



Podcast by
Windsor & Royal Borough Museum

Stay Tuned on Oral History

Introduction

Becky: Hello and welcome to Windsor and Royal Borough Museum's third podcast episode. This one will be a little different from the last, as instead of telling you hidden histories will be discussing the value of oral histories to museums. Ever wondered what oral history really is or how to record someone's life stories for the future- a relative perhaps? Well stick around to find out as I speak to two guests- my colleague Steph who is a Museum, Arts and Local Studies Officer at the Windsor and Royal Borough Museum and Stephen, who has been actively involved in oral history for over 50 years.

In its broadest sense, oral history can be defined as recording people's memories, life experiences and opinions, based on any of their memories of the past. It usually takes three main forms: the topic-based interview- which focuses on a theme or one phase in a life; the life story - which records a whole life from childhood to the present; or, the search for oral traditions, of, say, a family or community - which explores memories of the past handed down orally between generations, and is often information not previously written down anywhere. Here at the Windsor and Royal Borough Museum we strongly believe that oral history is a powerful means of documenting local history. It allows us to record multiple perspectives of the same event and to archive the stories of those who might not otherwise have their experiences included in the historical record. The inclusion of oral histories in our galleries and online also allows local residents to learn from one another. By listening to an oral history, an individual is consulting a primary source and by listening to its content, tone and hesitations, they can interpret their own meanings about the past. We want to empower our local community to be able to actively interpret their own shared past, and so this is why we have created a podcast series specifically to share the oral histories we hold. We are experimenting with styles for each episode but in every one of them we aim to tell national stories through the local lens of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, but importantly, we want you to be able to learn from the individuals who know the Borough best- its residents. Now having said this, in this episode we want to take the time to tell you more about our oral history project, discuss the value of using oral histories in museums, and offer advice to anyone thinking of starting up their own oral history project.



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Many of our histories were collected as part of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead's 'Beyond the Castle Walls' project between which ran between 2012 and 2014 and was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Funded.

I will now talk to Steph who worked on the 'Beyond the Castle Walls' project as Project Research Assistant.

Interview with Steph

Becky: Hi Steph. Thank you for being on the podcast. Would you be able to explain what the Beyond the Castle Walls project was and what its aims were?

Steph: Hi Becky, thanks for asking me to join you, it's very kind of you. The Windsor & Royal Borough Museum was awarded £250,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund to develop the interpretation of Windsor Guildhall and open up the local heritage of Windsor to a wide range of audiences. The project was designed to look at local lives as opposed to Royalty and that's why it was given the name Beyond the Castle Walls.

The main aims were to involve local people with their local heritage, enhance the history of the Windsor Guildhall and the Windsor & Royal Borough Museum collection and to work with local schools to develop learning opportunities.

£250,000 was a significant sum for a small local authority museum and creating an oral history archive of 50 interviews formed a central part of this project, so the pressure was really on to complete the project within the two-year time frame.

Myself and a colleague Alice were employed for two years to make the project happen. We used our collecting policy to identify themes for the interviews and also considered geographical spread to capture stories from the whole of the Borough.

Becky: That's great. Thank you for explaining. I'm just interest to know what were your experiences of working on the project and what did you learn and what did you enjoy?

Steph: We recruited 8 volunteers to help with the oral history side of the project alone. The team was trained by the Oral History Society and fulfilled



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roles such as interviewing, operating the sound equipment, transcribing, editing and copying the interviews. We were amazed at how many people applied to volunteer with us. Many had lots of skills to offer but the most interesting discovery was that some didn't want to work within the comfort zone of their skill set. They actually wanted training to help further their career or a chance to learn something new. One fully qualified archivist for example wanted to be an interviewer!

It can be quite daunting being interviewed, so investing in training at the outset was really beneficial to put the interviewee at ease and as a result the feedback we received from interviewees was that everyone felt relaxed and actually enjoyed the experience, so we must have got that bit right!

The interviewers were pleased that others would be able to hear the stories that had been told to them and that these would be preserved for generations to come.

For one volunteer, being involved opened up a whole interest in history for them...They actually admitted that they'd lived in Windsor for 40 years and had never visited Windsor Castle let alone the museum until they started the project.

