The Political Institute of Action Research

Memorial Benches in St Andrews

How do memorial benches in St Andrews function as sites of public memory and community heritage?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Monuments, such as memorial benches are often seen as static objects within urban or scenic environments, frequently overlooked.
- In our article, we sought to challenge the theoretical thesis that monuments lack impactful interaction by employing empirical methods of historical research (case studies) and analysing survey results.
- Despite challenges such as limited land availability and data gaps, initiatives like Open Benches underline the interest in these commemorative sites, blending physical and virtual community connections.
- A case study of one memorial bench in St Andrews reveals that commemoration of alumni serves to generate cross-generational connections between previous and current students and an interest in the continuity and longevity of university traditions.
- The memorial bench dedicated to two members of the ‘Class of 1972’ serves as a prompt from which observers can discover the continuing impact of alumni in St Andrews, in this case their contribution to the Wardlaw Scholarship.
- The memorial benches serve as a unification point for the diverse population of St Andrews and our research hopes to raise appreciation towards their role in facilitating a strong community.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Humanity has struggled with the concept of memorialisation since the beginning of time. Early civilisation memorialised themselves through cave art, kings memorialised themselves through conquests and colonisation, artists through art, literature, music, scientists through their discoveries, family members through memorial rites, etc. Despite their vast differences, each of these forms of memorialisation represent the plight to preserve someone's life. The very essence of memorialisation is about conserving the memory of someone. However, the apprehensiveness that surrounds memorialisation is the sorrowful truth that memory fades, hence the desperation to have an impact on something tangible. The mind cannot quietly erase physical objects, ceasing their existence. This asks the question of how to preserve the memory of a loved one, physically memorialising them to offer the world a fraction of a glimpse of their soul.

One of the most overlooked forms of public memorialisation, the impact and importance of which is the grounds for this paper, are memorial benches. Memorial benches are simple in concept: merely a bench with a plaque in the centre of the back that has a short inscription dedicated in memory of the person. Their simplicity is both their advantage and disadvantage. In terms of advantage, benches serve a public function, a place to rest, and thus are needed by communities. Since these benches are already desired, it harms no one and doesn't deter from their function to dedicate them to members of the community. The disadvantage to memorial benches is that one could argue that most people who encounter memorial benches often ignore the plaque's dedication, thus defeating the purpose of using these benches to physically preserve the memory of someone. This brings forth the question of asking how to draw people's attention and interest to memorial benches, in efforts to keep the memory of someone else alive? How do you change how people approach these benches, not just as a public place of rest but also as a place of dedication?

This research paper aims to answer these questions and to understand memorial benches for more than just their appearances. This paper will evaluate the cultural impact of memorial benches on the community of St Andrews, a Scottish town on the north-western coast. Through communication with Fife Council, the council area in which St Andrews resides, the research behind this paper worked to understand the deliberation behind the location of the benches, who funds and dedicates the benches, the volume of benches, etc. In addition to researching the benches located in the town, and to understand the daily impact of the benches on the community, volunteers from both the local and university

population participated in a survey that accounts for gender, nationality, and age to further recognize which demographics experience the largest and smallest impacts of memorial benches. This paper strives to answer the question of why memorial benches are important, the cultural impact that they have on their community (using St Andrews as a case study), and why these benches and the memories they carry with them are worth preserving.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ABOUT THE THEORETICAL DISCUSSION ON MEMORIALS

Before we start analysing the memorial benches and their effects on the people in St Andrews, we would like to ask which function they can play and present a brief overview of central theoretical positions on memorial objects. Generally, the function of the benches can be described as follows: Memorial benches are objects exhibited in public to represent a person or cultural value. Memorial objects in general, are designed to create communities by communicating to the passersby on the street that they are part of a bigger group, like a state, religious group, or more local communities. Therefore, their main effect is based on the reception of the person being confronted with it. Memorials are successful if this person recognises the memorial, engages with it intellectually or emotionally and becomes conscious about their own role as being part of a community and having certain duties and benefits related to this role.

The relationship between the memorial as a representative object and its receiver is subject of a broader theoretical discussion within art history, cultural studies, and to some extent philosophy. The main questions this discussion focuses on is whether memorials can generate the effect described and if so, which conditions must be fulfilled for both the representation of memorial and the perception of the recipient.

This discussion was triggered by a text published by Lewis Mumford under the title “The Death of the Monument” in 1937 in which he declared that monuments of past times are mere replicas that stay in cities without their original “spirit”. Their aesthetic experience as well as the content they represent can be seen as an object of study, however, they do not actively influence the cultural life of the contemporary civilians that are moving through the city. While the work of art exhibited in museums still enables an intellectual process for the art recipient, the monument exhibited in public does not reach its viewer in a way that makes them engage with it emotionally or intellectually. The monument therefore has reached its deadly end, and other architectural solutions must be found to strengthen the community feeling of civilians. (Mumford: 1937; Elliot: 1964)

The discussion reached attention again in the 1990s and early 2000s. Influenced by a discourse about socio-political norms and their exclusionary impact on

civilians, philosophers and cultural scholars explored how a public consciousness could be built that criticises hegemonic ideas that are racist, sexist or homophobic. By referring to the conception of Judith Butler, memorialisation was considered as a form of resistance aiming to create a collective that understands an interdependence of people regardless of their ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. (Butler: 1990, 2000, 2004, 2013, 2015, 2020).

The concept of memorialisation as resistance is based on a distinction of representative objects and performative effects which are considered as different ways of creating political remembrance. For representative, Butler describes objects that are static and present hegemonic cultural and national ideals, like monuments. Even though she does not further analyse them, she does not regard them as ideal tools for political resistance, as they do not create deep emotional connections and a recognition of interdependence that is necessary to create an alternative understanding of a collective. (Butler: 2004) Scholars in cultural studies strengthen this argument by pointing to the perception of monuments of the everyday by-passant: Not only do monuments rarely trigger emotional or intellectual involvement, quite often they get completely overlooked and exist as invisible elements in contrast to the more vibrant life of cities (Bertens: 2019).

