

Oral History: Where do you start?

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts as well as enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Julian: In today's episode, I'm joined by Padmini Broomfield. Padmini is a freelance oral history and heritage consultant who's produced audio content for exhibitions at various museums in Hampshire and across Southeast England, based on her recordings with people working at, for example:- the Southampton Ford factory; Southampton football club; the cruise liners and other local industries. She's also the co-author of an oral history of Vosper Thornycroft and another on Basque evacuees who came to Southampton during the Spanish civil war. Padmini, can you tell us in the simplest terms, what exactly is an oral history and what's it for?

Padmini: History could best be described as the recording, preserving and interpreting of people's memories, life experiences, and opinions. So it's not just all about their memories, but it is also about how they experienced life events or major events happening around them. Also, getting their views and opinions on various aspects of their lives. So telling you a little bit more than just what happened, it's also a little bit about how those events or things that they did in life impacted on subsequent life events or on their opinions on things that are happening around them. Generally, not all of us write our memoirs and autobiographies, etc, etc so oral history allows people to tell their story in their own words and helps us to sort of document everyday lives, and everyday experiences.

Julian: I see. And if someone was a complete newcomer to oral histories, but decided they wanted to record one with a friend or a colleague or whatever, where would they start and what would they need in order to be able to go about it?

Padmini: if you want to do an interview with a friend or a colleague, you'd need to think about what is it you want to ask them about? Is it a life story which is just starting from their childhood memories right up to the present day, all the sorts of things they did and their reflections on their life, or do you want to focus on a particular topic? Whether it's their work in a particular job or a membership of an organization or a particular event. Once you've established that, obviously you need to make sure that they're willing to talk to you, but in order to make sure that they completely understand what you're going to do with their material as well, you need to clarify to them what it'll involve in practical terms, but also why you want to do this, and what will happen to the content that they have shared with you? Is this something you're doing for private study, in which case there is just you and that person, who would have access to the recordings, or are you doing it for an organization or are you going to deposit it in some kind of a public archive, where you may be using it in some sort of public output, like an exhibition or a publication, or perhaps if it's going to be kept in a public

archive for posterity, who will have access to it, is it just open to anybody and what likely ways that it could be used.

So they need to understand before they agree to continue. Once they've agreed and you've got their permission to get started then you need some sort of recording equipment. and obviously these days we use digital recorders and everything I'm talking about today is about audio recording. I personally don't do video recording, but you may choose to do video recording. In which case obviously you'll need that, sort of equipment. So if you're using a digital audio recorder you want something that's going to record at a very good audio quality because you want what we call uncompressed audio files. Which means that, it is good quality. It's good archival quality, which means it won't deteriorate. So you don't want to be recording in MP3. So whichever equipment you use, just make sure it records at that standard and that it's got good microphones. You might need other equipment like batteries, where you're going to store it, etc. And once you have got that practical, where are you going to interview? You need to make sure that you're going to be recording in a quiet place where you're not going to have any disturbance from external noises, but also you don't want lots of people in the room who might interfere in the recording.

And I would advocate, you know, having a one-to-one interview because then the person is more relaxed and much more able to tell their story, as opposed to, if they feel they've got an audience around them, of people kind of interfering in the conversation. So those are the sort of practical ways, but also at that stage, you may also need to think if you are going to do anything with the recording, as in deposit it in an archive or use it for something that other people would have access to, then you need to have some kind of a permission agreement with your interviewee. And if it is something you're doing individually, then perhaps you need to draw up some document that both of you are aware of, the set of circumstances, but also the criteria of how you may use it.

Generally, people, when they do oral histories for an institution like a university museum archive, those organizations often have their own paperwork. So if you're going to deposit it in an archive, it's best to ask them for the paperwork so that you can get that permission on that particular form. There's a lot of information on the Oral History Society website, precisely for the kind of question that you've asked for beginners

Julian: Are there any particular types of people that make good subjects for oral history recordings or indeed particular types of themes that make a good recording?

