

National Research Strategy for Oral History

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.

English Heritage and 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.

Collecting oral history and priority collecting areas

For English Heritage, 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 commissioned for marketing or exhibition purposes are not considered oral history, although they may originate from full recorded interviews (e.g. extracted for use in exhibitions or online articles). Reminiscence work that may be carried out is not considered to be oral history and is outside the scope of this strategy. However, individuals involved in reminiscence sessions may be identified as potential oral history interviewees and subsequently interviewed.

English Heritage's *National Oral History Standard* applies to all oral history interviews carried out across the organisation.

The five primary oral history collecting areas for EH are:

1. Direct personal experience of life and/or work at an English Heritage site or monument, prior to it becoming part of the National Heritage Collection, both primary and secondary recollections

These could be former owners, occupiers, staff and others who have memories or recollections about sites before any involvement from e.g. Ministry of Works or English Heritage. It is envisaged that this collecting area will be the one usually prioritised during oral history projects due to the likely age of potential interviewees.

NB secondary recollections may cover one or two generations removed from direct living or working experience of an EH site, or people who knew a person associated with a site. For secondary recollections, the interviewee should be able to talk about memories or events told directly to them, rather than assuming knowledge.

Examples of primary recollections:

- Polish SOE lived experience at Audley End.
- ROC personnel based at the York Cold War Bunker.
- Former housemaid at Brodsworth Hall.
- Family members who lived at Brinkburn Priory/Manor House.

Examples of secondary recollections:

- Daughter of an operative at Dover Wartime Tunnels.
 - Son of one of the men who helped put out the fire in the roof of the Great Hall at Eltham Palace.
2. Direct personal experience of the investigation, transfer and protection of English Heritage sites and monuments (including pre-, post- coming into the National Heritage Collection), both primary and secondary recollections.

These could be site custodians during the Ministry of Works period, individuals involved with transfer of sites and/or collections, or retired English Heritage staff.

NB primary recollections would always take precedence in this collecting area.

Examples:

- Archaeologists who worked on site excavations for the Ministry of Works.
- Recollections of people directly associated with transfer and decision-making processes e.g. inspectors of ancient monuments, past custodians, local campaigners, retired English Heritage staff with early memories of a site when it transferred to the National Collection.
- Contractors such as masons, electricians, carpet fitters who worked on preparing, conserving or restoring sites for opening to the public, if their memories are substantial.

3. Contemporary oral history collecting associated with specific English Heritage site activity (in 'real time')

Occasionally it may be considered important to record spoken memories of sites or objects as a record of time sensitive occasions or projects.

NB Short sound bites or quotes commissioned for marketing or exhibition purposes are not considered oral history.

Examples:

- Memories associated with an object gifted to a collection.
- Artist descriptions of new commissions at sites.
- Staff or contractor involvement in major projects who could be recorded as part of the project record if there is significant content to be recorded. (e.g. Tim Martin, engineering

conservator, was interviewed talking through the repairs to the roller shutters at Brodsworth Hall during a conservation project due to the significant changes made to the shutters).

4. Local memories of an EH site or monument

Local memories can form an important record of how sites have been used or celebrated across the decades. Opportunities may arise to record memories which shed light on how sites have been used or experienced within the community.

NB Although there are similarities, English Heritage does not consider reminiscence work to be oral history and is outside the scope of this strategy. However, specific individuals involved in reminiscence sessions may be considered as potential oral history source and subsequently interviewed.

Examples:

- Memories of events happening at a site (e.g. festivals, installations, pageants) that help to give context to how a site has been used in the distant or recent past.

5. Supplementary accounts

Exceptionally, there may be potential to record 'supplementary accounts' which do not fall into the above four categories, although are connected to English Heritage sites and collections.

NB Supplementary accounts should not be prioritised over the previous four main collecting areas, unless there are no other potential oral histories arising for a site.

Example:

- A bobbin worker who can give insight into the pressures and dangers of the work and has anecdotes about aspects of working practice or machinery at a bobbin mill. The bobbin worker may not have any connection to EH's Stott Park Bobbin Mill but may have useful insights that can be applied to the site and collection at the mill.

Prioritisation of potential projects

Prioritisation of oral history interviews should consider the following:

- 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(s)? 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).

- o Potential for interview to result in further interviews, contacts, donations of objects or photographs. *NB Any potential donations 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, submitted by the relevant Collections Curator as required.*
- o Staff time, available resources, and commitment to see project and interview through to full completion and archiving. These should be agreed prior to commencement.

Taking into consideration the above, projects and interviews can be categorised and budgets for oral history work can be allocated/prioritised accordingly. Although information presented by individual interviewees will differ in quality and quantity, potential projects can be categorised according to their intrinsic value, relevance to current projects and relative urgency, as:

1	High priority	Essential/urgent recording. To be dealt with within the next 4-6 months.
2	Medium priority	Information worth recording to significantly enhance knowledge of sites/collections but not essential for current projects. To be dealt with within a year.
3	Low priority	Information worth gathering to enhance general knowledge of site/collections, 'useful but not essential' information. No time limits.

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