Performative, however, are practices or even counter-representations that challenge the status quo and have a rather ephemeral appearance: actions of protests or collective mourning but also representative objects that or do resist against common visual habits can create attention through their visual appearance and allow their viewer not only to look at them, but actively engage with them intellectually, emotionally, and sometimes even physically. (Butler: 1990, 2004, 2013, 2015, 2020)

Newer positions in the cultural studies challenged the strict distinction between representative objects and performative effects by claiming that memorial objects in fact can be performative. Based on the premise that they do not have performative effects themselves, scholars analysed different ways in how they can create attention and be brought into a new discourse. The suggested solution is that ephemeral practices like light projections on monuments, public performances, or the reproduction of monuments in new artworks like videos or photographs can enable a new perception of them and transform them from “dead objects” into objects of political discourse. Thus, monuments can be brought back to life again, but therefore, it requires certain actions. (see for example: Widrich, 2014) Sometimes these actions are forms of critique by highlighting the historical cultural values we do not want to accept in our society anymore.

In conclusion, the theoretical discussion shows a clear trend from a radical

rejection of memorials to a discourse in which their cultural value gets recognised and which tries to bring them back into a more discursive and critical reception. All these positions share the idea that static memorial objects have no or a very limited effect to create a political community. As memorial benches fall under the category of these kinds of objects, it is our aim to discuss whether this position in the theoretical discussion can be validated.

3. BEGINNING WITH THE FIELDWORK: TALKING TO THE FIFE COUNCIL

When we started to contextualise our research, many practical questions sprung to our minds, questions that we had never had before. Although we were all fascinated by memorial benches and how they shape St Andrew's landscape, we suddenly realised that we did not know who puts them there, how the process works, or how much they cost. We needed to get a better understanding of all these questions in order to proceed with the fieldwork, so we decided to contact the Fife Council, the local authority of Scotland's Fife County. After approaching them both by email and calls, we had the opportunity to talk with the GM Area Officer Roger A Honeyman, who answered our questions and facilitated us with all the practical information regarding the benches.

Honeyman confirmed to us that the Fife Council is the organisation responsible for most public memorial benches in St Andrews. This initiative has been going on for more than thirty years now, its main purpose being 'a long-lasting way to commemorate a loved one'. The cost of a memorial bench can vary, as it 'depends on what bench the customer wants'. The ones we have researched cost from £500 to £800. It is worth pointing out that all of them are made from recycled materials and combine strength and weather resistance with attractive styling. These are indispensable factors to consider when placing a bench in a public space: they must be suitable for the environment. The bench is then installed by the Fife Council, which costs £293.36. Concerning their location, the Fife Council works closely with the families or organisations that arrange them to ensure they are put in their preferred location, considering the availability of places in town and how they could affect people's daily life.

In St Andrews, most of the benches are located along the East Sands and the Scores. As Honeyman states, the majority of them are funded by individuals, and just a minority of them are funded by local community groups. This year, two new benches have been added to St Andrews' landscape, and just one in 2023. Sometimes old benches are replaced with new ones and sometimes a suitable base must be constructed to support a new bench. Memorial benches remain in their place for as long as they remain in good condition, and the Council is

allowed to remove them if they fall into disrepair or are damaged, always contacting the buyer first. Memorial trees, another site of public memory in St Andrews, are maintained by the Grounds Maintenance Service, and all efforts are made to ensure their survival.

On the other hand, Honeyman pointed out to us that the Fife Council does not hold historical or current numbers of how many benches there are in St Andrews. Similarly, due to data protection, they do not keep track of the information that memorial plaques depict. He also highlights that one of the major issues with memorial benches in St Andrews is that there is not much land to site them, so the numbers have been very low these last years.

Additionally, we would like to mention the initiative led by Terence and Elizabeth Eden, who in 2016 realised that there was no official register of every bench that commemorates people and created an open virtual map where people can add their benches. Open Benches is a worldwide project, but with a quick look, we realise that the majority of benches are located in the United Kingdom, followed by the United States and some areas in the North of Europe. Some local councils, like the one from Bath, have participated in the creation of this map, which can be checked through the following link: https://openbenches.org/. According to this map, we know that there are at least 59 benches in St Andrews, although the numbers may be higher, as it is not up to date. Even though this source of information does not rely on official numbers and has not been taken as a reliable source of data for this investigation, we wanted to highlight the initiative as an example of how memorial benches do attract the public interest in a way that transcends national borders. The fact that citizens from around the world have contributed to the creation of this map adds another layer of signification to memorial benches, which function as a site of community even beyond their physical location, entering the virtual space.

4. ANALYSING THE SURVEY

To best address the question, we crafted a questionnaire and asked volunteers to respond through social media, group messaging, and in person. We surveyed an age group from 17-58 years, multiple gender identities, and an almost even split between St Andrews locals and foreigners, which serves to highlight how our coverage over a wide range of demographics minimises the opportunity for response bias. We first asked volunteers how many memorial benches in St Andrews they could identify. In asking this question, we can see primarily if the presence of the memorial benches have any recognition in the community at all, which from there gives grounds to evaluate the extent of which the benches

contribute to public memory and community heritage. In our survey we observed about 70% of responses claiming to have identified 0-15 benches around town, followed by 23% having identified 15-30, and finally 3% and 5% identifying 30-45 and 45+ respectively. While the St Andrews Parish Council fails to identify a specific number, understanding that there are over 45 benches within in the town and the overwhelming majority of responses only recognised 0-15 benches gives an understanding of how often people notice them, and by extension, how their presence plays into the community.

Secondly, we asked volunteers to identify who they observe being commemorated on the memorial benches with the purpose of studying how members of the community perceive the benches, as methods of memorialisation or simply as decoration. Over 80% of the responses reported that they typically see family members being commemorated, followed by around 20% of people seeing students and faculty names. These observations that community members have helps progress the argument that the St Andrews memorial benches contribute to public memory as the people read and engage with them, further understanding how the benches serve as landmarks of community heritage. Moreover, we went on to ask how frequently volunteers read the bench's inscriptions and research the person they are dedicated to, to examine how much interaction the members of the St Andrews community have with these memorial benches. With around 53% of the responses claiming to have occasionally done research on the dedication plaques, and 17% claiming to have frequently done research, it is reasonable to conclude that the benches contribute to public memory and community heritage as they receive a high degree of engagement among students, locals, and tourists, educating others about the town's history.

