

What is oral
history

This sheet will
explain:

- The origins of modern oral history.
- How to use oral history.
- The value of oral history.
- Where you can find out more about oral history.

What is oral history?

Oral history can be defined as the recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, based on the personal experiences and opinions of the speaker. It may take the form of eye-witness evidence about the past, but can include folklore, myths, songs and stories passed down over the years by word of mouth. While it is an invaluable way of preserving the knowledge and understanding of older people, it can also involve interviewing younger generations.

What is new about oral history?

Nothing, in one sense. The spoken word was the only form of 'history' in pre-literate societies – and we sometimes forget just how many written historical sources are actually based on oral testimony. In the fifth century BC, the Greek historian Thucydides drew heavily on the accounts of eye-witnesses of the Peloponnesian Wars, 'whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible'. Bede's eighth century *History of the English Church & People* also relied on 'countless faithful witnesses who either know or remember the facts'. Other examples are transcripts of court proceedings, the evidence given to Victorian Royal Commissions, and newspaper accounts of political or other meetings.

How did it start?

Oral history in the modern form of audio recordings had its origins in the work of Allan Nevins at the University of Columbia in the USA. He began to record the memories of 'persons significant in American life' in 1948. By contrast to this 'great men' approach, the pioneer of oral history in England, George Ewart Evans, collected memories of life and work in Suffolk villages, where 'the old survivors were walking books'. These were first published in *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* in 1956. At much the same time, oral history in Scotland developed within a broader focus on Scottish culture and history. In their different ways, all three reflected the changing political and social climate of the early post-war period – just as more recent oral history work has developed its own distinctive forms in other areas of the world.

Can we believe it?

Another Greek historian, Herodotus, ranked 'what you have been told' (after what you have seen or what you have read) as the most unreliable form of historical evidence. However, all historical sources have their problems, and oral history is not necessarily any more biased or partial than documentary evidence. It needs to be subjected to the same tests as we would apply to other sources, and used in conjunction with them. The value we place on oral history will depend on our own perceptions of what or who history is about, and what it is for – but arguably, it can offer unique opportunities and insights.

What is the value of oral history?

when our tongues go they are not clocks to tell only the time present, but large books unclasped; and our speeches, like leaves turned over and over, discover wonders that are long since past.

(XVII century tract)



For some examples of how oral history has been used in local publications, see:

Brown C., *Wharf Street Revisited: a history of the Wharf Street area of Leicester* (Leicester Living History Unit 1995)

Carswell J. ed., *Ibstock Lives* (Coalville Publishing Co. Ltd. 1994)

Hyde C., *Walnut Street Past, Present & Future: an oral history of the Walnut Street area of Leicester* (Leicester Living History Unit 1995)

Hyde C., Vadnerkar S. & Cutting A., *Parampara: continuing the tradition – 30 years of Indian dance & music in Leicester* (Leicester Living History Unit 1995)

Oral history is a very subjective and personal form of evidence – but this is also one of its great strengths. In the words of the Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli, oral sources ‘tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did...’ Subjectivity is as much the business of history as the more visible “facts”...’ (*History Workshop Journal*, 12, Autumn 1981).

Oral history can give a voice to individuals and groups who are sometimes marginalized in ‘conventional’ histories – the working classes, women and ethnic minorities, for instance. It can provide new information, alternative explanations and different insights which are potentially of enormous value. The spoken word can convey feelings and emotions with an immediacy and an impact that the written word cannot match, as well as preserving a record of local dialects and accents. It allows the historian to ask questions of his or her informant – to be present at the creation of a historical source, rather than relying solely on those created by others.

How can I find out more?

There are many books and articles on the theory and practice of oral history, but in the first instance you might like to look at Paul Thompson’s classic text, *The Voice of the Past* (3rd edition, OUP 2000); and Perks R. & Thomson A., eds., *The Oral History Reader* (Routledge 1998), an international anthology of key writings on the subject.

...the main components of history are not things but people. This is to make a song of a discovery of the obvious, but it is something that needs to be repeated.

George Ewart Evans, *The Days That We Have Seen* (1975)



You could also join the Oral History Society, a national and international organisation dedicated to the collection and preservation of oral history. The Society publishes a journal twice a year, and members also enjoy preferential rates on other publications and conferences. For more information, visit the Society’s website at www.oralhistory.org.uk; write to the Secretary, Oral History Society, c/o Department of History, University of Essex, Colchester, CO4 3SQ; telephone 020 7412 7405; email rob.perks@bl.uk.