

## National Oral History Standard

### Oral history

Oral history is the recording of memories, experiences, feelings, opinions and lives of individuals or groups. It is an extremely important research area, revealing information and stories that may not be found in other records, with the capacity to bring sites and collections to life through lived experience. The interviewee is considered a key source of information unavailable elsewhere and whose knowledge may be lost if unrecorded. Therefore, oral history is a vital part of the research and development of English Heritage's sites and collections.

### National Standard

This National Standard outlines English Heritage's protocols for commissioning, recording, and archiving any new oral history recordings.

Oral history involves recording and preserving the oral testimony of individuals, in their own voices. It is reliant on the goodwill and generous sharing of life stories. It is *'essential that interviewees should have confidence and trust in interviewers, and that recordings should be available for research and other uses within a legal and ethical framework which protects the interests of interviewees'* (Oral History Society website, 2023).

English Heritage is committed to best practice sector guidelines, to act ethically, to use resources effectively, and to create an archive that is usable and stable.

All oral history recordings carried out by English Heritage are required to be:

- informed by research of the highest standard
- resourced fully from start to finish, and
- adhere to EH and best practice sector guidelines.

Prior to commencement, anyone intending to conduct or commission oral history interviews for English Heritage must work in consultation with EH's national advisor to ensure that projects are coordinated and that the resources, skills, capacity and budget for any project, whatever size, from initial scoping to final documentation and archiving is accounted for. This will ensure that key colleagues are involved in advance of projects being taken forward. Advice and guidance should be sought by contacting [oralhistory@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:oralhistory@english-heritage.org.uk)

### Collecting oral history

Collecting oral history is already well established at English Heritage. At present, EHT holds over 400 catalogued recordings from 26 different sites.

Section 5.1.7 of the English Heritage Trust (EHT) National Collections Development Policy states that one of the themes and priorities for future collecting is: 'Oral history recordings of former owners, occupiers, staff and others who have an association with English Heritage properties and objects.' Oral history is also referenced in many site-specific Collections Development Policies.

## Co-ordinating and commissioning new interviews

- Oral history can be commissioned by anyone within English Heritage. Working in consultation with EH's national advisor, project leaders **must** ensure that all new projects, whether single interviews or groups, are fully resourced from start to finish and that the guidelines found within this National Standard are followed.
- Oral history is understood as the long form recorded interview of an individual, or group, associated with a site or collection in the care of English Heritage. Short sound bites or quotes are not considered oral history, although they may originate from full recorded interviews (e.g. extracted for use in exhibitions or online articles).
- Oral history recordings form part of the national collection. Section 10.1.2 of EHT's National Collections Development Policy states that 'Acquisitions which fall within this policy will be approved by the Acquisitions, Disposals and Loans Committee on behalf of the English Heritage Trustees, under its approved terms of reference.'
- **All proposed new oral history projects, regardless of size, are required to present their project to EH's Acquisitions, Loans and Disposals Committee (ADLC) for approval.** ADLC meet quarterly. Templates for ADLC papers are available and should be used. Proposed projects which are poorly researched, planned, conceived and without resource or realistic timescale will not be supported.
- Pre-project advice and guidance for planning an oral history project, and submission of the ADLC paper, should be sought by contacting [oralhistory@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:oralhistory@english-heritage.org.uk)
- Proposals for new oral history projects must ensure that appropriate resources have been allocated for project completion, particularly for managing the resource post interview stage. Appropriate budget should be allocated for commissioning, training, recording, and archiving for the duration of the project. These should be indicated within the ADLC paper.
- There may be isolated occasions when rapid response is required to carry out an interview (e.g. illness/significant time pressure) and there is limited time to plan and submit an ADLC paper. Consultation with EH's national advisor will ensure that appropriate sign off and procedure is followed in these instances.
- All new oral history projects should be assessed against English Heritage's *National Research Strategy for Oral History* and the *National Collections Development Policy* (including site specific ones where available) to ensure that the proposed project falls within the primary collecting areas across the organisation.
- All new oral history projects should be fully researched and planned with a suitable timescale, to ensure capacity and resources are available.

