

# Talking about prisons: making sense of difficult heritage at Peterhead Prison Museum.

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# TALKING ABOUT PRISONS

## MAKING SENSE OF DIFFICULT HERITAGE AT PETERHEAD PRISON MUSEUM

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ROOTS REVIVED CONFERENCE

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# Rationale and aim

- 1) Prison tourism has become the contemporary outlet for public interest in **punishment** (Urquhart, 2022)
- 2) Visitors engage with difficult, and often dissonant, heritage of the penal history through curated objects that produce **meaning** (Welch, 2013)
- 3) Previous studies used methods such as autoethnography, thematic and discourse analysis, and interviews to gain an understanding of the **visitor experience** and **heritage construction**.
- 4) Consideration of the social interaction of visitors is notably absent from these studies



The **aim** is to explore how people make sense of difficult heritage by studying how visitors examine and experience different types of exhibits at Peterhead Prison Museum

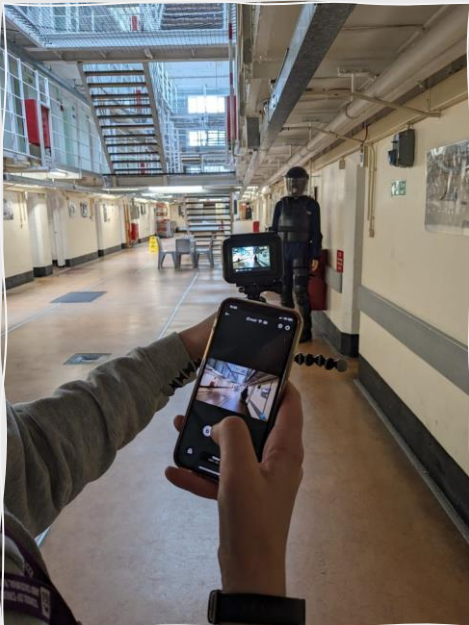
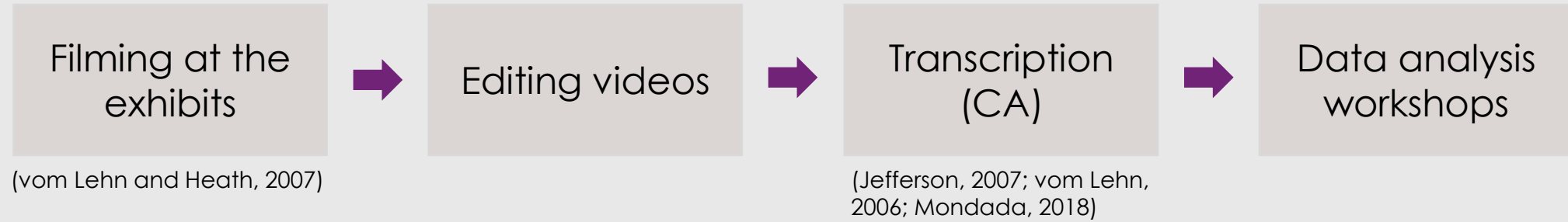
# Conceptual background

- 1) Prison museums have a responsibility to consider how the construction and interpretation of prison heritage influences the **authenticity and interpretation of past** (and present) events (Sharpley, 2009)
- 2) Studies have shown that visitors' interaction with museum exhibits is **influenced by the social interaction** with other visitors, exhibit elements and supporting materials (vom Lehn, Heath and Hindmarsh, 2001)
- 3) How people interact is important, and can reveal how people “come to see and understand exhibitions **in particular ways**” (Heath and vom Lehn, 2004 p.60)





# Methods



# The exhibits

**EXHIBIT 07: THE MURDER CELL**



**EXHIBIT 13: CAT O NINE TAILS**





# General observations

- 1) Duration of the interaction
- 2) Depth and triviality of interaction
- 3) Interaction with cameras
- 4) Distance from exhibits
- 5) Orderliness of interaction

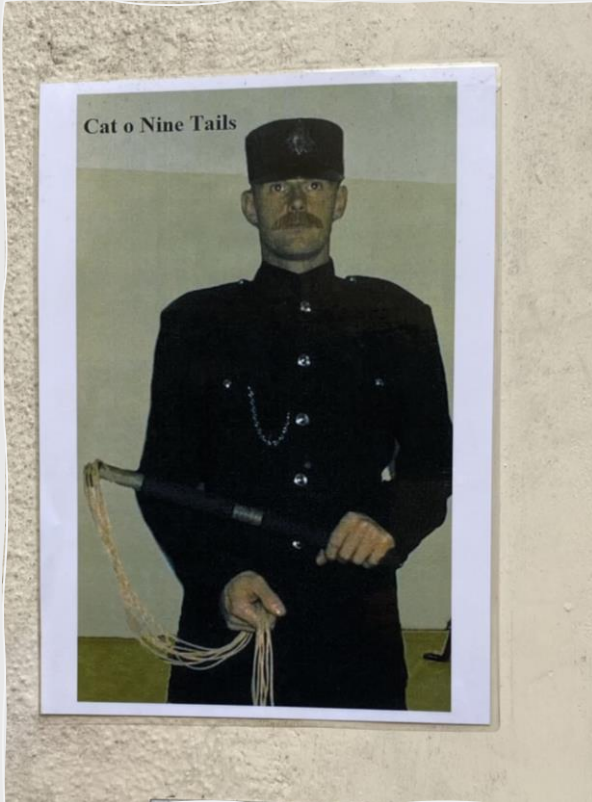


# 1. Responding to each other





## 2. Anchor for sense-making practices



(Welch, 2013)

21 P2 EG \*makes a criss-cross movement with his right hand  
to simulate whipping\*  
... (1) [. . . (2)

22 P1 [.hh!

23 P1 [EG \*shocked facial expression\*  
... (1) [. [. . [(2) [. . [. [(3) »

24 P2 [GS \*CO9\*

25 P1 [GS \*P2\*

26 P2 [GS>P \*photo\*

27 P2 [it's that

28 P1 [GS \*photo\*

29 P1 [M \*steps  
closer to the photo\*

30 P1 EG \*shocked facial expression\*  
» ... (4) ... [(5) [. . [. (6) . [ . . (7) [. . . [(8)

# 3. Humour

32 P2 **Didn't do them any harm**

[. . . (1)

33 P2 [EG \*smile\*

34 P1 **No-o! Hhhh**

[. [.

35 P1 [EG \*head shake\*

36 P1 [GS \*tripod\*

37 P2 **In fact, there are a few folk I know to the day  
could do...**

. . . (1) . . . (2) . [. . (3)

38 P1 [Yeah, that's right!





# Conclusion



- 1) Visitors make sense of difficult heritage through their interaction with each other, artefacts and the exhibit environment.
- 2) Deeper interactions are enabled by the presence of contextualising anchors that encourage sense-making through referential practice (Ironsides and Woofit 2015), gesture and talk.
- 3) Visitor experience may not be determined by a site's categorisation as light or dark but is shaped by the ability of the exhibit to facilitate the desired type of interaction.



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# Thank you

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