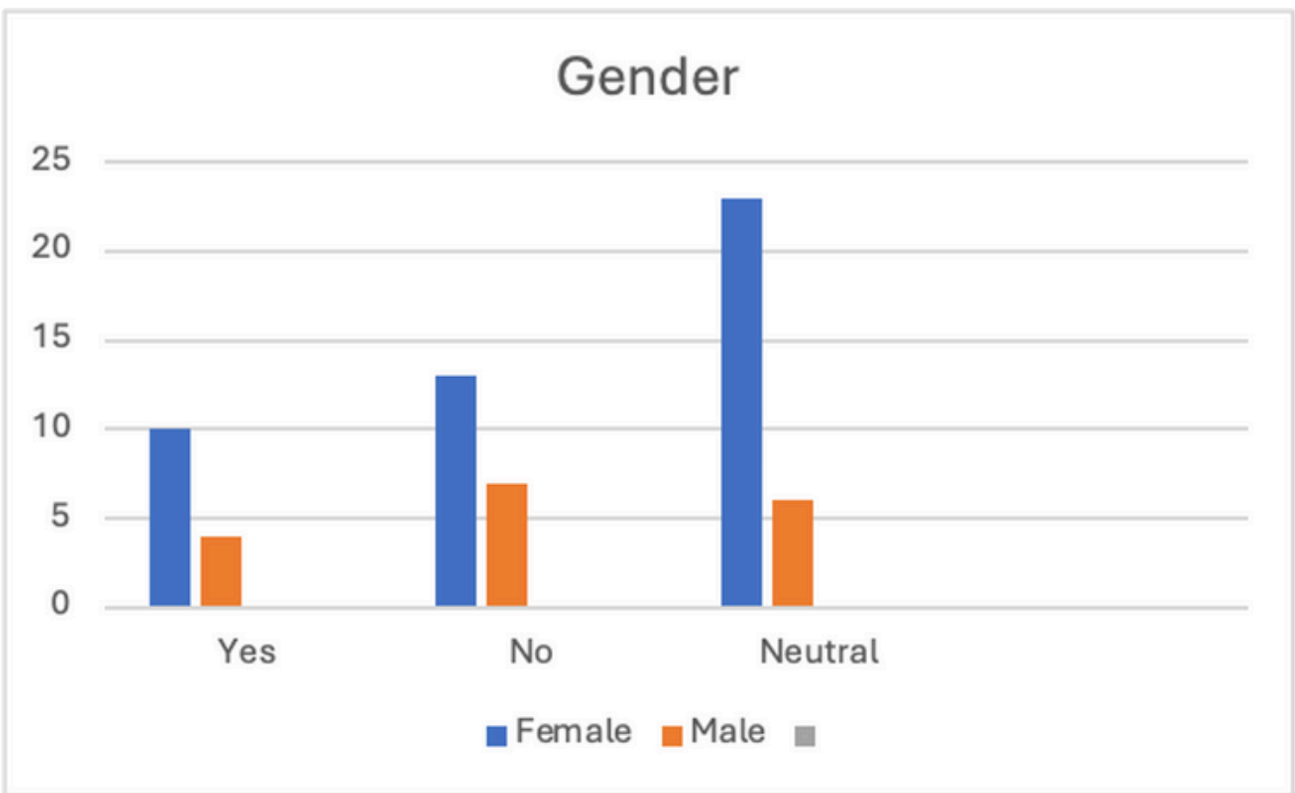
Penultimately, in an effort to comprehend how the benches bridge the individual to the community, and the community to itself, we asked volunteers if the presence of the memorial benches fosters a personal connection to the rest of St Andrews, and if they feel the benches have an impact on the St Andrews experience. Firstly, a reported 46% of volunteers claimed they felt neutral about whether or not the benches connected them to the rest of the community, backed by another 30% claiming they felt no connection at all. In contrast, the second data set reports 46% of people claiming the benches do have an impact on the St Andrews community experience.

As we anticipated that individuals might relate to the benches differently depending on their nationality, age, and possibly their gender, we asked participants about these criteria. In the following section, we present how

different groups responded to the questions regarding whether they feel personally connected to the benches and whether they believe the benches have an impact on the sense of community. However, we do not discuss the relationship between the responses and age, as most of our participants were aged between 18 and 25. Since individuals over 25 were represented by only a small number of participants, the results are not considered representative.

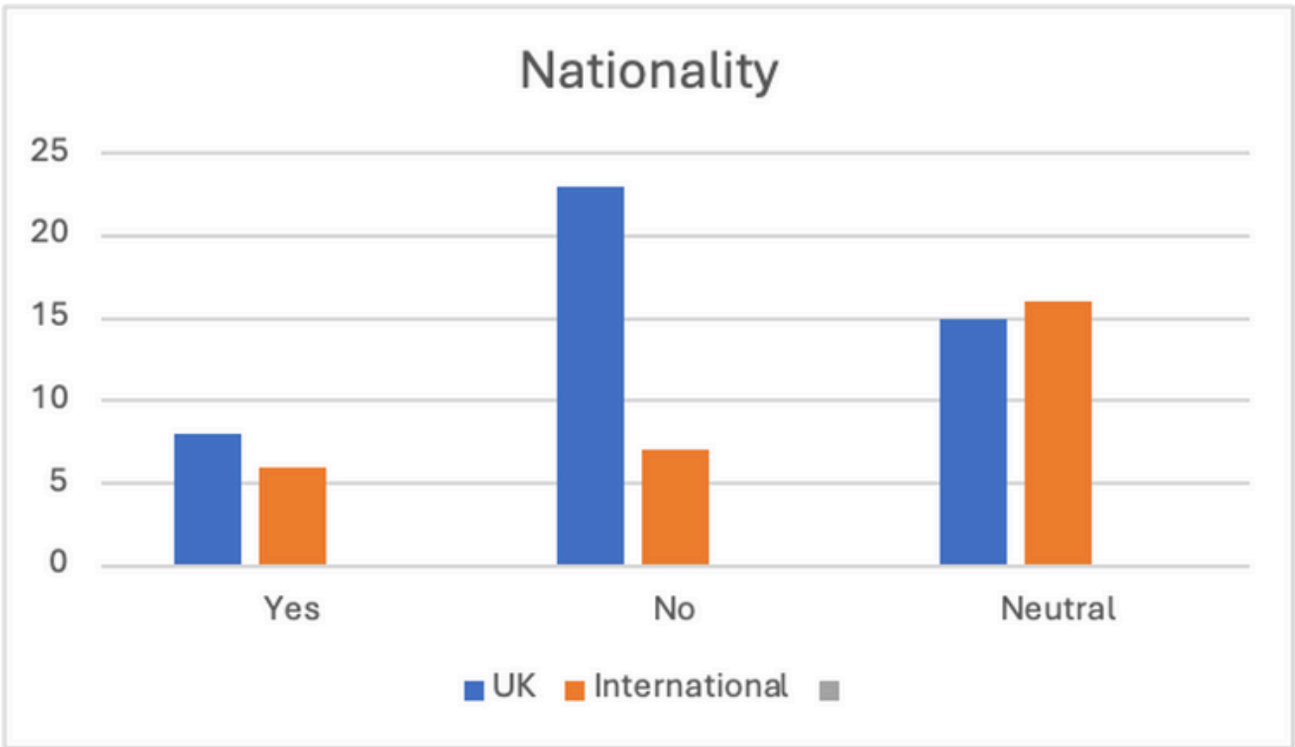
Regarding the question, “Do you feel more personally connected to the St Andrews community because of the benches?”, we observed slight variations in how different groups responded.