For me, well, my role was to project manage the whole thing. I used to work for the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council – which is now part of the Arts Council – and managed lots of different grant programmes for regional museums but I'd never actually managed a project of this scale within a museum before, so it was a real test of my skills...and of course I learnt many new ones. I particularly enjoyed hearing from the volunteers when they came back from an interview. The excitement of hearing a story first hand was evident – I sometimes wished I could have accompanied them on an interview but my time was stretched to help deliver other parts of the Beyond the Castle Walls Project – organising large-scale events throughout the decades and dressing up in 20's and 80's gear!

Becky: Wow that sounds like a lot of fun and definitely every busy two years for you all but definitely worth it because we've got some amazing oral histories from it. Can you explain actually how the museum currently uses the oral histories collected and how we might use them in the future?

Steph: Sure, well we have a wonderful archive of oral history interviews which we can draw on now. The touch screen in the museum space at the Guildhall is used to host short interview clips, one of which is John Mansfield



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recounting his memories of setting up the Ricky Tick Club in Windsor during the 1960s and how he came to book the Rolling Stones to first play at the club in December 1962. I bet not many people know that they played there 28 times! John sadly passed away last year but his story lives on. That's a really important part of our local, national and international history that we can preserve for future generations.

Another clip that we've used was from a local resident Doreen Crowhurst. She describes being evacuated from London to Windsor at the start of the Second World War. When I first listened to her story, I had tears in my eyes as it's such an emotional recount of how she was separated from her parents as such a young age. We used her clip to recreate a performance for Windsor & Eton's Living Advent Calendar Window. Visitors were taken back in time and had a little glimpse into what the journey would have been like for her that day.

And of course, the Coronavirus pandemic has given us the opportunity to use more clips from our collection in podcasts which I think is a really great way for listeners to gain a better understanding of an event or a time in our history. The podcast you've created *Becky, Out and About Windsor's shops*, is a great way for people to reminisce about times gone by whilst they spend more time in their homes.

Becky: Thank you Steph. That's what I hoped they would do. So, we're still actively collecting oral histories. Can you explain the process of this and whose stories we would like to collect?

Steph: Yeah sure. We are absolutely still collecting oral histories. We'd love to hear from anyone who has lived, worked or spent time in any area of the Royal Borough who feel they have a story to tell. It could be about their connection or involvement to the local area or about their own achievements, experiences or witness to a historical event for example.

We'd also love to capture people's experiences of the current pandemic. What has lockdown been like for people? We'd love to hear from people who have been working on the front line, people who have been furloughed or even A-level students who have missed their exams. Or even people who are working from home and home schooling at the same time because that's quite challenging. I know that from experience. It's important that we collect their stories of this time so that our future generations can better understand this period of history we are currently living through.



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Becky: How can people contact us regarding being interviewed? (obviously when life returns to more of a normality)

Steph: Yes, obviously we aren't yet in a position to carry out the interviews effectively to get a high-quality sound. So, my advice would be for people to keep a diary or write some notes down about how you are feeling that you can refer back to when we can get out to do interviews again. These documents in themselves could also be included in our archive to enrich the interviews even further. We've actually set up a Facebook group called the Royal Borough Memory Box which invites people who live and work in the Royal Borough to share their photos or other digital content with us to preserve for the future so I'm hoping this will encourage people to join that group.

However, we know that not everyone is on Facebook so you can also email us at museum@rbwm.gov.uk if you have an interesting story to tell through an oral history interview and it's the same address if you have any digital content you would like to share with us.

Becky: That's brilliant. Thank you, Steph, for being on the podcast.

Interview with Stephen

Becky: I will now talk to Stephen Simmons who led on conducting interviews for the Beyond the Castle Walls project. Stephen as a child growing up in Leicester, used to play at interviewing with his friend Ivan (who owned a Grundig tape recorder) – copying what they saw on TV news & current affairs programmes. Later, Jack Simmons, Professor of History at Leicester University, suggested Stephen read “Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay” by George Evans and RG Collingwood’s “The Idea of History”.

