



# talking history

The Newsletter of the East Midlands Oral History Archive

## Life and death at EMOHA

Life and death seems a fitting theme for the last EMOHA newsletter. The essence of the oral history interviews in the collections is to record the lives of people and what they experienced, witnessed, or contributed to during their lifetime. The struggle for life against poverty and the many life threatening diseases of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as diphtheria, TB, and polio can be found in often moving accounts, showing how tenuous life could be even in the recent past. A variety of health care professionals have been interviewed over the years and their memories have contributed to edited recordings such as the Leicester Oral History Archive's 'Public Health' and 'Midwife', and books such as 'In Sickness and in Health'. Mrs G. Matthews, a health visitor and nurse, and Alice Hannah both provide informative accounts on health, poverty and childbirth. Here, Mrs Matthews recalls bringing children into the world in less than ideal circumstances:

"Oh yes, because it cost money to go into hospital then. I think really it was a guinea (£1.05) then to go into hospital and be looked after. But then you see, if you've got a whole lot of children, who's going to mind the children while you're in hospital? They never liked the idea. They liked the idea of being at home, in with the family so that when the baby was

born everything was happy and everything would go straightforward. But they had a lot of faith in the midwife of course.

"And of course, looking after the children, they saved from one baby to the next, everything was usually in a drawer and beautifully clean. Or then perhaps we wouldn't have anywhere to put the baby – only in a box or a drawer, when the baby was born. But everything was always beautiful and clean and yet there'd be all these children looking on, you know, hardly clothed as you might say, and yet for the new baby, everything was saved from the one before. This is how they went on.

"Gaslights of course, penny in the slot. And many times if we had two or three cases, went from one to the other, and the last one the penny'd run out, I mean we never carried any money at all, and it was a case of three candles – I delivered a baby with three candles on the shelf. And that was just before it got dark, but we couldn't see a lot, and it was a double bed and it was very dirty... And we always carried newspaper because



you couldn't put your instrument bag down in safety, you might get bugs and you might get fleas. And the same with the woman, you cleaned her up as best you could and put her on clean things as best you could. And we used a lot of newspaper underneath, you see there was no such thing as draw sheets."



Continued from page 1



The life the coal mining industry brought to Northwest Leicestershire, and the nature of life for miners and their families during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been recorded in great detail in the Mantle Collection. The different types of work in the pit, the conditions, wages, and collier's leisure activities are often vividly accounted for as conditions changed in the industry. Dr Shelia Lee, a GP and one of the few women to be allowed down the pit in the 1950s, provides a unique insight into accidents in the pit and the health problems faced by miners and their families. Accounts of the miners' strikes, particularly twenty years ago in 1984, as well as the effects of pit closure and regeneration projects, reflect the impact which is felt on individual's lives, their communities, and towns and villages when a major industry goes into terminal decline.

The way we cope when people have died has changed over the years. Wilf Sawbridge, a Stone Mason in Ellistown, provides a detailed account of the process of burial, along with how he learnt his craft and made a living from monumental masonry. The dangers of industry are evident in accounts of death from industrial accidents and misadventures, and mining and quarrying feature a number of times in this re-

spect. Death in such circumstances as road accidents (including horse driven vehicles), wartime, and even murder can be found in interviews. These people, who feature on the LOHA's 'Public Health', recall the laying out of people in front rooms:

"Yes, and I can always remember when my mother lay dying how they put the straw and the paper in the road. Always remember seeing that. That's so the horses – there weren't many cars – the horses, you couldn't hear the hooves going by."

"If anybody died there was always a woman in the street that used to lay the people out, and put them in the front rooms, and they used to put blackboards up at the window so that you knew somebody was dead. And when we were kids we used to creep round, we were terrified, you know."