We generally had more female than male participants, and no gender-diverse participants. In both groups, the smallest proportion of respondents indicated that they feel personally connected to the benches. The majority of females took a neutral position, whereas most males indicated that they did not feel a personal connection.



Reactions to the question “Do you feel more personally connected to the St Andrews community because of the benches?” sorted by gender.

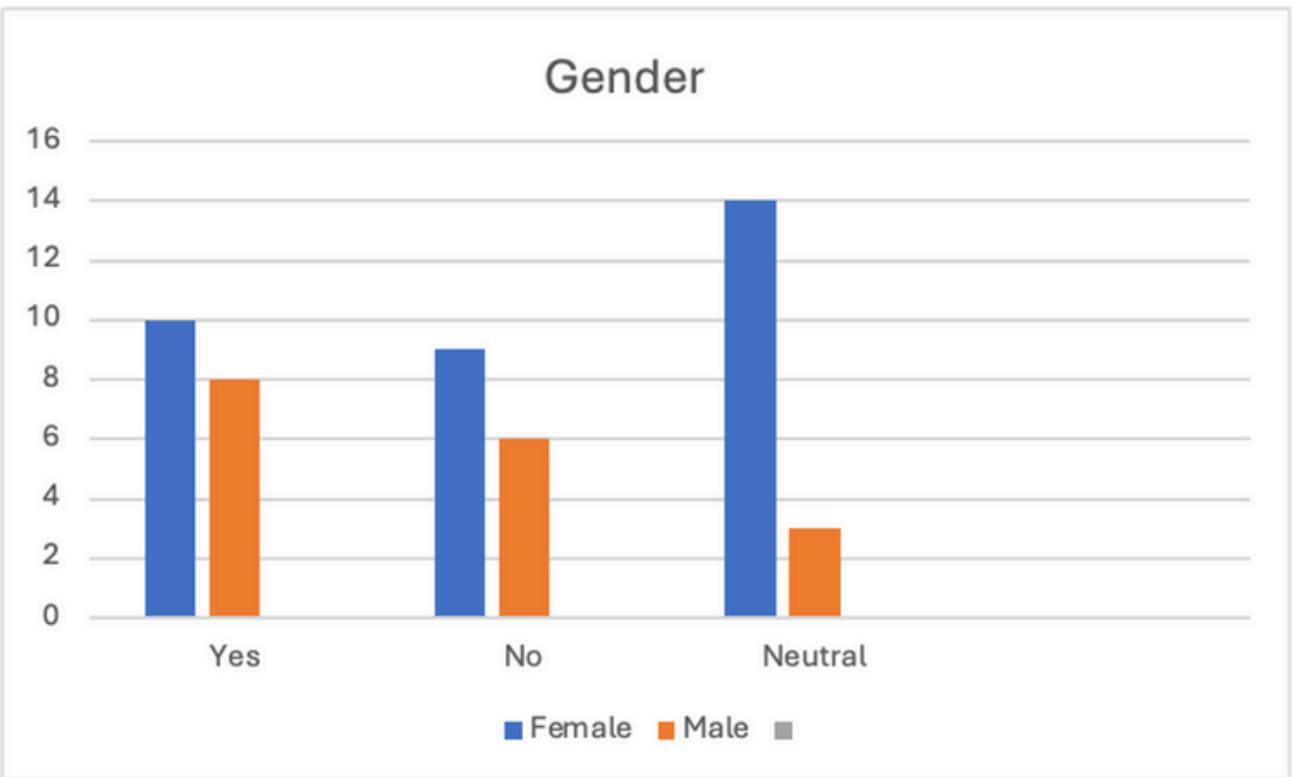
We also distinguished between UK and non-UK participants when asking about nationality. Most participants were UK citizens. Among both groups, the smallest number of respondents gave a positive answer to the question. While most UK citizens stated that they did not feel a personal connection to the benches, the majority of international participants took a neutral position.



Reactions to the question “Do you feel more personally connected to the St Andrews community because of the benches?” sorted by nationality.

