



ENGLISH HERITAGE

# Oral History

## A Toolkit for Teachers



## **Contents**

Your Oral History Project: Getting Started .....	3
Learning outcomes for Oral History Projects .....	5
Key Stage 2: Curriculum Links.....	7
Key Stage 3: Curriculum Links.....	8
What equipment should I use to capture Oral History? .....	10
How to use TASCAM Recorders (with Windows computers)? .....	12
Ethics of Oral History.....	14
Interviews .....	19
How to use sound clips and other audio?.....	23
Copyright Issues.....	26

## Your Oral History Project: Getting Started

### What is Oral History?

Oral History is the collection and study of historical information, usually using sound recordings of interviews with people who have personal knowledge of the past (whether that be of people, places or events). Oral history allows very personal histories and stories to be recorded and is particularly useful as a classroom tool as it offers a very real connection between young people and the wider local community in which they live. History can come alive through the words and memories of those who are interviewed offering a unique and personal perspective. In the words of Professor Paul Thompson, founder of the Oral History Society, “*Oral History gives history back to the people in their own words*”.

### Starting Points:

- Choose a **theme** for your project
- **Research** your theme using local and online resources
- Find **interviewees** for your project.
- **Themes:** Deciding a theme for your project is the best starting point when beginning your project. The theme can be anything, from a general history of your school through to a particular period or event. Potential themes could be: ‘**A History of Our School**’, ‘**Our School during World War II**’, ‘**and Working Lives in the 1950s**’ etc. Once you have decided an appropriate theme for your project you can begin to do some research to decide the direction of the project and whether the theme you have chosen is viable (i.e. is there research already that you can use as a starting point? If not, will you be able to carry out the project using oral history alone?).
- **Research:** There are a number of resources you can utilise for research purposes. An **internet** search might be a useful starting point as it will provide a variety of further resources that may be helpful. It is also important to visit **local archives** and **local history**

**libraries/organisations. School logbooks** are usually readily available within the school itself providing valuable information on subjects such as wartime evacuation and day to day running of the school, as well as some personal anecdotes. Looking at **old maps and photographs** of your area of interest would also be useful as a comparison and to note the changes that might be relevant to your project.

- Finding Interviewees: Searching out good potential interviewees is essential to a successful oral history project. Depending on your chosen theme, it might be a useful starting point to contact parents/guardians of pupils to find out if they have stories that can contribute to the project. This can include staff members and board members. It might also be useful to build links with local community groups (including elders groups, such as Age Concern and local lunch/activities clubs for the over 50s). A press release can be effective to local news agencies (e.g. a local newspaper or community magazine) inviting interviewees from the wider community to come forward.

## **Learning outcomes for Oral History Projects**

### **Key Stage 2: Learning outcomes**

- Ability to record people's stories and develop an understanding of oral history techniques
- Ability to select relevant materials
- Ability to identify and ask appropriate questions
- Ability to develop a range of communication strategies
- Ability to present information and results clearly
- Ability to participate in and record the contents of group and class discussions
- Ability to evaluate ideas, arguments and points of view and to use evidence and/or reason to justify opinions
- Ability to use a range of sources to locate, select, evaluate and communicate information.

### **Key Stage 3: Learning outcomes**

- Ability to record people's stories and develop an understanding of oral history techniques
- Ability to participate in and record the contents of group and class discussions
- Ability to evaluate ideas, arguments and points of view and to use evidence and/or reason to justify opinions
- Ability to identify and ask appropriate questions
- Ability to use a range of sources to locate, select, evaluate and communicate information

- Awareness of the positive and negative consequences of change and its impact on people
- Awareness of the change over time in the area, local environment, school and work places
- Ability to collect, examine and select resource material to use in the development of enquiries
- Ability to recognise places and historical information
- Ability to explain and share ideas, discuss difficulties and to review and modify work to find solutions.

## **Key Stage 2: Curriculum Links**

Oral history projects can fit a variety of subjects at Key Stage 2, for example History, Geography, English, PSHE, and Art & Design. The following strands, some of which are cross-curricular, are things you could consider for your projects.