"One of the most horrible things, I thought as a child, I should be about ten, and a friend of mine that I used to play about with, she went to go to the hospital with tuberculosis. And she was up there for quite a while... eventually she died and they brought her home. It was at the back of this little shop that was against where we lived, and they'd only got that one room, and it was her grandmother she lived with, and they fetched me in one day when she came home, and I've never forgotten it, she was there in her coffin and it was all sealed up except for a glass panel where you could see her face. And the old lady said to me, she said, if you don't come and see her you'll have her on your mind all your life - but I did go and see her, but I've had her on my mind all my life, you know. I can still see her now this girl, you

know, in her coffin..."

During the life of EMOHA we have taken in a total of 26 Collections, nearly 3,000 recordings, and catalogued over 500 interviews on-line. Preserving and making the interviews available has been a main concern of the archive. This work has ensured that a valuable oral record of everyday life in the counties of Leicestershire and Rutland has been secured for posterity. The collections, offering a view of life and death in their many guises, as well as many other themes, can be listened to at the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, by appointment. Full details of accessing the collections and the catalogue can be found at [www.le.ac.uk/emoha/catalogue.html](http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/catalogue.html).

**Christine Thornhill and Colin Hyde**

### References to recordings

683, LO/050/001 Mrs G. Matthews  
Leicester Oral History Archive  
Collection.

768, LO/132/083 Alice Hannah  
Leicester Oral History Archive  
Collection.

11, MA200/011/011 Wilf Sawbridge  
Mantle Oral History Project  
Collection.

111, MA200/121/121 Dr Shelia Lee  
Mantle Oral History Project  
Collection.

0389, LO/020/020 'Midwife'  
Leicester Oral History Archive  
Collection.

0400 LO 020/020 'Public Health'  
Leicester Oral History Archive  
Collection.

### Get on the EMOHA website ([www.le.ac.uk/emoha](http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha))

We are keen to establish a directory of current oral history projects in the East Midlands on the EMOHA website. If you know of a project that should be included on EMOHA's website, please contact us at [emoha@le.ac.uk](mailto:emoha@le.ac.uk) or telephone 0116 2525065. Keep checking the website at ([www.le.ac.uk/emoha](http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha)) for details of projects in your area.

## The future of the East Midlands Oral History Archive

As you may already know the project to expand EMOHA activities beyond the Leicestershire and Rutland area into a genuinely East Midlands archive was turned down by the Lottery Fund in late-November 2003. The bid was rejected because restoration projects at Foxton Locks and a bomber at Bruntingthorpe got the go ahead, and there simply was not enough cash to continue the EMOHA project. In addition, the squeeze on Council budgets meant that the nine local government partners in our bid were unable to come up with sufficient cash to satisfy the Lottery officials.

The decision has been a deep disappointment to all at EMOHA, and many of you, our readers, supporters, and enthusiasts for oral history.

The letters of support, and sympathy, have been very much appreciated. Thank you very much for these.

What happens next? Well the EMOHA project will continue in a somewhat reduced form until 30 June 2004. Then, for another year, it will continue in a yet more scaled down form for a further year until June 2005, funded by the University of Leicester. The intention during this extra year is to provide time to see if we can attract support from other sources.

Meanwhile, we will continue to copy, catalogue and conserve. The Newsletters will cease with this edition, though the website will continue to exist, the catalogue will continue to show additions, and you will be able



*EMOHA HQ on Salisbury Road*

to listen to interviews at the Record Office for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland at Wigston.

**Richard Rodger (Director of the Centre for Urban History).**

## Goodbye from some of us

As our bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund was unsuccessful, some of us have now moved to other jobs where we can use the experience and contacts gained from EMOHA. Lesley Gill (Clerical Officer) has a new post within the University at Labour Market Studies, while Sarah Ferrier (Education Officer) is now working at the East Midlands Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (EMMLAC) as Learning Policy Officer.

I have joined her at EMMLAC recently as Workforce Development Officer, where – amongst other things - I am responsible for facilitating training and professional development for everyone (paid or unpaid!) working in museums, libraries and archives. It's a big job and a challenging one, but I'm finding it interesting and enjoyable, and it also allows me to stay in touch with many of the people I have worked with at EMOHA over the past three years.