Stephen started interviewing seriously for oral history while a dental student in 1964 and has continued ever since. He used oral history techniques while working in the NHS, to improve the quality of care. He was lead for oral history at British Dental Association, Windsor & Royal Borough Museum and Surrey History Centre, and he is a Long-standing member of Oral History Society.

Becky: Hi Stephen, thank you for being on the podcast. I know you have a wealth of experience conducting oral histories, so to begin, could you tell us



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how you approach conducting an oral history? And what your main considerations are when doing so?

Stephen: Hello Becky, yes, the first question has to be what are we trying to achieve. We're not just trying to build an archive. It's to do something useful, something informative, educational or entertaining or preferably all three, but I'm afraid that without some idea of what we're looking for we are rather unlikely to find it. That said we mustn't be so focused that we overlook the treasures under our noses. Oral history narratives are extremely rich sources of information. You never know for sure what you'll find when you start exploring people's lives. Bit like archaeology really, only without the ground penetrating radar, but when we suggest to someone that we would like to interview them they quite often say to us 'oh well but nobody would be interested in my story, it's very ordinary, I mean really it's just the same as lots of others', to which we would generally reply 'well look you are a witness to the past. Our past was once your present and what may have seemed very ordinary and commonplace to people in the past might seem quite extraordinary and different now and we don't want to lose sight of what life was like in the past so we would like you to help us understand what it was like and also what do you make of it now looking back. You never know it might be a guide to the future'.

Becky: Brilliant, so if we are hoping to conduct research into recent history what aspects should be considered before we start?

Stephen: Well, it's a question of management of the project. It might need funds. You need to know the legal and ethical constraints. You might need to recruit volunteers. You might need links to other departments. There's administration of the project, there's auditing the project to see where all the interviews are at (are they planned, are they done). There's paperwork, lots of paperwork, consents, agreements, there's a lot of communication often with families of the interviewee particularly if they are elderly. There's schedules and equipment to maintain as well. There's research. We need to have some background and context generally speaking. For historical work there's sampling- we want a very diverse sample if we can get it and that means screening potential interviewees to see if they're going to be helpful to us. We need interviewers- generally people that can conduct a topic-based interview or a life history, and that generally requires some training. We need recordists and people who can post process the recordings. We want to enhance the quality of clips from the interviews that we can put on a CD or on the website. We might want equipment checked over. We want analysts, people who can



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carry out the different types of analysis that oral history can be subjected to. It might be at an archetypal life story that we're using or it might be a thematic or topic-based analysis. It might be the conventional traditional historical thesis which has evidence to support it and evidence to refute it and we come to a conclusion at the end. It might be narrative analysis where we're interested not just in the story but in how it's told. Not many people do. That's quite difficult. Might be bricolage where we take clips from different interviews to tell the story. Very entertaining, very informative. There's archiving the collection. Somebody has to curate all the material, the recordings, documents, the photographs, maybe even artefacts, and the archivist also takes decisions about making the information accessible to the public, what form it will take in terms of information technology, what formats will be used and so on, and then finally there's the products from all this- the booklets, the CDs, the podcasts, the websites, the displays, the articles in the local paper, some even write community plays with it. Then there's its role in the virtual exhibition of a digital museum, so there's quite a few things to think about before we actually press the red record button.

Becky: Wow! Yeah it sounds like there's definitely a lot to consider, and so when you are interviewing what are your main considerations at that point?

Stephen: Well I think Becky, first thing is to establish rapport. We try to do that before the interview and of course during the interview rapport is quite important to reduce the interviewer effect. There's a large literature on how interviewers unintentionally can affect what interviewees say so they change things slightly to give the interviewer what they think the interviewer would like to hear. Can be quite subtle. As I said before we need diversity of interviewees. It's very important when we're dealing with subjectivity, and the word interview means a comparison of views so we need interviewers to be sensitive at detecting and understanding differences between the interviewer's perspective and the interviewees perspective. We have to acknowledge there is shared authority between the interviewer and the interviewee, particularly with regard to interpretation of content, but it also means following the interviewees train of thought until it stops. I mean after all even if the interviewer has read everything there is to know about social history between the wars, one has to acknowledge that the interviewee is the world expert on their memories of their own life experience.

