

*'You made me feel young again for
the afternoon'*

(Resident of St Helier House, February 2007)



Triggers to the past





Reminiscence through museums

Memories come flooding back for many of the Island's elderly when the Jersey Heritage reminiscence session team take to the road, as Jason Castledine explains.

Above Stuart Nicolle showing a cooper's tool to one of the reminiscence groups during 2007.

What is reminiscence?

It doesn't matter what age we are, throughout our lives we all recall memories and knowledge from our past. This can be as simple as chatting with friends or family about what we did last weekend or remembering how to cook a particular dish for dinner.

However, it can also involve more in-depth recollections from our childhood, relationships or working life. Equally, an old photograph from years past might stimulate memories of how the place in which we live has changed.

As people go from childhood to adulthood, they accumulate vast amounts of memories, experience and knowledge that relate to work and home life, as well as interests, hobbies, and social activities. The knowledge that we gain during our lifetime provides subject matter for conversation, as well as becoming the instrument with which to solve a particular task or problem.

On the other hand, memories of past events or people provide not only topics of conversation, but can give us a positive and happy feeling, as well as reassuring us on occasions when we are feeling uncertain or sad. At the same time, reminiscence can also trigger sad memories, and we always need to be sensitive to people's feelings when recalling the past.

In simple terms, reminiscence means to remember and talk about our past. As we grow older, the opportunity to recall

moments and relationships helps us to maintain our sense of identity and who we are. This provides a positive 'feel good' factor through recollection of achievements, enjoyable holidays or events, and strong friendships. For people living in residential homes, it becomes of even greater importance, as it helps to maintain a link to who they are and where they come from at a time when they are in an unfamiliar environment with very few reminders of their past life.

At the same time, for those working as carers in the residential homes, reminiscence can provide an important key to communication with the people they look after, and give them a greater understanding of each individual. It can also help provide a link to common interests between residents, allowing new friendships to be forged within the home.

Reminiscence can also provide a means to stronger relationships between different generations and cultural backgrounds, helping to break down barriers and remove awkwardness between two people of considerably different ages. For example, a recollection by someone in their seventies of a football career or trips to matches with their father can provide a common topic of conversation with a teenager who plays football and supports a particular team.

Therefore, there can be a wide range of reasons for why reminiscence work is important. These include:

Sense of community

Exchanging memories and chatting about our lives helps generate a togetherness and feeling of being part of a community.

Dispelling isolation

As people get older, the loss of partners and close friends can lead to feelings of isolation; talking and reminiscing about our lives can provide common ground for people to form new relationships and links within new groups.

Sense of identity

Sharing our life's experiences within a friendly atmosphere helps people feel a sense of who they are, and thereby gives their lives meaning at a time when maybe they feel less sure of themselves.

A part of history

Reminiscence work and the stories it triggers can give people from younger generations a first-hand perspective on many of the social and political upheavals of the last century. It can also provide people with invaluable information about past skills, events, etc that might otherwise be lost.

Recognition

Reminiscence work can give everyone in the group a chance to be recognised as an individual and have their opinions and views valued.

Support of others

While reminiscence can stimulate both happy and sad memories within a group, it can provide support as others recall similar experiences.

Creativity and stimulation

Reminiscing through objects and photographs provides one way in which people can continue to stimulate their mind and creativity, such as trying to recall a connection with a particular object or work out what it was used for.



A popular photograph taken during the coronation celebrations for Queen Elizabeth, most groups recognise Hamons and enjoy the fact it is still exists relatively unchanged. (Courtesy of the Jersey Evening Post)

But what triggers reminiscence? This can be anything from a simple conversation, a place or particular activity. At the same time, it can be stimulated through activation of the senses, such as touch, smell, taste or sound. In reminiscence work, objects and photographs can be very powerful stimulants in triggering memories.

The power of the object

A key to any object or photograph is that it provides an association to a particular place, subject, event or person. For example, a wooden butter pat might act as a reminder for someone of a childhood growing up on a farm and making homemade butter. Equally, a simple photograph or object from the Occupation can provide a trigger to memories of childhood or life at this time.

However, it can also be just the first stepping-stone to a chain of interconnecting memories. For example, remembering this time might stimulate memories of a relative or friend who served in the army and their experiences and ultimate return to the Island.



This could be seen in one of the reminiscence sessions conducted at St Ewold's residential home, where we had been showing a range of objects dating to the Occupation period. For one woman, the objects clearly stimulated memories, not just specifically of her life at that time in the Island, but also of an uncle who had been away in the army, as shortly after seeing the objects she went and brought back a small brass locket that he had given her from his service during the Second World War. Especially fascinating was the dent she showed us on the locket, from which a bullet had deflected.