- Chronological understanding - factual knowledge, dates, timelines, historical vocabulary
- Cause and effect - understanding and describing the causes and process of change, exploring how humans and physical features can effect change in the environment
- Historical interpretation - understanding that there can be more than one version of a given event using artefacts and documents to reconstruct activities and events from the past
- Enquiry and research skills - understanding maps and aerial photos, using archive material in libraries, museums and online
- Organisation and communication skills - documenting and presenting findings in a variety of different ways
- Speaking and listening - developing an awareness of other people's views and sensitivities (particularly those of other generations and cultures), open and closed questions, interviewing skills
- Performing and presentation skills when sharing learning with others
- Interpreting and presenting research findings using a variety of techniques in drawing, painting and modelling.

## **Key Stage 3: Curriculum Links**

### **History:**

- Identifying ways in which the lives, beliefs, ideas and attitudes of people in Britain have changed over time
- Investigating aspects of personal, family or local history by providing opportunities to engage with local sources including people, archives and sites. Example – museums, historic buildings and other places of interest
- Understanding the role of, and using, archives and museums for research, e.g. through visits and research training
- Analysing and evaluating evidence and considering the reliability of sources.

### **ICT:**

- Sound and image manipulation using a range of software, e.g. using SoundForge to make audio clips
- Social, economic, legal and ethical implications of access to and use of ICT. Example –creating a website using copyright free material and ensuring that copyright consent is obtained as necessary
- Considering the range of uses and significance to individuals, communities and society

### **PSHE and Citizenship:**

- Exploring opinions and ideas other than your own to provide differing perceptions of diverse communities and generations
- Identities and diversity. Example–exploring diverse local, national and regional ethnic and religious cultures, groups and communities in the UK
- Exploring community cohesion. Example – through intercultural interviewing.

### **English:**

- Engagement in specific activities that develop speaking and listening skills, Example –responding appropriately to the answers given to questions and actively responding to new/interesting information
- Speaking and listening in contexts beyond the classroom. Example –engaging with other schools, groups, organisations and individuals in the local community, nationally or internationally
- Questioning techniques and the use of appropriate language.

### **Geography:**

- Cultural understanding and diversity. Example – learning about different cultures and diverse groups
- Using structured and more open-ended oral history to explore a range of enquiries
- Identifying bias, opinion and abuse of information. Example – to validate and evaluate information
- Human geography including urban change, migration, sustainable development
- Fieldwork investigations. Example – through thematic interviewing
- Data handling and data analysis.

### **Art & Design:**

- Engaging with a range of images and artefacts from different cultures to recognise the varied characteristics offered by different cultures and using them to inform creativity and to question local/national identity
- Research and investigative skills appropriate to art, craft and design
- Using new technologies – film, video, sound and web based arts
- Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary practice. Example – by combining images with sound and movement to produce an artwork.

## **What equipment should I use to capture Oral History?**

### **Equipment**

The equipment needed is contained within this learning resource. Ensure the class has an opportunity to practice using the equipment before the interviewee's visit. It is important to be aware of whether or not the interview will be archived afterwards, as if it is you will need to ensure that the equipment you use records in the correct format (e.g. **WAV**).

### **Recording Devices**

It is possible to make digital recordings using computers, laptop computers, handheld dictaphones, telephones, and mp3 recorders that also store music, photographs etc.

While these can create very good recordings it is worth noting that none of them are designed for recording long interviews at high quality. For this it is still best to use a dedicated sound recorder that is designed specifically for this purpose. At the start of 2013 the cheapest quality recorder on the market is the Zoom H1 or **Tascam** which retails between £80-£100

You should aim to record .wav files (uncompressed) at a minimum quality of 44.1khz 16 bit (CD quality). Either 44.1khz or 48khz at 24 bits is usually considered to be better.

The 'no frills' versions of some of the recorders are pictured overleaf and they come without a tripod or USB cable. Due to handling noise you will need to use a tripod with these.

The Zoom H1 is simple to use, the internal microphones are of good quality, and it is affordable. However, like most of the cheaper recorders it is limited in the types of external microphones it will accept, so it isn't ideal for everyone.

The Olympus LS-5 (left) and the Zoom H2n (right) are examples of small recorders which cost from £155-£200. These offer more features than the Zoom H1, are more solidly built, and come with cables etc. but will still not accept high quality external microphones.

The Zoom H4n (up to £300) and the Marantz PMD661 (up to £430) are both popular recorders, which accept microphones with XLR connections. These are more rugged than cheaper recorders but it is their high quality electronics and compatibility with high quality microphones that makes them so popular. There are always new recorders coming onto the market.

### **Memory Cards**

While a few recorders may have some built in memory the majority will require a memory card of some sort. These will be SD, SDHC, mini SD cards or Compact Flash, and most recorders will take sizes of up to or over 4Gb. It is worth checking this before you buy a large capacity memory card.