Padmini: Where I stand, I think everybody's story is interesting. I don't think that any person is better or worse than another one when they're telling their story, it's their story. What you need is you need them to feel comfortable with you. You need to put them at ease and once you've put them at ease, I think they relax and are able to tell you the story, in their own way, but also, it's much more engaging. Some of us think that perhaps the word interview - we often call oral history interviews - and I think sometimes that can put off people because they think it's something terribly formal and so, you know, that sort of gets in the way.

In terms of subjects, no, I don't think that there are any topics I would say are more valuable than others. I think it just depends on what is the purpose your recording, you know, are you looking at a certain sort of aspect? Are you looking at a locality, say your neighbourhood or

how it's changed over time? Or are you thinking about your workplace and what people do in it? So it really depends on what you're trying to capture. So I wouldn't say that there are any kind of topics that are more interesting than others, because each topic has got its own target audience that may be interested in it.

Julian: Yes. And would you ever recommend that oral history is conducted as a monologue as opposed to the type of structured interview that you've been alluding to so far?

Padmini: I know that some people, perhaps do that, where they want to sort of document their memories, perhaps to write, an autobiography and things. But I think that's much harder to do.

And I think that the strength of oral history is that dialogue. It's not a dialogue in the sense that the interviewer shared their own thoughts and memories, but the interviewer enables, facilitates, the recollection of someone's memories. So I think a monologue would be much harder for someone unless they are very, very used to recording themselves using equipment, but also who have prepared and structured the way they're going to tell the story.

Whereas with an interview, the interviewer's role is to sort of, just jog the memories, ask questions, and just elicit information as it emerges without having any kind of a questionnaire. I don't have questionnaires when I interview people, people say something and I follow that up and that kind of reveals all sorts of unexpected stories because quite often at the end of an interview, I've had people say to me, You've made me remember things that I had forgotten or I'd never talked about, I'd never shared this with anyone before. One interviewee said to me, you've made me reflect on my life and I've never done that before. And I think that that's because they are talking to someone, but if you have a sort of chronological format that helps people remember.

I would say that that's what oral history's strength is, that the interviewer is enabling the person to tell their story.

Julian: That's an interesting point, that the interviewer can really help tease out detail that might not come out otherwise. In your experience, there any pitfalls or problems to avoid in that process?

Padmini: There are two sort of pitfalls that I would classify. So one is much more the physical environment in terms of where you're recording it, in terms of your equipment things can either go wrong or you're not used to it. But on the other hand, sometimes you have interviewees who initially might be quite reluctant. I find that when someone has nominated a person oh, they've got a really good story to tell, and if they're not signed up to it, if they feel uncomfortable, then you have much more difficulty trying to get them to go into details. The other much more important, and things that can happen in any interview, is when you ask people to remember the past, it could include perhaps, sad memories. It could trigger sort of strong emotions. As an interviewer, you just need to be aware of that. You never know what is likely to trigger that kind of a strong emotion where somebody might get upset or start crying because sometimes people talking about their parents, for example, they might get emotional, not because they're telling a sad story or some traumatic experience, but just that memory. And you just need to know how to deal with that.

On the other hand, there are other kinds of stories that might be on sensitive topics, those are the kinds of things that, again, you need to be aware of as to how you're going to deal with experiences that are being shared. Especially if it's something unexpected that you did not know about, because you don't always know a great deal about the interviewee themselves, you may know certain aspects, but sometimes they talk about things that perhaps you didn't know about. It's just as an interviewer being prepared for these kind of things and knowing how to deal with them as they arise. But I think all of that can be dealt with by just creating that sense of trust with your interviewee, that empathy that you show, the listening. And I think that those can be dealt with. Those are the sort of pitfalls I can think of at the moment.

Julian: That's really useful, the fact that you need to be empathic as well as applying some of the harder questioning and listening skills perhaps. Are there any particular tips or tricks that you've come across that work well in that process drawing people's memories out?

Padmini: One of the things I've always found that get people to remember, and also sort of tell the story in such a way that the listener then kind of has a clearer picture of what happened. I find that following a sort of chronological pattern, a live story approach, to start with when people are talking about childhood memories, unless they've had a really hard time, it kind of eases them into the process.