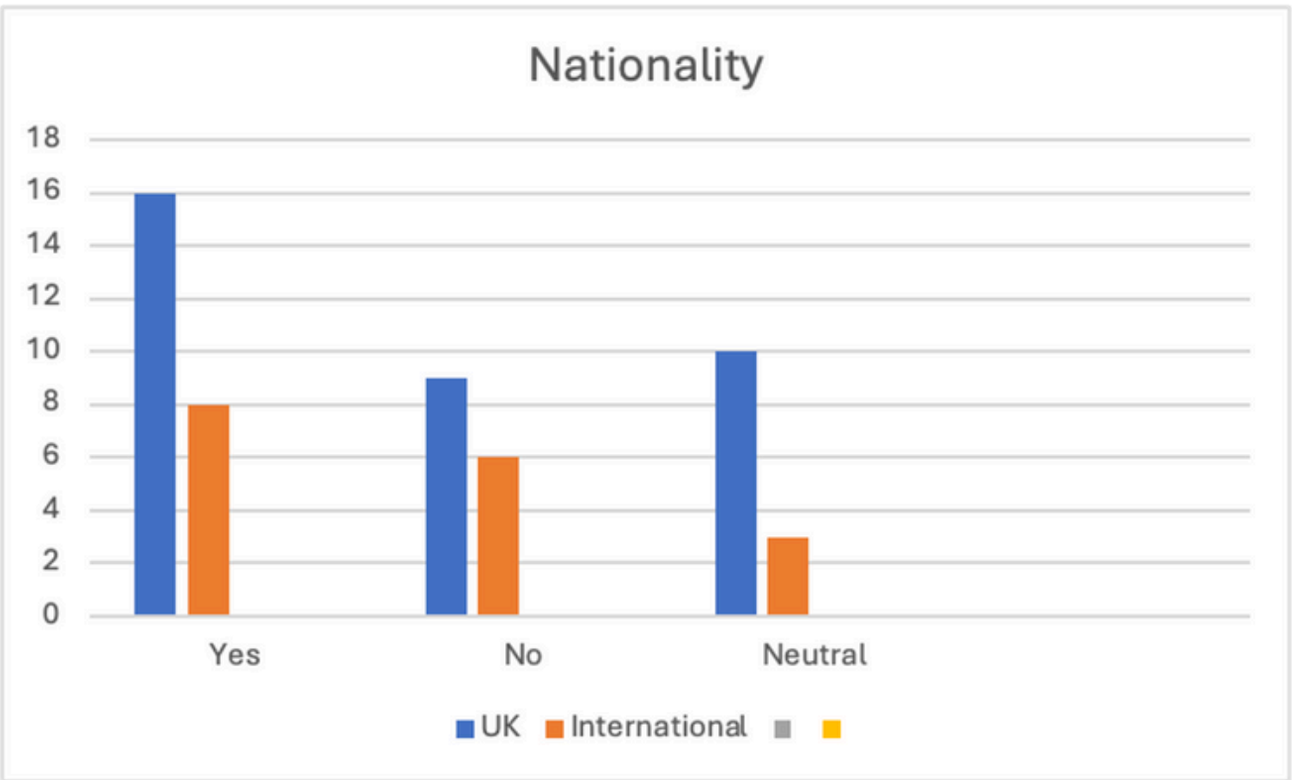
The relationship between the question of whether participants themselves feel a connection and the question of whether they think the benches affect others is particularly interesting. Most participants indicated that they did not feel a personal connection, yet many believed the benches have a positive impact on the community experience in St Andrews overall.

Regarding gender, most females believed that the benches have a neutral effect on the community experience. However, the subgroup of females who thought the benches do have an effect was not the smallest. The difference between responses to the first and second questions was more pronounced among male participants. Although many male respondents also stated that the benches have no effect, the majority believed they do have a positive impact on the community experience.



Reactions to the question “Do You Think They Have an Effect on the Community Experience in St Andrews?” sorted by gender.

The responses from nationality groups demonstrated an even clearer distinction. While most UK citizens stated that the benches have no personal impact on them, as mentioned earlier, the majority believed the benches have an effect on others. Similarly, most non-UK citizens also claimed that the benches have a general impact, with the neutral response being the least common among this group.



Reactions to the question “Do You Think They Have an Effect on the Community Experience in St Andrews?” sorted by nationality.

These statistics, when observed together, provide the perspective that the memorial benches are well received throughout the community as they connect the present St Andrews with the past. However, they also draw the conclusion that the memorial benches fall short in individually connecting people to the outer town circle. While the benches may lack in bridging the gap between the individual and the community, they are effective in their purpose as serving as sites of public memory and heritage through their prompted education of events and people from St. Andrews.

Lastly, we evaluated the various other methods of public commemoration and memorialisation to understand how much of an impact the St Andrews memorial benches have on facilitating a sense of community in comparison to

other local landmarks. The distribution of responses was almost uniform, reporting tiles, engravings, trees, art and even buildings, with statues even being identified twice. The diversity of responses allowed us to gauge how frequently people pay attention to memorialisation and landmarks around St Andrews, as well as draw conclusions on the level of contribution memorial benches have on public memory and community heritage. In comparing the vastness in these responses, as well as understanding the functionality and usage of the benches, we can infer that the memorial benches receive more attention than trees, tiles, or engravings due to their more subtleness and lack of methods for interaction. However, perhaps less attention than a bolder landmark such as a statue or art that may receive more publicity. It is important to have identified this as it helps further define the role that these benches play in facilitating a sense of community in St Andrews.

St Andrews as a town is a melting pot of different cultures, bringing in students, tourists, and locals from around the world. The presence of these memorial benches works to bridge the gap between cultures and facilitate a sense of community through memorialisation and education of the town's history. While there are a variety of methods of commemorating public memory and community heritage, in our research we hoped to have brought awareness to the presence of memorial benches in St. Andrews and draws a sense of appreciation for the town's community and history.

5. CASE STUDY

Many of the memorial benches in St Andrews reflect the vitality of the town's academic community. As such there are valuable insights to be taken from benches commemorating professors, students and alumni. A bench situated in the university's St Mary's Quad is particularly poignant and reveals long-lasting networks between the institution's alumni and current students. The bench is dedicated to "Anni & Jeremy Gillingham, Tragically killed in a skiing accident January 1994" from "The 1972 Club", which is the School of Medicine's graduating class of 1972 (The Independent, 1994). The Gillinghams' deaths were nationally documented partly owing to the length of time between the avalanche that caused their deaths and the raising of alarm bells regarding their absence. Both were GPs trained at St Andrews who had been combining a skiing holiday with medical conferences.