### **Headphones**

From £4 for Walkman-style headphones to £9 for larger styles.

## How to use TASCAM Recorders (with Windows computers)?



### The Basics

1. Hold down the POWER button to turn the recorder on.  
You'll see the home screen. You can get back here at any point by pressing the POWER button again.
2. Press the RECORD button while on the home screen, and the red recording light will start to flash; this means you're on Standby. Press RECORD again to start recording, or the POWER button to stop.
3. Once you are recording, you can see how much time has elapsed on the timer. Press the RECORD button to pause, and again to return to recording. Press the POWER/STOP button to stop recording.

### Connecting the Tascam to a computer

1. Use the USB lead to connect the recorder to a computer (turn the recorder on). On the TASCAM monitor, select 'Storage' with the PLAY button.
2. To access the recorded files, go to My Computer>DS-05>MUSIC.
3. Each separate audio recording should be saved as a WAV file.

### Notes

When in standby, or whilst recording, use the left and right arrows to control the input level. Be sure to test this before recording any audio. You should aim for a level loud enough to hear clearly, but not so high that it exceeds comfortable levels,

creates feedback or lets background audio dominate. You can see the microphone levels on the monitor –try to keep them below the arrow.

**To delete files**, select them on the home screen (cycle through numbered files with the arrows) and press **QUICK**. This will bring up the option to delete; press **PLAY** to confirm.

**To turn on the recorder's built-in speaker**, press **MENU>SPEAKER>+/-**. With the speaker on, you can play back the audio files without headphones or an external device.

For a **video** of how to use the **TASCAM** use the following link:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSmBjhzHFWQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSmBjhzHFWQ)

## **Ethics of Oral History**

It is important to include a basic understanding of ethics when working with oral history projects and it will be necessary to do some work with your class about what ethics is and why it is important. The way in which this is done will depend on the age group you are working with and how much of this subject you may have already covered in classroom work.

In its simplest form the subject of ethics can be broken down to the following statement:

**‘Ethics is what we use to decide what is a right or wrong way to behave, or a right or wrong thing to say or do.’**

In the context of oral history projects the following points should be considered:

Ensure that the interviewee understands why the interview is taking place

- Ask permission to use what the interviewee says (e.g. can we use this in our exhibition about the history of the school?). Further guidance on **copyright** issues can be found after the ‘Sample Activity’ section
- What to do if your interviewee becomes upset
- What to do if your interviewee says something you do not agree with.

### **Sample Activity 1:**

- Provide an ethics worksheet to everyone in the class (sample of basic worksheet in appendix)

The content of the worksheet will depend on the age group you are working with. Choosing a theme, such as ‘right and wrong’ in the classroom (given in the sample worksheet provided) will provide a focus to the class in a context that they will understand.

- Discuss the summary definition of the term with the class. It is useful to ask what they think ethics means

- Allow the class time to give an example of what they consider to be right and wrong in the example situation provided on the worksheet
- Work through the tips with the class discussing each point as you and asking why these tips are important
- Asking questions about the information contained in the tips reinforces the learning, e.g. “What do we do if our interviewee gets upset?” or “What do we do if our interviewee says something we do not agree with?”

## Ethics Activity

### What does 'ethics' mean?

Ethics means right and wrong

Can you think of something that is right to do, and wrong to do in the classroom?

#### Right:

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#### Wrong:

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### Tips when working on ethics

In oral history, it is thought to be wrong to use what people say in their interviews without their permission. This is why we must ask permission so that we can use people's memories in our work

If someone we interview says something that we do not agree with, we do not tell him/her what we think. We are there to **LISTEN** and **RECORD** only

If someone we interview gets upset (maybe because we have asked a sad question), we stop recording and ask if they would like to continue. We do not insist that they answer the question

We always say thank you when we have finished asking our questions.

## Questions Activity

### Open and closed questions

Before preparing questions for an interview make sure your questions are open. Work in pairs to decide if these are open or closed questions, If they are closed what could you ask instead?

### Open and closed questions

**Think of 2 closed questions of your own about favourite food:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Think of 2 open questions of your own about favourite food:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Are the following questions open or closed?**

1. Do you like pizza?
2. Where do you live?
3. How old are you?
4. Are you left or right handed?
5. Where do you go to school?

