

HCT Digital 2021- Recording Oral Histories

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Why do we record Oral Histories?

We record oral histories because they allow people whose voices might not otherwise be heard to share their experiences.

Oral Histories secure memories that are at risk of being lost and they bring new perspectives and challenge existing views by giving voice to people who are excluded from traditional historical records.

They allow us to document both enduring and changing culture in places and communities, and to record shifts in their practices, and are particularly important in preserving customs, dialects, and ways of speaking.

When is history happening?

Now. We just don't think of it that way while it's happening. Projects that capture current events are as useful as projects that aim for a point far away in time. Capturing moments while they're happening is an important part of putting unheard voices and experiences into the public record.

For example, if you ask somebody in a year's time about their experience with Lockdown you'll get different answers to if you asked them today.

Preparing to Interview

Decide on a Topic

What will the focus of your Oral History Recording activities be?

Projects often focus on local subjects although national subjects can also be interesting to research. Topics like entertainment history, historic skills and trades, changes in the landscape or the history of a specific building are often popular.

Research Your Topic

Most Oral History projects begin with a clear research topic. This might be the history of a particular building, of a traditional event, or of a particular era. Research your topic beforehand and prepare questions.

You might wish to conduct an 'open' interview where the interviewee reminisces generally about their life, this makes research more difficult to target. For that reason 'open' interviews are best conducted by people with a reasonable knowledge of the area's history.

Choose an Interviewee

Ideas for potential interviewees will usually come when you define the research topic. Some Oral History researchers recommend picking interviewees who aren't an obvious first choice.

Don't always choose older interviewees, talking to a range of ages can give your project greater depth and breadth. Interviewing young people can give create the opportunity to return for further interviews in years or decades to come.

Of course, who you choose will depend on the nature and scope of your project, but remember that everybody has a story to tell!

Prepare Paperwork

You should download the paperwork pack from the HCT website. If you're unsure of how to complete the Recording Agreement forms or the Project Information sheets then please contact Viv Cooling, the HCT Digital Project Manager.

The pack contains a checklist that will help you to prepare.

Make sure that you have printed off *two* Recording Agreement forms and completed your part of the information. Make sure that you have enough Synopsis and Notes pages printed, and take an extra copy of the Project Information pages.

Fill in the cover sheet:

This page should stay at the front of all the paperwork that you create as part of this interview. When you decide a Recording Number this should be noted at the bottom of **every** sheet. If you are completing most of the documents electronically then you can edit the Recording Number in the footer so that

Interviewee Name	<i>The name of the person being interviewed</i>
Interview Location	<i>Where is the interview being held?</i>
Interview Date	<i>Time, date and year of the interview</i>
Interviewer Name	<i>The name of the person performing the interview</i>
Project Name	<i>The name of the project, e.g. "Solihull Gasworks Memories Project"</i>
Recording Number	<i>Ahead of time give the interview recording a unique number. This number must be noted on all sheets related to the interview and particularly on the Recording Agreement.</i> <i>A good way to generate numbers is to use the project initials followed by YY MM DD HH, or year, month, day, hour. An interview for the project above, conducted on 17th January 2021 at 3pm would be</i> <i>SGMP-21-01-17-15</i>

Edit the Project Information pages

All invited interviewees should receive a copy of your Project Information pages before they agree to be recorded. You should take extra copies of these to the interview in case the interviewee wishes to read them again.

There are three sections that you may wish to edit: 'Who will conduct the research?', 'What is the purpose of the research?' and 'Why have I been invited?'. If you would like help with completing these sections for your own project then please contact Vivienne Cooling at vcooling@hct.org.uk

Get Recording Equipment

Each community group has been provided with a Zoom H1n portable, digital audio recorder for conducting interviews. This is supplied with a wind cover for recording outside, an expanded memory card to allow greater storage, and a pack of rechargeable AAA batteries with a suitable charger.

Full instructions on using the Zoom H1n to record interviews is available in a separate document, for support with this or any other technical problems please contact mike@frithheritage.org

We advise against making recordings on personal devices like mobile phones and tablets. The batteries in these devices aren't made for such constant use, their storage space may not be great enough for long recordings, and the data they record can be subject to remote quality sampling in other legal territories by the operating system provider and other permitted parties.

Interview Location

Find somewhere accessible, comfortable and quiet to make your recordings.