Although we were disappointed by the HLF's decision, we were not really taken by surprise. The amount of money it now has available for grants is shrinking – and we had had one substantial grant already. Oral history, unfortunately, has always been funded on a very temporary basis. But in the less than three years since EMOHA was established, we have achieved a great deal. Apart from the CDs, books, educational resources, talks and the

website we have produced, our lasting legacies will be the archive recordings themselves, which will be better cared for and more accessible than ever before, and the flourishing of oral history work that we have enabled other people to do by providing training, support and – above all, I think – by passing on our own enthusiasm for oral history, and our commitment to it as a valid and valuable historical resource.

Keep at it – and keep in touch! I can be contacted now at EMMLAC, 56 King Street, Leicester, LE1 6RL, (0116) 285 1370, cbrown@emmlac.org.uk.

**Cynthia Brown**



*Present and ex-staff say farewell to Cynthia Brown*

## The Development of Oral History in Japan

Oral history methods were highly appreciated before 1945 by folklorists in Japan. Kunio Yanagita (1875-1962), a founder of Japanese folklore studies is believed to be the first person to use oral history. His publications, such as 'Josei to Minkan Denshoo' ('Women and Folklore'), 'Imo no Chikara' ('Women's Power') and 'Konin no Hanashi' ('Stories of Matrimony'), helped to legitimise oral history. The term 'kikigaki' (which literally means interviewing and transcription, and which denotes 'oral history'), was first used in Japan from about 1910 onwards by Yanagita and other folklorists.

After 1945, the method has been deployed with effectiveness chiefly by a few Japanese academics in sociology (especially socio-rural studies), folklore studies and ethnography. However, Japanese academic historians have failed to appreciate oral history as a research tool. They have felt considerable suspicion or hesitation over oral historical methods, in particular raising doubts about the accuracy of memory. There were some distinctively Japanese reasons for scepticism, involving complicated attitudes to authority, towards those who are poorer or less privileged in society, and an accompanying respect for official written sources over oral tradition.

There are very few oral history publications and resources available for historical studies in Japan, despite the advanced technical and financial capabilities of the country. The Japanese Ministry of Education has taken a restrictive and narrow attitude towards oral history, and until recently oral history projects have not been encouraged. In Japan there are no oral history archives like the National Sound Archive in London. Almost no libraries possess oral history cas-

ettes or video tapes. Again this reflects oral history's lack of academic prestige. As yet Japan has no oral history journal, nor direct counterparts to books like Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past*.

However, in the relatively new field of Japanese women's history, which has largely developed since 1945, amateur women's historians such as Tomoko Yamazaki, Shigemi Yamamoto and Nobuhiko Murakami, have used oral history to uncover the experiences and lives of ordinary women, who hardly left written documents. Women's historiography, hitherto restricted to the general history of women's movements and biographical sketches of leading feminists, opened up fresh lines of enquiry in the mid-1970s through oral history. This new research methodology extended historiographical dimensions and stimulated many original publications, not by 'academic' historians, but by freelance writers, journalists and amateur historians.

There was a growth of women's oral history from about 1975 throughout Japan among women's local history associations and women's 'amateur' history groups. They aimed to rediscover the lives of those women omitted from official Japanese history and produced many publications on local women's histories in many prefectures, often heavily dependent on oral history. Their undertakings still continue. However, their publications are mainly published by amateur historians and local women's groups in Japan, and are usually simple narratives and highly biographical, lacking clear analytical approaches and academic scrutiny. They tend to be written in an unsophisticated or exaggerated literary style, and they bear witness to the undeveloped state of Japanese women's oral-history writ-

ing compared to that in the west. Amateur interviewing skills are very manifest, with the exponents usually having no knowledge of western work.

Most recently a positive sign for developing oral history in Japan has emerged. In 2000 an innovative large-scale, five-year academic oral history project funded by the Ministry of Education was launched at Seisaku Kenkyuu Daigakuin University by Takashi Mikuriya, who had researched with oral history at Harvard University. The Nihon Oral History Gakkai (The Japanese Oral History Association) will be launched in Tokyo in September 2004 by Junko Sakai, who researched using oral history under Paul Thompson's supervision, and a number of other people with an interest in oral history.