So even if you're going to be talking about something to do with their work, which happened when they were in their twenties or thirties, just starting at the beginning helps them to get into the process of telling, it relaxes them and once they're relaxed and in the meantime you're building that relationship as you are listening.

And as I said, as an interviewer, I don't interject except to ask the odd question. It's all sort of nonverbal communication, so I don't actually respond in any way to what they're saying apart from just listening. I've interviewed people, the Basque children who were evacuated to Southampton in 1937 during the Spanish civil war, and obviously they had been evacuated as very young children, far away from their parents to a foreign country. So every single interview, there was a point when people got emotional, particularly when they remembered the parting with their parents, or just a memory of their families. There were times when people got emotional, their voices cracked, but rather than taking the control away from them I waited to see what it was they wanted to do. And when somebody got quite upset, I asked before I turned off the recording, would you like to stop now? Sometimes they didn't want to, you know, because they want to tell you that story and they will continue. On other occasions, they would say, yes, please let's stop. I think basically I would say if you want to do oral history interviews, just learn to listen and listen really carefully. And once you get that, you can ask questions to help the person along and I think that empathy and that sort of just willingness to be interested in someone's story is what I would say is the key. Because a lot of people say to me, why do you want to interview me? I haven't done anything special. I haven't had great achievements and once they realize that you are interested - quite often, nobody's ever asked them these questions. How often have we asked our parents or grandparents to tell us all these things?

Just the fact that someone's interested really gives them a great sense of ownership of their story. I find that once you've got to that point, you get the most amazing stories from people. I

had this amazing experience recently after a two and a half hour interview the interviewee said to me, that was the best birthday present I could ever have had.

Julian: It's wonderful to hear that it can be so rewarding for the interviewee as well. And I love the idea that, bringing out stories that may otherwise just disappear over time and vanish from history completely. A little earlier in the conversation you mentioned public archives. Are there any particular public archives that include oral histories either locally here in Hampshire or at a wider level nationally?

Padmini: Around Hampshire, Southampton Museums and Archives have a very large collection of oral histories pertaining to all things Southampton. They've been recording interviews since the early 1980s. So the memories, they go back to people who were born at the turn of the previous century. I used to work there many years ago. There isn't an oral history department anymore, but what they are now doing is recording for certain topics or certain exhibitions, but also they are willing to accept deposits of recordings made by community groups or individuals that are related to Southampton.

In Hampshire you've got the Hampshire Record Office which has got the Wessex film and sound archive, which has got a vast collection of audio as well as video recordings. They accept deposits on topics related to Hampshire. In Portsmouth, the Portsmouth History Centre has got a large a collection of oral history recordings because they have done lots of interviews and this goes back 20, 30 years.

These are the main ones in Hampshire, but every place in the country would have some, either oral history collections already or archives that are willing to accept deposits. So if you're thinking of depositing your recordings in an archive or a museum collection, then it's best you talk to them before you start collecting to make sure that they are willing and able to accept the recordings, because not all archives may be kitted out to looking after sound recordings. So have these conversations beforehand. The Oral History Society's website has got region network representatives that are able to give advice to people setting out on projects. They can help you identify the nearest or the most relevant archive where you could deposit, because some stories, some projects that are recorded may well be of interest to national collections. But before you start, it's just worth researching who is likely to be, interested and have those conversations

Julian: it sounds as if we are extremely well provided for in the local area, both with archives that may accept recordings being deposited, but also, I guess all of those places you mentioned are great sources of reference and the ideas, as well as the source of oral histories to listen to, to get an idea of how other people have done it.

Padmini: Absolutely. Hampshire Record Office website has got a catalogue you can search for things. Southampton city council's archives have got some audio recording clips online, a lot of that collection is now being digitized because remember all these organizations that started recording in the 1980s had started on open reel tapes, the analogue open reel tapes and audio cassettes. A lot of that is now retrospectively being digitized by a big national program that's being led by the British Library and the Lottery Fund so Southampton's collection is now being digitized so it'll be easier to access once that process is finished.