Becky: Of course, I really like that and it's really important to remember. So, to help the interviews go more smoothly, do you need to do preliminary research beforehand?



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Stephen: For some types of projects, naivety can be very useful in ensuring that we ask the sort of questions that most people being non specialists would like to have answered. For historical projects, I would say yes, some preliminary research. I mean the more you know the more you can find out, but it takes skill and self-control not to use this knowledge to dominate the interview-that's pretty important.

Becky: That's really interesting. Are there any other things that you need to watch out for when interviewing?

Stephen: Yes, we generally prefer plausible stories and plausible stories can drive out truth. Extraordinary things happen to people, extraordinary coincidences and we need to be just aware that, that can happen we need to also develop and practise the skill at exploring significant but sensitive issues. We need to learn how to recover from digressions without losing report. You can't tell an interviewer 'we've had enough stop that now'. You have to keep report going while recovering from a digression. We have to be aware of the risk of stirring traumatic memory. For example, when we come to interview people about the COVID-19 pandemic, we may well encounter traumatic memory in people who have lost loved ones. For example, it might be the interviewee or it might be the interviewer, so I think we have to be careful about traumatic memory.

Becky: Of course, and so does it matter therefore if there's periods of silence in the interview?

Stephen: We need to make use of silence because it allows time for the interviewee to reflect. I mean even if it's an awkward silence people often stop talking and then think of something else to say, so it's really important when the interviewees stopped talking not to rush in with the next question. They might have something else to add.

Becky: What can you do if you don't get a response that answers the question you've asked?

Stephen: Well Becky, if the answer would be of great historical value, then we need to find another way to ask the same question. I agree that there is a balance of how many times you can nag people with the same question. Personally, I never ask the same question in different ways more than five times, but I've had it work and elicit some really important stuff after five



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questions. We're not TV interviewers who are asking a politician exactly the same question 11 times for example.

Becky: And are there any special ways of phrasing questions?

Stephen: Yes, the general principal is don't ask leading questions which have the answer built in. Of course, we use open ended questions first- 'so can you tell me about your childhood? where you were born and grew up?'. Nice and open ended. We then move on to closed questions as follow ups. For example, 'can you tell me which primary school did you go to? when was that?' and so on. Follow ups are very important to establish the context of a story; to anchor events in time; to seek more evidence for opinions; and then of course there are the sensitive topics for which we tend to use what's known as a prefaced question. It explains to people that of course 'you know you don't have to answer this but there is a question that does arise quite naturally from what you've been saying and an answer would help enlighten future generations'.

Becky: I'm interested to know, how does one take account for the tricks of memory when interviewing? For example, how can you be sure someone is recalling an individual memory vs recalling a public memory about an event, and also we tend to refine our memories into neat stories that we repeat over and over or even recall memories differently according to the time we are remembering and can be influenced more by our opinions in the present than in the past, so how do you get beyond these factors when interviewing to perhaps remember other details?

Stephen: Most people have their own bunch of techniques that they have used and are comfortable with. My techniques are based on a method known as cognitive interviewing which was developed by two psychologists, Ed Geiselman and Ron Fisher roundabout 1984. Essentially you stay in the witness' sensory mode. If the interview is talking about what they heard, you can ask 'did you hear anything else'. You don't switch to 'or did you see anything'. Never interrupt the interview, never. Using props is very useful. Prompts will be photographs, documents, artifacts which prompt memory. We try to use only the most recent utterance and if we encounter a frozen anecdote that could be important- a frozen anecdote is a Storey that's been told lots of times possibly a bit embellished- and you'd like to try and get at the reality behind it we can ask the interviewee to start the story from a different place in the story. Perhaps take the story backwards or start in the middle and so on. This technique, cognitive interviewing, is one