Experts on oral history from America and Britain, such as Paul Thompson and Robert Perks, were invited to give lectures on oral history in Japan. A few of their publications were translated into Japanese. These recent activities, mainly led by Japanese academics partially educated in America and Britain, promoted and upgraded the standard of Japanese oral history. Even many academic historians, who refused to regard oral history as a serious academic pursuit, began to accept it as a useful method in the writing of Japanese history. One can surely now anticipate the flowering of oral history in Japan, and we might also hope that it will bring about considerable widening, reappraisal and democratisation of the scope of what can be recognised as 'history' in that country.

**Hiroko Tomida**  
(University of Edinburgh)

# Archive CD Books

The Archive CD Books Project exists to make reproductions of old books, documents and maps available on CD to genealogists and historians, and to co-operate with libraries, museums and record offices in providing money to renovate old books in their collection, and to donate books to their collections, where they will be preserved for future generations.

## How to get involved

### NEW Adopt-a-Book scheme

This new scheme invites people to Adopt-A-Book to enable it to be preserved and made more widely accessible to the public. Books available for adoption can be viewed on the Archive CD Books website, [www.archivecdbooks.org/adopt](http://www.archivecdbooks.org/adopt) There are several available already and many more will be appearing soon. However we want more libraries, museums and record offices to get involved! For more details please contact us.

## Who benefits and how?

### Libraries, Museums and Record Offices –

they lend us a book for about three weeks, in which time we ensure it is fully restored to it's former glory. The institution gets a CD AND facsimile book copy of the adopted book, so the restored original can be kept, by them, under proper archive conditions. Visitors can access the data on the CD or facsimile copy.

**Adopters** – They get huge enjoyment from knowing they've contributed to the preservation of vital books for future generations to use. They also receive a free CD and limited edition facsimile copy of the book they adopted. On top of this they get a 20% discount on all Archive CD Books purchases.

## Family and local

**historians** – All family and local historians will benefit from this scheme since all the adopted books will be made available on CDs and can be bought from the Archive CD Books website.



# How to get involved

## Just some of the 1300 CD books available from Archive CD Books

### FREE!

**The Universal Directory of Great Britain** – (Ref: 8018)  
Five huge volumes comprising the earliest directory for Great Britain, and of immense interest to genealogists and historians. Descriptions of towns and villages, their facilities, trades and residents. **FREE TO FIRST TIME BUYERS. USUAL PRICE £34.94**



### The Parish Register 1910

A pocket book sized book, fantastically useful to explain the mysteries of Parish Registers. A must have for beginner and advanced historians alike. **£5.00**

### Nottingham Date Book

An excellent chronological list of events in Nottingham 850-1884. Full of information that brings the town to life such as the description of wife selling or the vicar who saw a flying saucer. Essential to those with Nottingham interests. **£14.25**

### The Gentleman's Magazine Library 1731-1868, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Middlesex & Monmouthshire.

The original Gentleman's Magazine contained articles on a vast array of subjects, including lots of wonderful topographical pieces. In 1891 George Gomme republished all of these topographical articles but edited and indexed them into county specific order. An absolute goldmine of information about the county, its people and its places. **£14.25**

### Old England, A Museum of Popular Antiquities

Two huge book with an absolutely superb topical approach to life, people, places, architecture and fashions, etc. in England from Roman times through to 1860. A double page of text, followed by a double page of illustrations throughout the volumes. Use the illustrations to compliment your history work. Understand what life was really like in old England. **£21.00**

### Camden's Britannia 1588

Includes all the 1695 maps by Robert Morden. The definitive early history and description of the whole of Britain. An absolute must for anyone's collection. These books are not dry! They give wonderful accounts of the places, their history and geography, lifestyle of the people at the time, etc. **£17.75**

### The Complete Parish Officer

**1772** – Of great interest to all family historians and local history researchers. Published in 1772 it was the handbook of the duties and responsibilities of the Parish Officer. **£17.75**