6. Do you have a pet?
7. What is your earliest memory?
8. How are you feeling?
9. Can you describe your favourite food?
10. What do you like about where you live?
11. Can you tell me about your favourite book?

## **Interviews**

### **Interviewing in the classroom**

The quality of the interview recorded will very much depend on the briefing of an interviewee and how well prepared the class members are.

It is useful if teachers are able to meet or have a telephone conversation with potential interviewees before they are invited into the school. The briefing could include a short oral history interview to gauge the information provided and the attitude of the interviewee. For example, a shy interviewee who does not like to talk about their life experiences is probably not the best choice. However, neither is a very talkative interviewee who is unable to stay on topic as that can be very confusing for the children who are interviewing them.

### **Group Interviews**

- In groups of 3 or 4, assign to each child in the group a role. For example; interviewer, photographer, equipment checker, recorder/transcriber.  
NOTE: You do not have to do this, but it is useful if the children have set roles that they can focus on.
- Each group, using the questions they have already prepared, will interview one interviewee. NOTE: If you have more than one interviewee, different groups can interview simultaneously. Otherwise, each group will have to take it in turns.
- The interviewer must ask the questions previously prepared by the group. The equipment checker must make sure the equipment is working properly (including checking things like batteries, and that it is recording properly before the interview begins). The recorder/transcriber must record what is said in the interview, using an Interview Recording worksheet (sample basic worksheet in appendix). The photographer documents the interview by taking photographs.
- Remind the group to record the name and date of birth of their interviewee, and to thank them when the interview is over.

- Sometimes it is not possible to record an interview in small groups, possibly due to time constraints or lack of interviewees. It is possible to interview one interviewee with the whole class, however it can be quite difficult to co-ordinate the children and ensure that as many as possible get a chance to ask their question(s). It can also be quite daunting for an interviewee to be in front of a whole class at once rather than a small group. If this is the only way to collect your interview then settle the children in their places before the interviewee arrives and consider the following:
  1. Introduce your interviewee to the whole class on arrival, ensuring that they greet the interviewee as this will help to put the interviewee at ease.
  2. Use only one recording equipment device and place this close to the interviewee.
  3. If the class is divided on separate tables, ask for one question from each table in turn. Depending on how much time is remaining keep requesting one question from each table in turn until time runs out.  
**NOTE: If a question is repeated, request a different question from that table.**
  4. Ensure that every child has an Interview Recording worksheet (samplebasic worksheet in appendix) to note answers to the questions.
  5. Remember to thank your interviewee when you have finished.

It is generally good practice for the group or entire class to write a thank you letter to the interviewee after their visit. If you are able to make copies of the recorded interview it may also be a nice gesture to include a copy for the interviewee to keep as a memento.

## Interviews Activity

- Keep your questions clear and simple.
- You will probably want to ask some questions about dates, names, locations and these will probably be CLOSED questions which only give a yes/no response. Also ask OPEN questions to encourage the interviewee to talk. For example:

- Tell me about...?
- How did you think about...?
- What did you like/dislike most about...?
- What sort of things did you do...?

- Asking people to talk about smells or sounds often brings up strong memories.
- This is about talking and listening – something we do every day.

**Think about some of the things you might like to ask our guests tomorrow. Write them here to remind yourself in the morning/after.**

## Interview Recording Form

**Recorded by**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

Write the answers to the questions in the box below

Remember to fill in the interview details below.

**Name of interviewee:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Interview:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Place of interview:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **How to use sound clips and other audio?**

Oral history can be used for a variety of activities in the classroom, many of which have cross-curricular outcomes. Resources to use for these activities can be easily found online or locally. Here are some examples of online resources that hold oral history collections around which you can base activities:

- British Library Sound Archive, Oral History - a variety of themes, useful for classroom activities
- <http://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/>
- Museum of London, 'Belonging: Voices of Refugees' project
- [www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Get-involved/Collaborative-projects/Belonging/](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Get-involved/Collaborative-projects/Belonging/)
- Imperial War Museum sound collections - recordings related to conflict since 1914
- [www.iwm.org.uk/collections-research/about/sound](http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections-research/about/sound)
- Eastside Community Heritage, Oral History Charity - numerous sound clips on a variety of themes
- [www.hidden-histories.org.uk](http://www.hidden-histories.org.uk)

It is important to remember to keep sound clips used in activities to between one and two minutes. This means that you must be selective about what you want your clips to demonstrate. You can also use transcripts of the audio clips where appropriate.

