focus on the second face	That was his wish. That when he died, that we would put him where the pigeons would fly over the top of him. You couldn't find a more appropriate place than that. Where the pigeons strikes out the door and flap outside
00:56 > 1.15	fade out > full picture > finish	It'll be tree year since. He was the mainstay. There's a lot not believe it, like, when I used to say to them…Ther's our Johns in there. He was a fanatic on pigeons. He was the main pigeon man. They called him John. He was the one that more-or-less financed them…looked after them an'that.
Black and white picture. Two men standing in front of a window. They hold a framed certificate with a picture of a pigeon at the centre which is the focus of the entire picture. On the right down angle, a dog. On the top left angle, a grid on a wall that balances the composition.		

The spectator is entertained, their curiosity is stimulated too. In the example above, photographs produce a form of social engagement

by their supposed realism. The individual world view is reformulated by the author using linguistic characterisation. Aspects like this contribute to create immersion and stimulate affective reactions. For this reason, they can be framed in the context of performative language and representative of the idea of heritage as consisting of fragments of narration built around 'samplings' of life (Lundby, 2008).

3. Conclusion

In the last decades, new technical opportunities have expanded digital literacy involving large audiences. From print to digital, the 'technologisation of orality' provides an extraordinary way of fixing memory over time. At the same time, the architecture of networked digital technologies reinforces the public exposure of the self. In this context, storytelling has increased its popularity, being a genre that foregrounds the creative process itself. Storytelling focuses on individuals and exploits visual technologies but retains the centrality of narration, hence of the text. The web encourages interactive knowledge production: many of these newer creations involve remixes, mash-ups, and other types of appropriation of digital content that reinvigorate narration by a change of medium that 'opens' texts to new topics and fits writing in new contexts. Heritage, in particular, benefits from this engagement with technologies which focus on experience, the visual, the production of narratives and hence the performative nature of storytelling (Jenkins, Ford, Green 2013; King, Stark, Cook 2016).

Collaborative, decentralised and participatory methods of authorship are core components of all forms of contemporary media which aim at substituting the authorial function with a peer-produced, non-profit framework that enhances creativity (Lee and Wellman 2012). Storytelling fits into this perspective because of the way participants interact and remediate fragments of life experience as unique. The result, though, is anything but spontaneous as I observed in the example discussed above (Ochs and Capps 2001).

Meadows' photographs are not simple snapshots of reality but clusters of meaning. Rather than just freezing a moment, they let the viewer grasp and understand the whole lives of the subjects portrayed. The fact that a text is added *augments* this aspect and

creates the diegetic quality of the photograph: a complementary level of narration that highlights a *punctum* as I discussed above. Moreover, anticipating post-modern culture, he redefines the object of his photographs by shifting their aesthetic value from the beautiful and the sublime towards the common, meaningless details that comprise everyday life. His representations are open to new contextualisations by the use of the digital medium. In fact, Meadows is exemplary in revitalising the past with technology. He idealises Englishness by foregrounding affection, valuing authenticity, presenting language and working class 'eccentricity' as true instances of nationhood. His documentary photography is indeed a theoretical construct with an established tradition in English culture.

In line with the well-known ideas of Sir Benjamin Stone (Edwards and James 2006: 7-24), Meadows described his *studia* (Barthes 1980) as prototypical:

> […] nobody can be dismissed as 'ordinary'. Everyone is, to some small degree at least, extraordinary […]. I hope that everyone who read the stories will be able to enjoy a snatch of life as it is lived by someone else. For it is only by appreciating each other's circumstances that we can hope to improve our world. (Meadows 1975: 125)

Yet, what Meadows collected in his early career anticipated the mediated managing of individual, social and cultural identities that were to come in the 21st century, where digital devices assemble fragments that build new "living archives" of people and stories (Peters and Allan 2016). Memory is kept alive as a digital item, as a framework in which visual culture and oral testimony merge and create ever-changing forms of heritage communication (Guy 2016). Individuals build their identity via the social practice of digitalising themselves, which is also a form of performance.

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Appendix

The Broxton Brothers **(digital text transcript)**

Robert and James Broxton in conversation with photographer Daniel Meadows. Easington Colliery. County Durham, England. September 1974

Me brother died…that's his grave there. You're not seeing a grave, are yer? It is. Never mind owt else. There's a lot not believe it. He's cremated and there's his ashes, there…inside that brick wall, them's his ashes and that's where mine gans when I die, next to him. That's our John's ashes in there. He was cremated but them's his ashes in there. That's a lot not believe it. He was the older brother, aye. That was his wish. That when he died, that we would put him where the pigeons would fly over the top of him. You couldn't find a more appropriate place than that. Where the pigeons strikes out the door and flap outside. It'll be tree year since. He was the mainstay. There's a lot not believe it, like, when I used to say to them…Ther's our Johns in there. He was a fanatic on pigeons. He was the main pigeon man. They called him John. He was the one that more-or-less financed them…looked after them an'that.

Same text as published in *Living like This* (Meadows 1975: 111).

Robert: We've got thirty-eight pigeons now. We used to have more before me brother died. That's his grave there. You want to see his grave do you? (laughs) It is! Never mind owt else! There's a lot not believe it. He was cremated and there's his ashes. There, inside that little brick wall. That there's his ashes. There, inside that little brick wall. That there's his ashes. And that's where mine gans when I die. Next to him (laughs). *James*: that was his wish that when he died we would put him where the pigeons would fly over the top of him. You couldn't find a more appropriate place than that; where the pigeons strike out the door and flap out through. It'll be there three years since he died. He never smoke nor drunk. He was the mainstay. He was the one that more or less financed them, looking after them and that. *Robert*: There's a lad gan down here one day. I says'Aye!' I says. I was hurling cigarettes tabs at the grave and Jonny never smoked. 'Aye. Our Johnny started to smoke. And at his age!' And this lad stands looking at me. 'Johnny's started to smoke? He says. I says: 'Aye. Our John.' I says: 'He's in there.' He says: 'Gataway!' I says: 'Aye he is! That's our John in there!' I says: 'He were buried in there.' He wouldn't believe it. He says: 'Pull the other led.' I says: 'That's our John's ashes.' I says, 'He was cremated but them's his ashes in there'. There's a lot not believe it!