

ORAL HISTORY

As part of the Liberation 60 celebrations the Jersey Heritage Trust created a living archive of the period from May 1945 to the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953. Archivist Stuart Nicolle explains how the Jersey Archive undertook its first large-scale oral history project.

What is oral history?

Oral history is the recording of peoples' memories and life stories and to the modern historian it plays as important a part in research as documentary sources. In recent times the view of history has expanded to encompass the first-hand account from living memory, whereas in the past societies traditionally recorded the stories of the social elite.

Oral history serves a number of purposes. First, it helps to make previously marginalised communities more visible.

For example, it is through oral history that the experience of migrants and ethnic minorities can be understood. In the past it has been easy for such groups to be forgotten and lost by history, other than the recording of statistics, so oral history serves to re-establish those who had previously been forgotten.

Memories can also give a face to previously dry historical information. History is about people and it is through oral history that the details of the

'common man' and society, and the everyday things within it, are pushed to the forefront. For example, anyone wishing to discover how a domestic kitchen was run in the 1960s would benefit much more from the reflections of a housewife of the era than from the scant written sources on the subject.

In the past, oral history was often looked upon as an unreliable source that needed documentary evidence to back it up. It was regarded as of less importance and likely to be less accurate than written evidence, but the study of events such as the Holocaust



Some of the people who risked imprisonment by listening to their wireless sets during the Occupation, photographed by Robert H Lawrence at the farm Bel Respiro. The image was brought to the St Brelade Parish Afternoon and later featured in the exhibition of Liberation 60 banners in Charing Cross.

Two images from cattle expert Mrs Anne Perchard (née Billot) who was recorded reminiscing about the years from Liberation to Coronation: The Billot family with friends and neighbours from three farms in St Martin on Liberation Day, when they went to town on the lorry belonging to Anne's father Thomas "Tom" Billot.

has dispelled this myth as interviews with the survivors brought their previously unknown sufferings explicitly to life. The Holocaust was primarily a human disaster, and by putting forward survivors' accounts as reliable testimony the unbelievable becomes altogether more tangible. This method of recording first-hand accounts of events within living memory has undermined the previous mistrust of oral history and it is now regarded with much more respect within academic circles.

In the past, historians relied on written documents, but that limited their research to the available documentary sources. A person's memory is a living document that is constantly evolving, and in face-to-face situations the historian has the flexibility to interact with their subject, to ask questions and tease out more details. Nonetheless, oral history does not serve to undermine the importance of the written sources, but acts as a good counterpoint and companion to the written memory. Information gleaned from an archival document can be juxtaposed with a quotation from an interview in order to provide a different viewpoint or to complement it.

Jersey Heritage Trust projects

The Jersey Heritage Trust's (JHT) experience of large-scale oral history projects was limited until the Liberation 60 Parish Project. In 2003 Jersey Archive undertook a small-scale history project in conjunction with the Methodist Church as part of the celebrations of the 300th anniversary of the birth of John Wesley. An open day was held to enable the public to view photographs and objects from the Methodist Church records which are held in the care of the Archive, and from that event appointments were made to record memories of the church's history. It proved to be a valuable early project in the organisation's understanding of oral history.

In 2001 the Jersey Sound Archive was transferred from Jersey Museum to the Archive. This collection of a number of sound recordings was originally deposited with the Société Jersiaise by the Education Department and consisted of interviews with various people relating to the German Occupation of the Channel Islands, tourism, vraicing and life in Jersey at the turn of the century, as well as other miscellaneous subjects. They were mostly

recorded onto cassette or reel-to-reel tapes.

Since that time other sound archives have been deposited from various sources. These include the Philip Gurdon sound archive, which consists of recordings made for the blind by a group of Jersey broadcasters, and the Channel Islands Occupation Society (Jersey) archive, which includes a collection of programmes and recordings from the radio concerning the Occupation of the Island and some original oral history recordings. Amongst recent deposits has been a collection of tapes from BBC Radio Jersey featuring a number of programmes on a variety of subjects, including both live broadcasts of events and *temps passé*. As well as recording history, all these collections also provide experience of interviews and the different techniques of conducting interviews.