### Pigot's Directories

**Derbyshire:**  
1822, 1828, 1831, 1835 **£11.50 each**  
**Durham:**  
1828, 1836, 1840 **£11.50 each**  
**Kent:** 1826, 1840, **£11.50 each**  
**Leicestershire:**  
1822, 1828, 1841 **£11.50 each**  
**Lincolnshire:**  
1828, 1835, 1841, 1850 **£11.50 each**  
**London:** 1822 **£14.25 each**  
**London** 1825, 1839 **£17.75 each**



There are more directories and other historical books available, for every county. Visit our online catalogue [www.archivecdbooks.org](http://www.archivecdbooks.org) for details.

## Resources for Schools

We want schools to have access to the fantastic books in our collection too. Please contact us to find out more about our county specific CD resources packs for schools. We don't charge any license fee so you can put the CDs information on your intranet systems. The pack contains history books and Directories. The range of Directories in the pack, for example, enables you to build up a detailed snapshot in time of real life.

They are a superb source of primary information. They list everyone with a trade and contain excellent descriptions about each place and its history and amenities.

They even list ordinary people such as gardeners, blacksmiths, seamstresses; dressmakers, chimney sweeps, etc. They are a great resource for comparing and contrasting the towns and villages during different periods.

How did your family travel to the nearest town? The details are here. If they wanted to send a parcel or goods by carrier, or post a letter, then you will find out all there is to know. What local schools were there, and who was the schoolteacher that taught your ancestors' children? Find out about the neighbours, the shopkeepers and tradesmen, and other related people in the village using the schools CD resource pack.

**Evidence on the Employment of Children 1842** – Over 800 pages of ACTUAL testimonies and interviews covering various types of work, in places across Britain



[www.archivecdbooks.org](http://www.archivecdbooks.org)

ALL CD'S SENT POST FREE. 5 Commercial Street, Cinderford, Glos GL14 2RP Telephone: 01594 829870

## Co-op funeral department - an oral testimony

"In 1948 I started on the funeral department. You started there to learn how to what they called fit up, knock up coffins, they called it knocking up coffins. They were all ready made. The Co-op had its own workshop to make coffins, and they also used to buy coffins ready made from various people, you see. And the coffins used to come just bare with a lid on. Now, by law, two inches of shavings must be in the bottom of the coffin, to absorb any fluids, and at the top end where the head was going, they used to put a bunch of shavings and slope it up for the head to rest on. And then there used to be canvas, white canvas, placed on the bottom and tacked round the sides, so the whole of the inside of the coffin had got like white canvas. And then there was a frill that went all the way round that was tacked on... The lid was also lined as well. And before you put the shavings in and the lining, you'd drill the holes all the way round and fasten the handles on.

"First of all they had some old Rolls Royces, enormous things, they were, and they were special vehicles. One of these vehicles could be a car, and

it could be a hearse, and it could be a child's, because in the front of it, when it was used for a child's, they'd got a glass case which held the child's coffin, and six people could sit

in with the child's coffin in front of them. We used to call it the 'triple'."

**From 'Leicester Voices' edited by Cynthia Brown**

### MA or Diploma in Social History

Why not study oral history and gain a postgraduate qualification? You can obtain an MA or a Diploma in Social History at the Centre for Urban History.

There are four elements:

- Survey of Modern British Social History
- 'Testimonies of the City' – on oral history course exploring best practice and methods in oral history, with interviews conducted by you as part of the coursework.
- A residential week in Edinburgh studying social change in the city since 1750.
- 'Vices and Virtues: a social history of changing attitudes to tobacco, alcohol, swearing, and sex in 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain.

And then complete the MA with a dissertation using oral history skills and interviews techniques learned during the course.

This is an exciting course, now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> year, offering unrivalled expertise in oral and social history with an experienced team of adult education teachers.

**Where and when?** The course is taught on Wednesday evenings in the Centre for Urban History, University of Leicester, 5 Salisbury Road, Leicester.

**Entry Qualifications?** Normally a first degree, though we will take into account courses and qualifications obtained through your work.