So clearly, objects and photographs can stimulate a chain of associated memories as well as those directly related to the item itself.

Objects in particular can be handled and recognised through touch, thereby removing barriers to those with visual impairments and providing access to a much wider group of people when conducting reminiscence sessions.

In order to maximise the full potential of objects and photographs during a session, so that they can encourage people to talk about their memories, it is important to focus on key aspects of life and work. When making the boxes for reminiscence sessions, many of those that are put together from the museum collections will therefore consist of items relating to familiar subjects such as household, sport and shopping. However, the items need not only be things that people will easily recognise from their past, but can also be unfamiliar items that encourage them to think

about what they are looking at, as well as stimulating their curiosity. This can in turn introduce a range of memories relating to the subject of the item, even when it is not something they might have used themselves. Also the fun in guessing what the item is can help to relax people and get the group chatting.

Another key element to triggering people's memories of the past can be the setting or environment in which the sessions are conducted. While it may not always be possible to conduct sessions outside the residential home or day centre, many homes will often have outdoor visits, and therefore it can be possible to conduct the sessions on site at the museum.

A good example of this was with a number of reminiscence sessions held at Hamptonne Country Life Museum in 2006. Apart from the obvious attractions of the beautiful setting, the houses, the exhibitions and the lively entertainment provided by the Goodwyf and other re-enactors, the farm environment provided the perfect atmosphere for reminiscence sessions, as many Islanders either grew up on farms or had close associations with them.

Consequently, the use of farm-related objects within a rural setting has proved very successful with the majority of people within the groups who have visited. This was highlighted when a group from St Ewold's arrived for a session involving objects and photographs with a farming theme. These ranged from a cow peg to a drinking trough for young chickens and an Aero Broadcast Seed Sower, while the photographs featured a range of farming practices around the Island from the 1940s and 1950s.

The objects and photographs stimulated lively discussion, with many recalling both child and adult lives on the farm, or friends and family who had farms. In particular, one woman with Alzheimer's disease became very chatty, recognising the majority of objects and recalling numerous memories from her childhood growing up on a local farm. This was especially pleasing to the social activities co-ordinator within the group who said that she very rarely spoke about this and so she was able to find out much more about her than she had previously known.

The importance of the objects and photographs in triggering this was further amplified as the group walked around the site after the session and were able to further recognise a wide range of agricultural machinery and a bread oven within the buildings. Therefore, the memories that are triggered for people through the objects and photographs can be further enhanced when the sessions are conducted within an environment that relates to the theme of the session.

Where it all began – the setting up of the Social Activities Forum

The incredible depth and variety of the collections held by the Jersey Heritage Trust have always offered a potentially rich source of material for reminiscence work within a variety of different settings. In the past, this often involved visits to the Archive in order to view films from the Jersey Film Archive, or a number of trips to residential homes made by curators with copies of photographs.

However, in June 2004, Helen Otterwell and Stuart Nicolle, both Archivists from the Jersey Archive, were invited to a meeting at the Eastern Good Companions Club. The meeting brought together stakeholders from various sections of the care community, including representatives of the residential homes, day centres, occupational therapists and social activity organisers. In addition to the Jersey Heritage Trust, the Jersey Library was also invited to attend.

The main purpose of the meeting was to form a committee that would focus on the provision of social activities within the

residential homes and day-care centres, as well as seeking to raise the profile of the importance of this within these environments. The committee would also seek to provide a training forum for those responsible for organising social activities.

Following this meeting a committee was formed and became known as the Social Activities Forum. Under the leadership of Mary Spratt, the Health Promotion Officer for Older People, the initial committee consisted of Joan Street, social activity co-ordinator at St Ewold's, Carol Keenan, manager of Ronceray, Fay Baudin, social activities co-ordinator at Rosewood House, Jaci Graham of the Jersey Library, and Stuart Nicolle and Helen Otterwell.

In the initial stages, the role of the Trust was to make use of the Jersey Archive collections as a tool for reminiscence work. In the early days of the Trust's involvement, the majority of the sessions were conducted using the Jersey Film Archive as the vehicle for stimulating reminiscence within the sessions. The films provided a fantastic resource and often provoked lively debate among the groups.