Liberation 60

The period 1945-1953 was chosen for a number of reasons. A great deal of attention has always been devoted to the Occupation itself. This time, however, the aim was to be not only forward-looking, but also to focus on the immediate post-war years of peace and prosperity. As Jersey's economy



A photograph taken by the local newspaper *The Morning News* at the 1948 cattle show - Anne Billot with "Sweetie's Bouquet".

Corporal Ted Dobson came to Jersey just after Liberation, as part of the "clean-up" force. The vehicle they used is still at Don Pallot's museum; pictured here in Gas Place with Ted Dobson at right. Mr Dobson fell in love and got married, and with his wife, Barbara, was recorded for the oral history project.

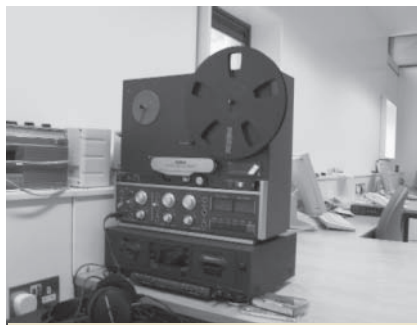
and infrastructure were rebuilt, a variety of interesting events occurred.

The recorded memory seems to stop once Liberation had taken place and it was felt important to bring the post-war period back, especially as there are still many people alive who would remember this particular time. It was important not to lose their memories. Memory is a finite source, and if people die without recording their memories they are lost forever. So with the passing of time, and the older generations of Occupation survivors dying, the Trust wanted to record as many memories as possible while there was still time. In addition to the recording sessions, people brought in photographs and documents that would otherwise have also been lost.

One of the first problems was knowing what questions to ask. What happened in the years 1945-1953 that the potential interviewees might have remembered? Research was undertaken through the almanacs and back copies of the *Jersey Evening Post* to draw up a chronology of the period. This helped to crystallise the questions that might be of interest, as the researchers were not only interested in Island-wide events but also in more localised parish happenings. One of the aims of the project was to produce an exhibition showing events in each parish, and it was important to pay equal attention to both aspects of Island life.

Technology

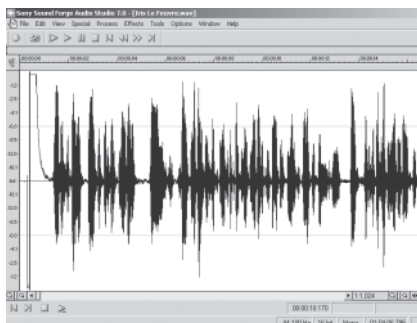
Technology was another obstacle to overcome. The JHT wanted to keep the recordings in perpetuity, and in order to do so it would be necessary to choose the most appropriate medium. On the advice of an oral history expert it was decided to use a mini-disc player, a reliable and easily portable means of recording – an important consideration when interviewing people in their homes. The recorded data from the mini-disc player were then transferred onto a computer.



Some oral history recordings at the Jersey Archive are recorded on to reel-to-reel tapes that can only be listened to on a reel-to-reel player.



The original recording is made on a mini-disc player, which is compact, reliable and easily transferable.



Sound software screen - recordings are transferred on to the computer and edited on Sony Sound Forge Audio Studio software.



Compact disc player - once the recording has been edited it can be burned on to compact disc so that it can be listened to on a CD player.

In addition we had to decide what microphones to buy, depending on whether we would undertake one-to-one or group interviews. Both situations have pros and cons; individual recording, because of the intimate environment, can make people relax and ‘open up’. Similarly, interviewing in groups can lead to the participants triggering memories for each other, but it can also lead to more forceful members dominating the session. It was decided to let the individual being questioned decide in which situation they felt most comfortable, as it was only by putting them at ease that the optimum interview could be achieved.

Interviewees

The next stage was to find people who were willing to be interviewed. Often oral history subjects come forward without encouragement, such as when a relative or friend suggests that their life story is of sufficient interest to be recorded. However, with a project on such a large-scale more immediate action was needed, so a meeting was held in each parish and parishioners were invited to attend, listen to a talk, watch a video and share their own experiences.