**Find out more?** Contact Richard Rodger or Kate Crispin kc15@le.ac.uk or 0116 252 2378. Come and visit us- see for yourself and discuss the course in detail.

## EMOHA Diary

### April

Tue 6<sup>th</sup>

- **7.30pm:** Denise McHugh (Leicester Victorian Society), *Town and Empire - late Victorian Bedford*. Organised by the Leicester Victorian Society. Small Hall, Leicester Adult Education College, Wellington Street.
- **7.30pm:** Tony Squires, *Capability Brown and his Gardens*. Organised by the Broughton Astley Heritage Society. Broughton Astley Village Hall. Admission: £3/£1.50. Everyone welcome.

**Fri 23rd (7.15pm):** Rob Colls, *The WG. Hoskins Lecture - The Englishness of WG. Hoskins*. Vaughan Archaeological & Historical Society, Vaughan College, St. Nicholas Circle.

**Tue 27th & Thu 29th (7.30pm):** Dr Anthony Fletcher, *An Introduction to The Natural History Collections and the Role of Volunteers*. Visit the Heritage Services' Collections Resources Store at barrow on Soar. Places limited to 15. Details from Leicestershire County Council Environmental Resources Centre, Heritage Services, Holly Hayes, 216 Birstall Road, Birstall.

### May

**Tue 6th (7.30pm):** Simon Tebbutt, *More Falconry*. Broughton Astley Heritage Society, Broughton Astley Village Hall. £3/£1.50.

**Wed 12<sup>th</sup>**

- **2.00pm:** *Finding the Past*. An afternoon with the Finds Liaison Officer and Archaeology

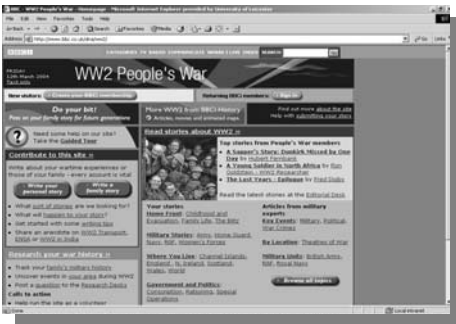
Team. Details from the Leicestershire County Council Environmental Resources Centre, Heritage Services, Holly Hayes, 216 Birstall Road, Birstall.

### June

**Tue 1st (7.30pm):** Peter Liddle, *The South-East Leicestershire Treasure and the Roman Conquest*. Broughton Astley Heritage Society. Broughton Astley Village Hall. £3/£1.50

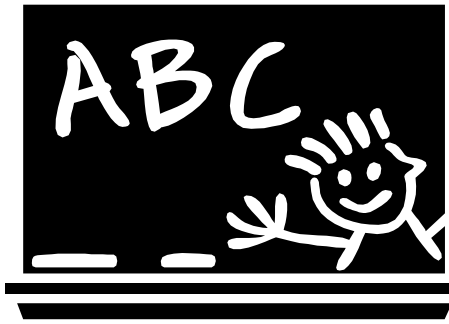
**Sat 5th (1.30pm):** *We Have No Factory Bell - a study of the lives of domestic textile workers in the 19th century*. Professor Marilyn Palmer of the University of Leicester will give the Philimore Lecture 2004 at the Imperial War Museum, London. Organised by the British Association for Local History.

## The People's War



Do you have a World War Two story to tell? If you do the BBC are asking you to pass on your family story for future generations. Although this new project can only be contributed to via the Internet, many individuals and organisations across the country are logging on and helping to share experiences of the Second World War. Find out more at [www.bbc.co.uk/ww2](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2).

## Schools News



EMOHA is developing an audio CD with an accompanying teachers' pack to support children's understanding of Britain's diverse communities. Aimed primarily at Key Stage 3, it is anticipated that the extracts will also be of interest to Key Stage 2 teachers. For further details, contact Colin Hyde at the East Midlands Oral History Archive on [ch38@le.ac.uk](mailto:ch38@le.ac.uk), or telephone (0116) 252 5066.