The first workshop held by the newly formed forum took place in November 2004 at the Archive. As part of the information to delegates on the type of activities that they could offer residents in their homes and day-care centres, the Trust presented its ideas regarding reminiscence sessions. These workshops have continued to be held twice a year with a range of themes, such as Volunteering and People-Centred Care, with the aim of providing those working in the care environment with information and ideas. The Trust has had a strong presence at all of these and has continued to promote the wide range of sessions available through the services of Stuart Nicolle and me.

I became involved with the forum in the latter part of 2004 following a move from Jersey Archive to Jersey Museum to take up the post of Assistant Curator of Social History, taking Helen Otterwell's place. As curatorial representative on the forum, I could facilitate the inclusion of the Trust's object collection in the reminiscence sessions.

During the March 2007 Social Activities Forum workshop we had the opportunity to show co-ordinators from the homes some of the objects we use in reminiscence sessions.



What do the reminiscence sessions involve?

In 2005, as part of the 'Liberation 60' celebrations, we conducted a number of reminiscence sessions themed around the Occupation and Liberation of Jersey. In 2006 the reminiscence sessions continued to grow in popularity, with six film shows and 12 object and photograph sessions being held, including three at Hamptonne. A further addition was the creation of a number of loan boxes, with themes such as the Occupation; these were loaned out on four occasions during the year to different homes. It is hoped to continue expanding this facility.

For the object and photograph sessions a number of themed boxes were created during the year, including ones on household, farming, shopping and trade, sports and leisure and medicine and health. The sessions conducted by Stuart and me have grown considerably since we started them, and within the first few months of 2007 we had already almost equalled the figures for 2006.

Generally, the format follows a similar framework each time. Whether it is a film show using the resources of the Film Archive, or a session using objects and photographs, the main idea is to keep them informal and relaxed so that people are encouraged to chat about their memories and share their stories.



Talking to one of the reminiscence groups about an object from the Shopping and Trade box in 2007.

With an object and photograph session the objects will usually be shown around first to the group as a whole, with people encouraged to say what they think it is. The object will then be taken around to people individually to give them the chance to chat one to one and see the object close up, and even in some cases handle it. Quite often the objects will be a blend of easily recognisable items and one or two unfamiliar objects that stimulate people's curiosity. The 'mystery objects', as we often call them, are great for getting everyone chatting and guessing as to what they think they might be, and often when the explanation or answer has come it can lead on to a wide range of memories and thoughts relating to the subject or use.

Often as the objects are taken around the memories triggered by them can link in to a whole range of associated thoughts about the individual's life. A good example of this came at a reminiscence session at Communicare when I was showing an old glass milk bottle from Victoria Dairy and one man recalled a time when he used to work as a postman. He remembered delivering post to one house and accidentally knocking over two milk bottles and breaking them.



Photographs form an integral part of the reminiscence work, here people look at some of the recycled Liberation 60 photographs.

Feeling bad, he went off to a nearby dairy and bought two new bottles and took them back to the house. He then knocked on the door and explained to the woman what had happened, whereupon she suggested he could do this again as the bottles he had broken were half-pint ones and he had replaced them with pint bottles.

The story is not only a funny story in itself but also shows the way a simple thing such as a glass bottle can link in to a whole range of memories about work, events, friends and family, etc. It also helps demonstrate an important point about what social history is about, in that reminiscences relating to the objects we collect provide the backbone to how we put together the pictures of people's lives and life in the past.

Another important part of the sessions is the photographs, which are handed around in batches to the group after the objects. These give people a chance to recognise places, people and events from the past. Often people will recognise friends and family, as well as events such as the Muratti and their trips to watch it. We will often spend time chatting to people individually as they look at the pictures, and huge amounts of information and stories can be gathered from people as they browse through the photographs. The photographs also provided an excellent opportunity for recycling, as many of the ones that are used come from the photographs produced for the 'Liberation 60' exhibition at Elizabeth Castle.

Conclusion

It is planned to continue to develop and expand the reminiscence sessions with the employment of new objects, photographs and film, as well as continuing to make use of our sites as interesting additions to the sessions. We are still actively involved in the Social Activities Forum and new homes have continued to come forward to ask us to present sessions. So far the feedback from audiences has been uniformly positive and appreciative.

Something that has become clear with the development of our work is that it is not only the audience who have benefited from reminiscence work, but us as well, with our knowledge and understanding of Jersey life and objects increasing.

Therefore, reminiscence work is an important aspect of the work we do, both in terms of the benefits it can bring to those involved and for the wealth of information it generates about the past and individual people's lives.

Jason Castledine is Assistant Curator of Social History at Jersey Heritage

Tel: 01534 833138

E-mail: Jason.Castledine@jerseyheritage.org