## Audio Activities

### Sample Activity 1: Creative Writing

- Use an excerpt of one story from an audio clip. The following podcast from 'Somali Stories' can be used as an example and can be found in the following link: [www.hidden-histories.org.uk/wordpress/?page\\_id=2545](http://www.hidden-histories.org.uk/wordpress/?page_id=2545)
- Play the excerpt for your class, emphasising pupils' need to LISTEN carefully
- After they have listened to the story ask questions like what is the story about? Have you heard this story before? Do you know any similar stories?
- After the discussion ask the children to:
  - Write their own story like the one they have listened to
  - Continue the story
  - Write the prologue
  - Tell the story of someone else they have learnt about in a similar way
  - Tell the story from a different point of view.

### Learning Outcomes:

- Ability to identify and ask appropriate questions
- Ability to develop a range of communication strategies
- Ability to present information and results clearly.

### Cross-Curriculum Links:

- **English:** Speaking and listening skills, communication skills, performing and presentation skills (when sharing learning with others). Literacy, organisation and communication skills, documenting and presenting findings in a variety of different ways, open and closed questions and interviewing skills.

- **PSHE:** Enquiry and research skills. Developing awareness of other people's views and sensitivities (particularly those of other generations and cultures). Ethics 'right and wrong'.
- **Art & Design:** New techniques in drawing, painting and modelling when interpreting and presenting research findings.

### **Sample Activity 2: Sound & Picture Bingo**

- Prepare 4 or 5 sound clips and ensure you provide an old photograph or image which illustrates each sound clip and include 1 or 2 unrelated images to ensure that the activity is not too easy
- Divide the class into groups of 4 to 6 and give each group a set of the photographs or images
- Play the first sound clip emphasising the need to LISTEN carefully
- Ask the class in its groups to hold up the photograph or image which best matches the sound clip. Are they right? Ask the children to explain their choice
- Repeat this activity for the rest of the sound clips.

An example of sound clips accompanied by related photographs can be found using the following link: [www.hidden-histories.org.uk/wordpress/?page\\_id=1858](http://www.hidden-histories.org.uk/wordpress/?page_id=1858)

### **Learning outcomes:**

- Ability to select relevant materials
- Ability to present information and results clearly
- Ability to use a range of sources to locate, select, evaluate and communicate information.

## Copyright Issues

- It is very important to get **written permission** from your participating interviewees to use any of their contributions to your project.
- After the interview it is generally good practice to send a letter thanking the interviewee for his /her contribution. You should also send a copy of the interview and a copyright form and ask for permission to use the material for your project. Example – using it in an exhibition or on a website. If this is not possible due to time or other constraints you should ask the interviewee to sign any copyright consent forms as soon as you stop recording the interview.
- Depending on what was said the interviewee may ask you specifically not to use certain parts of their interview. Ask him/her to mark this clearly on his/her consent form.
- If you are planning to archive any material collected in your project you must make it clear to the interviewee that this is your intention. Archives generally have open access policies so any interviews that are archived will probably be available for anyone to see or listen to. If your interviewee does not want his/her material to be made publicly available in an archive ask him/her to mark this clearly on their consent form.
- **Always check** back on what is written on the consent form before publishing or using any material from the interview.

NOTE: An example of a copyright consent form, used by Eastside Community Heritage, is included in this resource. You may use this as a template to devise your own consent form.

**COPYRIGHT ASSIGNMENT & DATA PROCESSING CONSENT FORM**

Can we add your contribution to a local archive?

YES / NO

Can we use material from your contribution in publications, education, lectures and exhibitions?

YES / NO

Can we post material from your contribution on our website, which can be accessed worldwide, or otherwise transfer material from your contribution to Eastside Community Heritage staff and selected researchers worldwide? (Your name will not be included).

YES / NO

Are there any exceptions to the use of particular elements of your contribution (e.g. would you prefer all family names are not used or published)?

YES / NO

If YES, please state exceptions here:

.....  
.....  
.....

I hereby assign the copyright in my contribution to the School and local Archive. This includes all rights and benefits relating to the copyright in my contribution, including my right to bring action and claim relief in respect of any infringement or unauthorised use of the copyright in my contribution, whether occurring before, on, or after the date of this assignment. I waive in favour of the School all moral rights relating to the copyright in my contribution conferred by Chapter IV of Part I of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Print Name.....

Address.....  
.....

Tel.....Email.....

Signed.....Date.....

For School:

Signed.....Date.....