Common venues for Oral History recording sessions are community centres and libraries because they're usually accessible and well-known. Their downside is that they can be busy, full of interruptions, and noisy – even libraries! Both interviewee concentration and recording quality can be affected by the sound of doors, footsteps on stairs or the floor above, the dance class next door, busses coming and going outside your window, and so on. Visit the venue beforehand if you're able and ensure that the space is suitable for your interview.

Make sure that everybody will have somewhere comfortable to sit and that the room will be warm enough. Forewarn the interviewee if there will be no facility to get drinks, and make preparations yourself if appropriate. If there are no toilet facilities then you should strongly consider holding the interviews elsewhere.

Conducting the Interview

Ensure that the room is prepared, that your interviewee is comfortable, and begin the recording.

Introduction

Begin with a spoken introduction that says who is present, where they are, and the topic of the interview. You might say *"This is an Oral History interview with **interviewee name** at the **venue name** as part of a project looking at **the topic subject**. The date is today's date and the time is current time"*.

Interviewee Comfort

Interviews can be mentally and physically tiring for participants. It is very important to remain conscious of the emotional and physical comfort of your interviewee at all times – be prepared to pause, suspend or abandon the interview if necessary.

Making Notes

Use the Synopsis sheet to make notes, particularly when the interviewee changes theme or when you ask one of your numbered, prepared questions. Use the audio recorder screen to find the time, and make a corresponding note. For example:

Time	Notes
1.51	Q1
3.19	Being evacuated
4.49	First ever banana
18.10	Q3
18.50	Air raids



Give Encouragement

Interviewees will often give detailed, factual memories but may not volunteer information about how they felt at the time. You should always think to ask “*what was that like?*” or “*how did that feel?*”.

While the interviewee is talking be encouraging, nod and demonstrate interest. Don’t engage in debate or discussion and, however difficult it may be to listen without interjecting, don’t challenge the interviewee on their views.

Leave a pause and let interviewees think. They may not have finished remembering or answering!

Working through questions

Mark questions as asked, and note the time you ask them on the Synopsis sheet. Cross questions out if the interviewee answers them without prompting.

Concluding the Interview

Conclude by giving the same information that you started with, eg “*This is an Oral History interview with **interviewee name** at the **venue name** as part of a project looking at **the topic subject**. The date is today’s date and the time is current time*”. Make sure to thank the interviewee.

Interviewee Wellbeing

Speaking about memories, particularly those that haven’t been recalled for a long time, can be an emotionally tiring and distressing experience. Take some time to ensure that the interviewee is calm and settled. Don’t be in a rush.

The Recording Agreement

This is the time when you must ask the interviewee to sign the Recording Agreement. Be prepared to discuss your project with them again if necessary. Have two prepared Recording Agreements for the interviewee to sign if they agree to submit their interview to your project. Complete both copies and give one to the interviewee to keep.

Further Contact

Ensure that the interviewee has the correct details for contacting you or your project. Explain whether or not you will make a follow-up contact and, if so, when.

Thank the interviewee again, and make it clear that their contribution is an important part of the project.

Summarising and Archiving the Interview

Complete your interview notes while your memory is fresh. Your own observations are an essential part of the interview data, the longer you wait to write them down the greater the chance of losing an important observation.

Make a backup of the interview recording

You must make a backup before playing or editing the interview recording. The Zoom H1n is easy to transfer recordings from, you will find the full instructions in a separate document. Contact mike@frithheritage.org if you are having technical difficulties with the Zoom H1n recorder.

Complete Synopsis

You must listen to the interview in full to ensure that it is usable. Review and edit your Synopsis document as you do this.

Contact mike@frithheritage.org if you feel there are audio problems with your recording.

Edit the Recording

You may want to trim the ends from your recording, you might wish to redact references to third parties, or you may have been asked to redact whole sections of the interview. All of these edits are okay to do.

You must *not* make any edits that might be construed as changing the meaning of the speaker’s words, and you must only cut out sections of speech if the speaker has specifically asked to have those sections redacted.

For editing audio files the HCT Digital Project recommends using **Audacity**, a free open-source audio editor. An instruction document for doing this is available on the HCT website.

Submit Your Recording for Archiving

All recordings can be archived at the HCT Website and will be available to the public for searching and listening. We are also exploring the possibility of a number of recordings being selected for inclusion in the British Library digital archives, this will be discussed with you in more detail when submissions are uploaded.