The success of this approach varied, with as many as 50 attending at one parish and as few as six in another, but the meetings did provide the opportunity to approach people to see if they were willing to be interviewed and for them in turn to meet the team of interviewers. Their details were taken and they were given the set of questions to take away so they understood the extent of the project and could give due consideration to their responses.

The interview

Not only was the JHT creating an archive: at the same time its intention was to sample the recordings for use in the parish exhibitions, extracting three one-minute sound bites from each parish (36 in total). So the long

interviews collected for the Archive had to be edited for the exhibitions. This proved to be a tough task for the interviewers, who were thorough in their preparations. They were flexible in their approach and took great care to put the subjects at their ease and to help them recall what they may have considered mundane events but which for the historian are fascinating details of life during the Occupation. It was good practice to let the subjects hear a copy of the recording afterwards to make sure they were happy for the information to be officially recorded.

As the Liberation 60 project proceeded the process became easier and more natural. It is imperative to ask only open-ended questions so as not to lead the interviewee or restrict their answers.

After the interview

It was important to resolve the issue of copyright relating to the interview. For the Liberation 60 Project we asked all interviewees to sign an agreement that would transfer copyright of their recorded interview to the JHT. This meant that in the future there would be no confusion over rights in the recordings and that the Trust can reproduce extracts.

Once the interview was over each disc was labeled to create a master copy, to be kept in its pristine state. The recordings were then copied onto computer and saved as a wav file. This meant that the original recordings could be put straight into the strong rooms and any editing could be carried out on a computer.

The ultimate aim of the project was to make all of the recordings fully available to the public. Cataloguing the sound material took a great deal of time, as the archivist had to listen to each recording in its entirety and make notes.

Ultimately, the Liberation 60 Parish Project served to provide a framework for the JHT in how to conduct large-scale oral history projects in the future. An archive of

memories of the years 1945-1953 has now been created and will be available to researchers to consult in years to come.

*Stuart Nicolle is Archivist at Jersey Archive. Tel: 833336
Email:
Stuart.Nicolle@jerseyheritagetrust.org*

If you wish to be interviewed please do not hesitate to get in contact.

Bibliography

Robert Perks, *Oral History: Talking About the Past*, London: The Historical Association, 1992.
Paul Thompson, *The Voice of The Past: Oral History*, 3rd Edition, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000.

Jersey Heritage Trust
Copyright Assignment and Consent Form for Oral History Recordings
Liberation 60 Project

The purpose of this assignment and consent is to enable the Jersey Heritage Trust to permanently retain and use the recorded recollections of individuals.

In respect of the content of a sound recording made by, and, or, being deposited with the Jersey Heritage Trust, constituting of the recollections of a contributor and constituting a literary work as defined by Copyright Legislation.

As present owner of the copyright in the contributor content (i.e. the words spoken by the interviewee), I hereby assign such copyright to the Jersey Heritage Trust. I hereby waive any moral rights which I presently own in relation to this work on the understanding that the content will not be used in a derogatory manner and that the author of the contribution will be correctly identified in all uses of it. I understand that no payment is due to me for this assignment and consent. In assigning my copyright, I understand that I am giving the Jersey Heritage Trust the right to use and make available the content of this recorded interview in the following ways:

- Use in schools, universities, colleges and other educational establishments, including use in a thesis, dissertation or similar research
- Public performance, lectures or talks
- Use in publications, including print, audio or video cassettes or CD ROM
- Public reference purposes in libraries, museums and record offices
- Use on radio or television
- Publication worldwide on the Internet

If you would not like your name to be disclosed please tick this box

Name of Jersey Heritage Trust Project.....

Name of Interviewer.....

Name of Interviewee.....

Subject of Interview.....

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Signed (Interviewee) Date.....

Print Name.....

Address.....

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Postcode..... Telephone.....

Once a recording has been made the interviewee signs a copyright form giving permission for the recording to be used by the Jersey Heritage Trust.