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of the very few interviewing techniques that has been tested empirically in the laboratory and in the field and achieves maximum volume and accuracy of recall. The technique was originally commissioned by the Los Angeles police force for interviewing witnesses. I mean in addition to all that, of course one could later triangulate what the interviewee says from other sources and to seek corroboration or reputation, but the thing about all this is the effect of public memory in distorting facts can itself be quite useful if you are an historian wanting explanations of some historical behavioural or sentiment. I mean as you know historians like to ask what happened, and they particularly like to ask when it happened, and where it happened, and how it happened, and who was involved, and historians also like to ask why did it happen, and so an historical account is not just about what factually happened. I mean that matters of course, but if also we want a complete historical account, we want to know what people at the time thought was happening as well the reason for it. Unlike you know, cause and effect between inanimate objects, human actions are generally purposive, aiming to obtain some ends or goals, so it can't be completely described and accounted for without considering what those motivating ends were and oral history has turned out to be a pretty good way of investigating.

Becky: Wow, that's really interesting and something you might not initially think about when approaching oral history, but I guess it's so important to remember that memory is a fluid, evolving process and consider how that might affect the stories you hear. I'm now going to ask you some questions about how oral history and public history relate to each other, and so to begin what general benefits does oral history bring to a museum or an archive's offering to the public?

Stephen: It's very flexible, digital recordings are very flexible. I mean you could make an informed guide to historic parts of the town- people can access it on their mobile phones or it could even be triggered by GPS or by QR codes around the place. Within the museum itself you can of course produce an informed guide to exhibits in the museum itself. We're living in a digital age. Museums now are expecting to have virtual visitors, worldwide audience visiting their websites to be informed, educated through the collection, so a digitised collection can replicate, it can extend and it can supplement the physical collection. This layered approach, I think we're going to see very much more of. I think even during the pandemic we could do a digital visit to Windsor museum from the comfort of our own home.



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Becky: I definitely agree. I think that is how things are going to be moving forward and I think as well, thinking about archiving for future generations, a major benefit that we've found is that the oral histories fill gaps in the historical record. For instance, many of the interviewees talk about how they've seen Windsor change through their lifetime which are observations not captured in the written records we hold and similarly we don't have extensive evidence in our material collections about experiences of the residents in Windsor during the Second World War but now thanks to the oral history project we have multiple accounts and were able to use them to create a podcast to commemorate the 75th anniversary of VE day, and I know the oral history we hold of Mrs Frances Rye is internationally significant and Steven you conducted that interview so I was just wondering if maybe you could explain to us its significance?

Stephen: Yes Françoise, Mrs Rye. Her mother came to this country from France. Her mother was a couturier and work for Norman Hartnell. Her mother was a brilliant couturier, known as la premiere in the fashion business and she made the Queen's wedding dress and Coronation dress. She sent her daughter Françoise home to the grandparents. In the summer of 1939 war was declared and poor Françoise could not make it back to England because she was just over 7, she was regarded under the law as an enemy alien and was arrested and sent to a concentration camp where she would certainly have died. Her family kicked up a big fuss. They got her reclassified as an abandoned child rather than enemy alien and then she came back to the family and spent the war going to school in Brittany. She saw Allied planes going overhead to bomb submarine pens on the Atlantic coast and she also witnessed something quite extraordinary. She said that one day they were called out to fields which were crawling with Colorado beetles eating the potato crop, and it was known that the Allies did not use biological warfare, but somebody dropped a load of Colorado beetles on their potato crop, and we subsequently found out that the Americans had shipped, I think it was 30 tubs of Colorado beetles to the United Kingdom for research. It's possible that this research was dropping it on the enemy food supplies to see what happened. So that was something of quite importance to understanding what was done during the war. Yes, that was her story. Quite remarkable.

Becky: That's so fascinating and really shows how powerful oral history can be as well in filling out those historical gaps in the record, and we're just so lucky to have her interview in our collection. It's a wonderful insight into the Second World War. Would you also be able to tell us about the Sydney



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Came story which is also something that has come out of the oral history project and is pretty interesting in itself?