When considering commencing an oral history project, the following considerations should be taken when considering interview:

- Staff time, available resources, and commitment to see project and interview through to full completion and archiving. These should be agreed **prior to commencement**.
- Relevance to English Heritage's five primary collecting areas, and/or whether the proposed interview is listed on a prioritised schedule of oral history research targets.
- Contribution to knowledge: In the context of the existing collection, how unique are the memories of the interviewee? Will it significantly increase our knowledge? Are there already similar examples already in the collection? Is there enough content to merit for a full interview/is note-taking enough? Will the project result in oral history interviews or short clips/sound bites?
- Age of interviewee(s).
- Health of interviewee(s).
- Location of interviewee(s) (and therefore cost to project if interviewee is far away, or overseas).
- Potential for interview to result in further interviews, contacts, donations of objects or photographs. *NB. Any potential donations, of any object type, intended for the permanent collection should be treated as per the National Collections Development Policy and be subject to a separate ADLC paper for Acquisitions, supported by the relevant Collections Curator as required.*

### Carrying out new interviews

- Conducting oral history interviews is a specialised professional skill requiring a thorough understanding of data protection and the complete pre- and post- interview process.
- The interviewer should ideally be a professional oral history specialist. However, fully trained staff or volunteers can undertake interviews. Training ensures that interviewers are confident in conducting the actual interview, pre- and post- interview work, necessary paperwork, copyright and GDPR requirements, and equipment guidance.
- Interviews should not be carried out by untrained staff or volunteers in any circumstances.
- Interviews should be recorded on a suitable digital recording device. According to best practice sector guidelines, this should be a portable audio recorder. Video interviews (Zoom, etc.) and interviews recorded on a personal mobile phone are not accepted by English Heritage. Recordings should be .wav files only. No other file types (such as mp3/4) are accepted.
- For full guidelines on how to carry out oral history interviews, interview techniques, equipment guidance and other aspects of the interview including all mandatory forms needed throughout the interview process please see English Heritage's *Oral History Guidance Notes*.

### Archiving recorded interviews

- All projects should be recorded, fully catalogued and permanently archived in a central location, to ensure that they are fully accessible in the future.
- Oral history recordings are classed as objects for archiving purposes. The Curatorial (Collections) team are responsible for ensuring that interviews are archived.

- Agreement to incorporate archiving into the workload of the Curatorial (Collections) team or allowance for sufficient budget to engage an external consultant to complete the project, **must** have been outlined in the relevant ADLC paper presented at project conception. Details of planned resource and budget source for this should be determined before project commencement.
- The current permanent storage location for master copies of recordings is English Heritage's MimsyXG (HOMS) collections management database. This database is managed by the Curatorial (Collections) team. The Collections team and associated paper archives are stored centrally at the Wrest Park store. Digital copies of the paper archive are attached to HOMS object records.
- Within three months of a recording taking place or when the practical phase of the project is completed, project leaders should supply all relevant material necessary for cataloguing, including:
  - Digital copies of the recordings accompanied by any solid-state storage (e.g. memory cards).
  - Hard *and* scanned digital copies of completed accompanying paperwork for each interview, including:
    - Participation Agreements (mandatory)
    - Recording Agreements (mandatory)
    - Interview Summary Sheets (mandatory) (NB full transcripts are desirable, but not required)
    - Historic Photograph Permissions forms (mandatory if used)
    - Model Release forms (mandatory if used)
    - Project Interview Log (mandatory)
    - Interview notes or other associated project documents or project archive.
  - Hard *and* digital copies of any photography taken during the interview (including photographs of the interviewee, and any historic photographs they own which may have been supplied during the interview). Any photographs should be accompanied by the appropriate Model Release and Historic Photograph Permission forms, noted above.
  - If any further materials are needed for the archiving process, the project budget will be required to cover the purchase of these.
  - Project leaders will be expected to follow up any missing recordings, paperwork and/or images.
- For full guidelines on conducting oral history interviews, including the pre- and post- interview work, mandatory paperwork, and further interview guidance, please see English Heritage's *Oral History Guidance Notes*.
- Within six months of a recording taking place, all new recordings should be catalogued and stored on English Heritage's MimsyXG (HOMS) collections management database, and all accompanying documentation scanned and attached to the object record.

For all oral history advice, questions and queries, please contact:  
[oralhistory@english-heritage.org.uk](mailto:oralhistory@english-heritage.org.uk)