It's also worth mentioning new community projects that museums have set up, over the last five to 10 years. Some museums have now started collecting oral histories initially to support their own collections, fill gaps that they have, or to inform exhibitions that they're putting up, but it's worth people asking if they would accept deposits. I can't guarantee that everybody has got the capacity to accept the deposits, but it is worth knowing that there are all these organizations out there that potentially might be interested in what you have.

Julian: Yes. And I guess those organizations might also be able to help with the matter of putting agreements in place, with the interviewee as well.

Padmini: Yes. If you are planning to deposit your recordings with a particular museum, it's best to obviously get their forms and their paperwork to make sure that they don't have to do a huge amount of administration to the collection you're depositing. But if you want to find out about it, what legal aspects you need to be aware of, or you need to draw up your own forms if you run an organization or you're a community group, just thinking of setting up then I would suggest you go to the Oral History Society website, and you have a section on the legal and ethical issues. There is a lot of information about what you need to be aware of, but also examples of forms that you can draw on to create your own documentation as well. So it's worth bearing that in mind. The Oral History Society is the organization for the UK although there are international members of the society as well. A lot of countries have their own particular oral history organisations that can advise on the specifics.

Julian: Are there any copyright issues involved in terms of who owns the recording and who owns the information in the recordings?

Padmini: Yes. The copyright in the actual recording is owned by the organization that is doing the recording, but the interviewee, the narrator, has copyright on the words. This is where the permission form comes in, which is the organization carrying out the recording seeks the permission of the interviewee to pass on the copyright to the organization, under whatever set of criteria that they are willing to allow that the use of their material so that the organization, if you recorded something and deposited it at Hampshire Record Office, for example, if there weren't any permission document then every time Hampshire Record Office needed to use that content, they would have to come back to the interviewee to get that permission. And this is where the permission form sets out how that organization may use the material. And that is what the interviewee signs to give that permission.

Julian: You've provided some fascinating insight and advice and guidance into making oral histories. I've certainly learned a lot. Are there any other aspects that you think we haven't covered so far?

Padmini: One of the things that's exciting with oral history now, compared to when I first started, we were still using audio cassettes and things. And so what we could do with the content was much more limited or time consuming. When I worked in Southampton we produced a lot of publications entirely based on oral testimony on a number of topics, or we had them in exhibitions, but as digital technology has allowed us to use them in much more exciting ways.

You now have things, not just on the internet, but also we're now able to use them in all sorts of other ways. Like in Southampton, if people are familiar with the Holyrood church, which is down in the High Street, it's essentially a ruined church, which was bombed out. And there are two sound posts where you can listen to little clips of memories of what the church was like before it was bombed, what the area was like. There's also a Titanic Memorial there, so there are little clips of memories of the Titanic, people who survived or people in the town who lost family members.

Similarly, there are audio benches in all sorts of places, where you can sit down and listen to the audio of somewhere outdoors. The Ford Transit plant interviews that we did a while ago, there is actually an audio post on the site of the old Ford factory in Swaythling where you can go and listen to some of the clips from the interviews.

In fact, in Bishop's Waltham there is an audio bench where you can go and listen to some of the clips about memories of Bishop's Waltham. There are all sorts of other creative ways, there's a lot of artists who use oral histories to interpret in creative ways. So whether there is an artwork or whether it's poetry. Last year, the year before, students from an art college had looked at the collections at the British Library and had interpreted it in the most amazing ways, you know, with the Sonic quilt, where you could press things on a quilt and listen to extracts. There's another project up in London that used 360 video to talk about an area of London and it puts you in that space. You're listening. It's kind of a very immersive experience. I think that's quite an exciting development that there are now audio tours where you can put your headphones on and you walk around as you listen to memories of the site or the specific point that you are standing in. What that means is that oral history doesn't remain in an archive, it is being shared much more widely and more people are getting involved not only, sharing their stories, but also in creation and dissemination of the material.

Julian: That's brilliant. It really sounds as if technology is helping to bring history alive in the context where it belongs. Padmini, thanks for all of your insights into making oral histories. And I'm very much hoping that some of our listeners will have been inspired to record their own oral histories or those of friends, family, or colleagues. If you'd like to know more about some of the useful reference sources that are available take a look at the Hampshire HistBites website.

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.