Stephen: Yes well, in 1912 Sydney Camm was 19 years old and at the age of 19 he had trained as a Carpenter and he started at age 19 the Windsor model aeroplane club which was in Alma Road and it backed onto his premises and backed onto the Borough Surveyor's Office and Depot in Alma Rd. The Borough surveyor was Mr Strickland. Aged 20 he became a Carpenter. He started his job as a Carpenter with Martinsyde Aircraft company at 20. 12 years later he was the chief designer of aircraft for Hawker Siddeley. Altogether he designed 52 different types of aircraft of which 26 thousand were manufactured. He of course designed the Hurricane and later on he contributed to the Harrier Jump Jet, a vertical take-off and landing craft which was an amazing engineering achievement. Now a question is, I've spoken to one or two aeronautical engineers about this. They tell me that designing a plane from scratch is a very difficult thing to do. Even adapting a plane is a very hard thing to do, I mean take the Boeing 737 Max which had two tragic crashes after being adapted. Having your own model aeroplane club, they acknowledged was a start, but in no way would it give you the solid engineering foundation that you need to design a real plane that carries people safely aloft and even more to design a plane that pushes the boundaries of what's possible. So where did Sidney Camm get his aeronautical engineering expertise? We had an interview with Rodger Collingham and the Worshipful Mayor Eileen Quick and the topic came up of Patrick Young Alexander who lived at 28 St Mark's Road. He came to Windsor in 1907 at the age of 40 and he endowed the Imperial Service College in Alma Road with a fully equipped up to date modern aeronautical engineering laboratory. Imperial College was in Alma Road. Sydney Camm lived in Alma road and Patrick Alexander gave Sydney Camm permission to use a fully equipped modern aeronautical engineering laboratory as a young man. I just want to add that Roger Cunningham's father Gordon wrote the defensive biography of Patrick Young Alexander who was a pioneer and patron of aviation and it was a missing piece of the jigsaw that really came out during the interview.

Becky: That's brilliant. I just think it's so amazing that an oral history can really add to the story of someone who arguably has been studied quite a lot locally. Again, just testament to the power of oral history as we said before. Going slightly back to oral history and its value in public history, how exactly can oral histories enhance the display or artefacts in a museum or library?



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Stephen: Well if you've got an audio commentary on artefacts it means that you're no longer confined to describing the significance of an artefact in fewer than 30 words with many abbreviations in a tiny font faint lettering on a small card placed next to the object at the back of some big glass cabinet, visitors crowding round the cabinet waiting their turn to struggle to read the little legends. This is a terrible experience. I've had it many times. Oral history can bring an authentic provenance to the context of an artefact giving it significance in depth. I mean the voice could be the voice of an expert or an eyewitness and it could enhance the accuracy of what's being conveyed. There's nothing like hearing about an object from someone who's used it for 25 years or someone who studied it for 25 years. You can convey several voices which either corroborate each other or challenge views so that we can build a sense of reliability into the account. Oral history is often subjective and a collection of interviews can be subjective and of course unlike the evidence from letters, journals, diaries, and documents, in oral history we can actually question the author about the words they utter- 'what did you mean by that? what makes you say that?'. It's very important I think that historical truth is not just evidenced in diaries, letters and dodgy dossiers; all of which are written with some intention or other. I think also an oral history account can bring human interest to an artefact because when people talk about artefacts that they are connected to we hear stories of great humour or great courage or great achievement or sometimes great self-sacrifice, great human interest. Sometimes of course, the oral history can bring a unique account- someone just happened to be in the right place at the right time and saw or heard things that no one else did and they can tell you for example, if they were the finder of the object, how they found it and that could be a very interesting story and of course there's the expert and all the rest of it who could talk having studied it, so I think oral history can enhance the experience of viewing artefacts in a museum.

Becky: Oh, I 100% agree and I think also what's great about having oral histories in your collection is that, well for us at the Windsor and Royal Borough Museum anyway, it's allowed us to maximise on the limited space we have and embed an additional layer of knowledge through including the oral histories in our audio trail, and in terms of local museums I think there's something very relatable and authentic about listening to the voice of somebody who has grown up in your area or lived there and having them be the ones tell you about the past in the local area. A sort of like shared authority I guess develops where it's not just a curator telling you what you should know about the past but rather the community is teaching each other and we hope for local residents listening to our audio trail it encourages



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people to reflect on their own lived experiences and thoughts about their locality and perhaps what they would say if they were being interviewed and for visitors to our Museum who have come from afield, like you were saying earlier, there is still something so engaging about hearing a person tell their stories in their own words. Sorry I went on a bit of a tangent there, but I guess another important question is what are the limits of using oral history in public history? For example, is it dependent on technology or other factors?