The University of St Andrew's Alumni Relations gave their first update on the Class of 1972 in 2020. Reminiscences on the class's St Andrews experience reflect the longevity of many university traditions. The Bute Medical Ball, a well-attended event by medical students even today, was a formative part of the Class

of 1972's experience (Alumni Relations, 2017). Connections with nearby communities are also traceable through the Class of 1972. The University of St Andrews and the University of Dundee are now very separate institutions. During the 1960s, medical students were taught between St Andrews and Dundee as the collegiate system remained in place. Without these tangible connections now, commemoration of a group who experienced the latter years of St Andrews' collegiate system allows us to observe most clearly the growth of St Andrews as an individual institution.

The concept of 'continuing bonds' is highly relevant to the case of the Class of 1972 and Anni and Jeremy Gillingham. While one cannot derive detailed information about the couple or their St Andrews experience as students, the memorial bench serves the purpose of sparking curiosity in "The 1972 Club" and their ties to the university. As such, a 'continuing bond' is established between the Gillinghams and the Class of 1972, and the Class of 1972 with current students (Maddrell, 2013). The situation of this particular bench in an area of campus with high foot traffic increases the likelihood that those being commemorated will continue to hold space in public memory and remain part of the community's history. Over two-thirds of respondents to our survey completed by residents and students in St Andrews said that they at least sometimes engaged with inscriptions on the memorial benches around town. Avril Maddrell's study on memorial culture offers the possibility that 'continuing bonds' are not inherently tied to a specific type or stage of grief. This means that while there may be a disconnect in the knowledge of current St Andrews residents regarding the relevance of the 1972 Club and Anni and Jeremy Gillingham to the current town and community, subconsciously their memory is being kept alive by the presence of a memorial.

A profound impact of the Class of 1972 is that of the Wardlaw Scholarship. Established in 2002, the Wardlaw Scholarship scheme enables students with the academic, but not financial, means to attend the University of St Andrews. The lasting connections among the Class of 1972 proved their positive impact at their 45th reunion, where alumni contributed to a fund that would be awarded to a student as part of the Wardlaw Scholarship to support their studies.

Memorial benches, as established through an examination of the memorial to Anni and Jeremy Gillingham, do not generally offer a detailed biography of those being commemorated. They do, however, have the capacity to inspire further research and thus prolong public memory. From a curiosity about the '1972 Club', the significance of alumni relations is reinforced, which we can better understand. A second update on the Class of 1972 given by alumni relations in

2022 documented their 50th reunion (Alumni Relations, 2022). The class were able to meet a recipient of their donations to the Wardlaw Scholarship, thus creating tangible connections between St Andrews' history and its current community. The central role of St Andrews' alumni network in preserving public memory of previous students and staff is indisputable. In the number of connections to be found from a brief inscription on campus, we can observe the maintenance of community heritage within the university.

6. CONCLUSION

The human lifespan, and human existence itself, are temporary. Time is not something that was ever promised to humankind, and there is no guarantee about how much time a person holds. This daunting truth is remarkably what makes a human's time on earth even more sacred, their temporariness what makes their existence more meaningful. In time that has not been promised, humans lead their lives in the ways in which they want to be remembered by humanity. Physical indicators of their memorialisation serve to remind their communities of the type of person they were, and of the ideologies they strived to represent.

The form of public memorialisation that this paper has served to advocate for the importance of are memorial benches, specifically the memorial benches found in the Scottish town of St. Andrews. In order to properly understand the background function of memorial benches, the research team communicated with Fife Council, learning that the council is responsible for the distribution, location, and implementation of these benches. Research highlights that Fife Council is also responsible for thinking about the impact the installation of memorial benches will have on the daily lives of members of the community. The benches are intended to preserve the memory of a member of the community who has passed away, and a loved member of the community would not intend to hinder the path of others who are actively still a part of that community. This further builds the notion of memorialisation serving as something positive, both in preserving memory as well as in positively contributing to the community. The research team acknowledged the importance that community serves in the preservation of memorial benches, thus the need to assess how the community regards memorial benches through a distributed survey. The survey volunteers were almost evenly split between locals and internationals studying at the University of St Andrews, all the questions developed with specific intentions. As discussed earlier, the disadvantage to a memorial bench is that sometimes the user of the bench only views the bench as a bench, disregarding or ignorant to the plaque that demonstrates memorial ties to the bench. However, across both local and student populations that make up the population of St Andrews,

memorial benches were found to be well received across the community and ultimately serve as public memory and heritage sites. Other forms of St Andrews public memorialisation were acknowledged throughout the survey, such as engravings, statues, art, buildings, etc. However, the element that makes memorial benches unique is the space for public interaction that they offer: they offer a seat to a member of the community throughout almost the entire town.

Due to these elements and the impact these benches have on the daily lives of St. Andrews community members, this paper is calling for the protection of these benches across St. Andrews. Through research and interaction with community members, it is clear that the memory that builds these benches helps to foster a sense of community and companionship, while also physically preserving the memory of a community member no longer present. Memorial benches are safe havens throughout the town that display the values St Andrews fosters regarding connection and heritage, thus the preservation of their memorialization is imperative.

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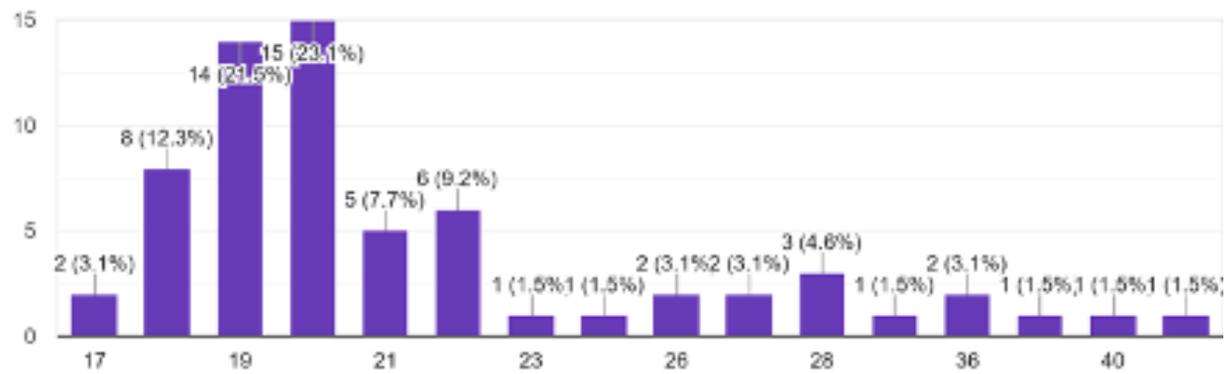
8. APPENDICES