## Local History



At the Linwood Centre a group are working with the Records Office to put on an exhibition this summer showing the history of the Saffron Lane Estate. Also, the Braunstone Motor Project and St Peter's Church are starting a project about Braunstone. Both projects will be using some oral history and further details can be supplied by EMOHA via the usual addresses.

# East Midlands Oral History Archive

The East Midlands Oral History Archive is funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund to establish the first large-scale archive of oral history recordings for Leicestershire & Rutland. This includes the collections of the former Leicester Oral History Archive, the Mantle Archive from North West Leicestershire, the Community History archive of Leicester City Libraries, and the sound archive of BBC Radio Leicester, along with smaller collections donated by local organisations or individuals.

The recordings are deposited in the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester & Rutland, and are currently being catalogued to make them more accessible. The project now has an online catalogue, and has produced a CD of edited extracts from the recordings on the theme of toys and games. EMOHA also aims to generate new oral history recordings through its own programme of interviewing, and by providing

advice, training and support for community groups, museums and heritage organisations, students and other individuals who are interested in developing their own projects.

EMOHA is a partnership between the Centre for Urban History at the University of Leicester, Leicestershire County Council and Leicester City Museums and Library Services.



Leicester  
City Council

*East Midlands Oral History Archive*  
Centre for Urban History  
University of Leicester, LE1 7RH

**Web:** [www.le.ac.uk/emoha](http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha)

**Email:** [emoha@le.ac.uk](mailto:emoha@le.ac.uk)

**Phone:** (0116) 252 5065

**Fax:** (0116) 252 5769



## The Business of Death

It was the subject of death that led me to my first encounters with oral history. As a mature undergraduate in Economic and Social History, inspired by rambling around Welford Road Cemetery I decided to write my final year dissertation on Victorian attitudes to death in Leicester.

This proved rather too broad and ambitious a plan for the available sources, not to mention the miserly word limit, and I finally narrowed it down to the undertaking trade in the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After trawling the catalogues in the Record Office, and identifying some of their gaps, I sent off a few letters to local funeral directors asking if they had any documents I could consult. The results were interesting, to say the least.

One responded by turning up at my front door in the 'funeral van' one afternoon, while I was at the University, alarming my daughter by informing her that he was 'looking for' Mrs Brown. 'She was alright this morning', was her immediate response,



followed by a telling off when I got home for not informing her of the nature of my research. So what did he actually say, I asked her? Just passing, was the reply, thought he'd see if you were in, so ring him and you can have a look at their ledgers. I did, and spent

a fascinating afternoon in a room stacked with coffins – empty at that point, I was reliably assured – looking through bills and accounts and getting a sense of what 'the business' involved.

Another local funeral director invited me to visit them. "We don't get many people who actually want to talk to us", as he said, and as well as loaning me some very useful books, he put me in touch with someone recently retired from the business who could better recall the actual period of my research. Armed with a list of undertakers culled from trade directories in the basement of the University Library, I was introduced to the value of oral testimony. I didn't call it that at the time, and had no notion that it was an academic discipline in itself – but I learnt a lot from the time I spent talking with him.

Needless to say, I didn't record this, 'interview' onto tape. The idea never occurred – but I left with some real insights about the way that the trade operated, the family links that existed between different firms, the spread of work (much of it unpaid) within the family, the changing nature of the



'market', and more besides. From the other company that invited me to visit, I had similar accounts which confirmed what I had heard and read elsewhere, along with descriptions of working conditions, analyses of how the work and the business had changed, and local superstitions which could cause enormous offence and loss of business in the breach – such as having to reverse the hearse into a cul-de-sac so as not to pass the house of the deceased twice and 'take another member of the family with it'.

So in this accidental way and apparently 'dismal' setting, I began to see the value of oral histories – not only in giving me information which I had not and could not have found in documentary sources. but in understanding the importance of feelings and individual interpretations of experience as well as 'facts' in adding to and modifying the historical record. And needless to say, if we do have the foresight to record these for posterity, death will not rob us of this immensely valuable historical resource.

**Cynthia Brown**