Stephen: Yes Becky, an investment is needed to give visitors access to an audio commentary. There are now many types of handsets and sophisticated ultrasonic sound areas and so on but people also have mobile phones and they can visit websites or read QR codes or have it triggered by GPS locations and it can work indoors or outdoors. We are limited obviously to exploring history within living memory. We want people with first-hand experience. Oral history is largely about eyewitness accounts. We can explore eyewitness accounts. It's very much harder to explore hearsay for example. I think the techniques of all history can be quite demanding for those of us who find it difficult to walk and chew gum at the same time. It can be quite difficult to interview and operate the equipment at the same time so I think two person teams can be helpful and also nowadays they provide some security and safeguarding for the interviewee and the interviewer but some people feel that having a two-person team results in lost report compared to a one to one dialogue. Haven't found that myself. Reminiscence is valuable in its own right and even therapeutic, and although it is skilful, it perhaps needs less preparation, post processing and analysis than historical research, but to produce testament of value to an historian one needs to think deeply about the project and maybe seek some training. I think oral history makes great demands on the interviewer who really has to listen hard to what's being said and what's not being said or being skipped over and it's pretty tiring actually. I think the task of capturing a coherent meaningfully collection of stories and turning them into a play or a booklet or a podcast or a guided walk or anything is labour intensive, and we do need volunteers to help us, volunteers with creative talents. The analysis of oral histories to produce an accessible index of themes and concepts is also labour intensive. Very rewarding for future research, publications, talks, bricolage, podcasts. The main aim of projects is not to create an archive but to use the material to inform, educate and entertain, and I think historical oral history works very well when it is combined with other sources of evidence and sometimes oral history just takes time before the true significance of an interviews content becomes clear after listening to it several times over a couple of years or listening to it in the light on another interview that you did



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two years after the first one and you begin to see a theme emerging. For example, suddenly for the third time you hear the interviewee telling how her grandmother was evicted from the Tide cottage after her grandfather was killed in the war or so badly injured, he couldn't work and you think to yourself hang on there is a social history theme here or is there? The theme of keeping jobs open for people coming back from the war that arose from listening to oral histories and realising hang on there is a theme coming out here. So those I think are some of the limitations of actually using oral history for public history.

Becky: Wow! That's all really interesting. Thank you, Stephen. So, if an institution or group wanted to start an oral history project, is it worth the effort and what are the benefits to such a project?

Stephen: Is it worth the effort? Sometimes I wonder myself [laughs] Yes, we do build links with the community because it is the communities voice that we are recording and of course we do give skills to people. Sometimes volunteers come with enormous skill and we're very grateful for them. We have incredible people as volunteers, but I think the skills people acquire are very helpful to them and it give the community some control over their own heritage.

Becky: On that note, are there any resources that people can consult and how could they go about starting an oral history project?

Stephen: Well I think a good place to start is to look at the Oral History Society's website, maybe contact their regional representatives. There is also quite a lot of free online guidance on oral history, especially the American website. I think if people are going to do it and undertake an oral history of their community then I think they might want to consider sharing their collection they create with a local museum or archive and for that to happen there has to be some agreement or recording format and characteristics and so on, but sharing with a local museum could be a useful thing to do.

Becky: That's a really good point and we very much love our collection that we have, and I think it adds so much value to our museum. Thank you so much Stephen for coming on the podcast and sharing your experiences and your expertise. We will add the relevant links to the resources mentioned by Stephen in the description of the podcast.



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Stephen: Thank you Becky

Summing up

Becky: We hope you have enjoyed listening to this podcast and maybe learnt some new things about oral history. If you want to know more about the oral histories we hold or indeed, as Steph mentioned earlier, be interviewed yourself, please don't hesitate to email us at museum@rbwm.gov.uk . Also look out for our next podcast when we will again be discovering hidden histories of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. Thank you for listening and speak to you next time.