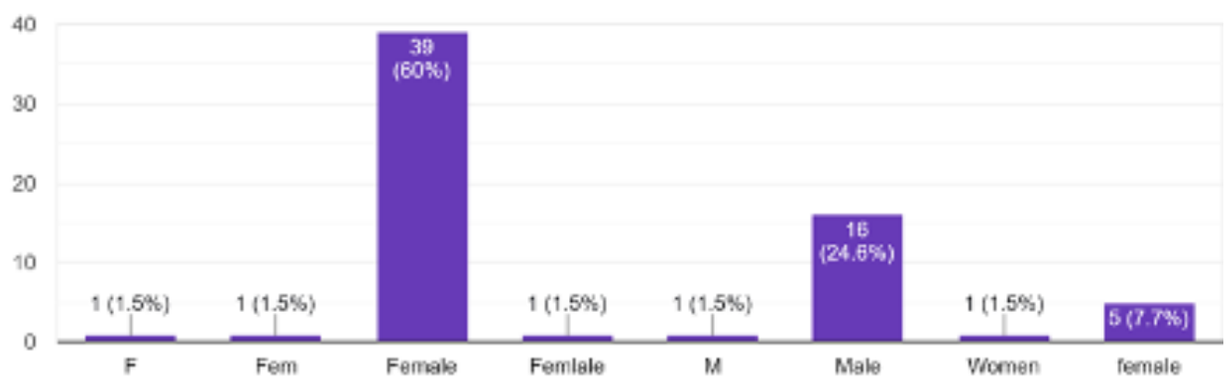
Age

65 responses



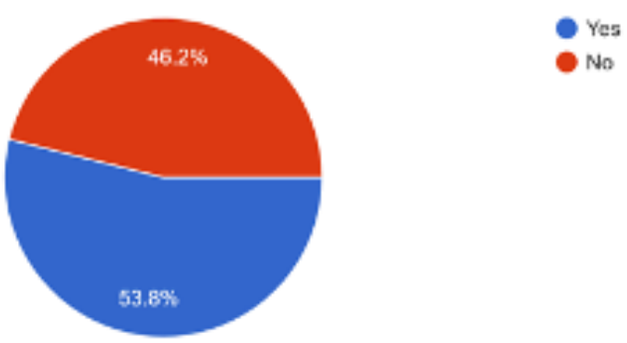
Gender

65 responses



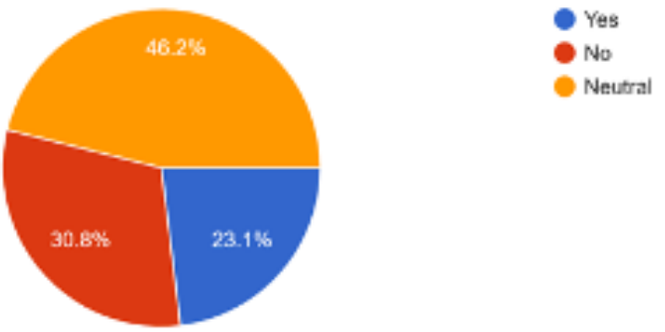
Are you from the UK?

65 responses



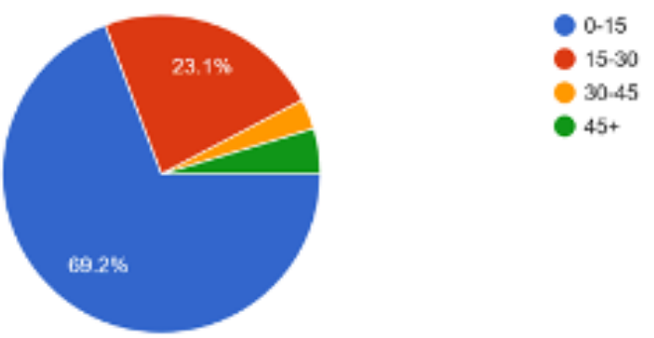
Do you feel more personally connected to the St Andrews community because of the benches?

65 responses



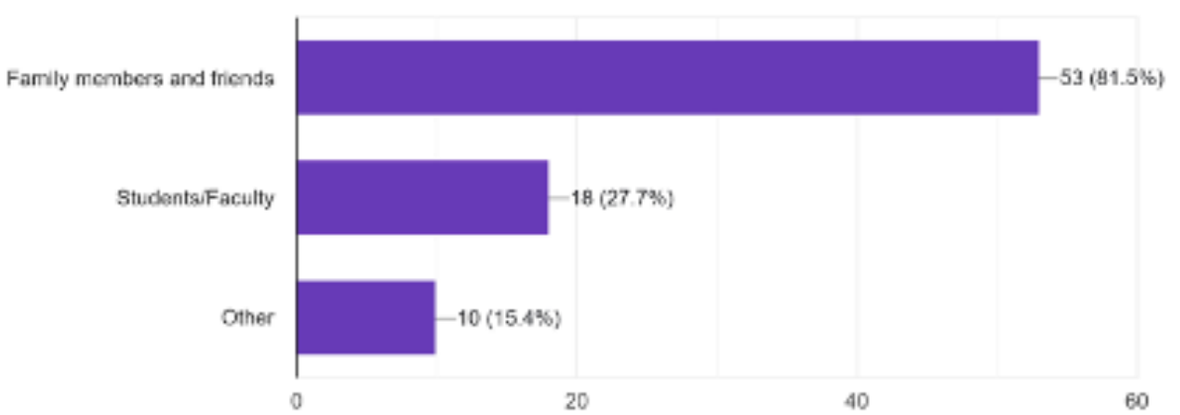
How many memorial benches have you seen around St. Andrews?

65 responses



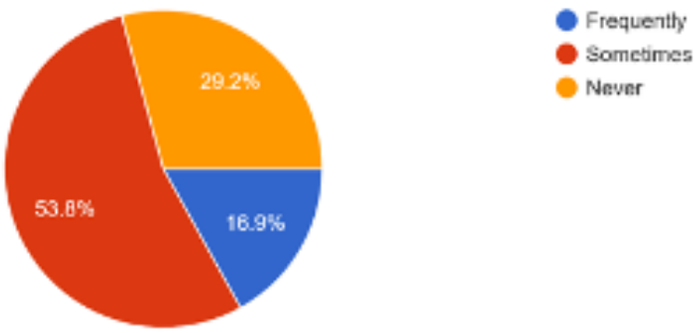
Who do you see commemorated on memorial benches in St Andrews?

65 responses



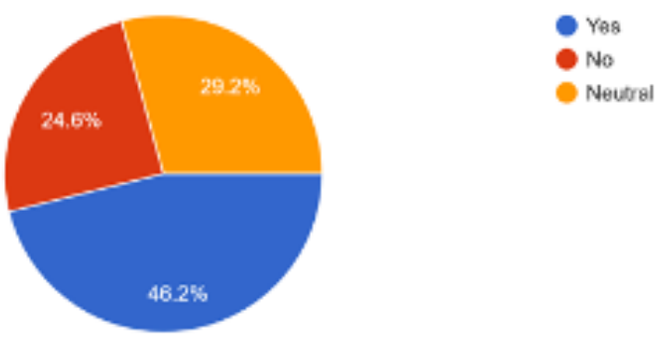
Have you ever read the inscriptions on the benches or done any research on who they are dedicated to?

65 responses



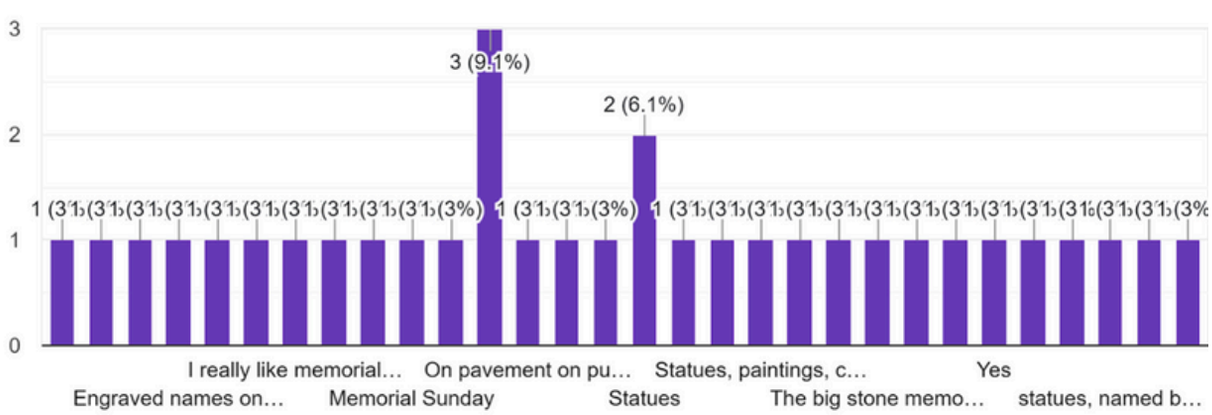
Do you think they have an effect on the community experience in St Andrews?

65 responses



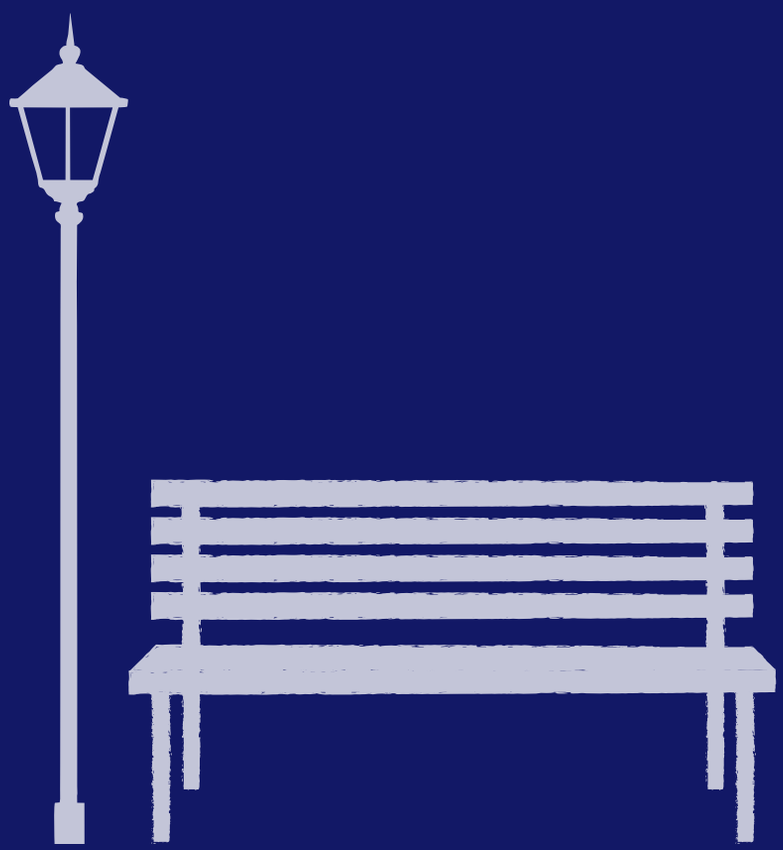
Could you recognise other ways of public commemoration and/or memorialisation?

33 responses



Feel free to share experiences/other relevant thoughts.

1. I’ve seen graffiti on memorial benches
2. I feel the most connected to the ones at St Salvator's Quad because they are more academic. Also, the story about the initials just in front of it made me respect and pay more attention to all the memorials around!
3. There are a few benches in town I know of the people they are dedicated to and I think it's a lovely way to remember the person. I'm fascinated by people's lives.
4. I never really paid attention to the benches, wouldn't have known they even existed without the survey



PIAR

The Political Institute
of Action Research

The Political Institute of Action Research at the University of St Andrews

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