


Oral History Consultancy

Recording personal memories

In today's rapidly changing world, Oral History collections in local archives and libraries have emerged as important new sources for all those interested in Britain's past and its people's achievements. Personal memories are seen as essential in recreating the past and keeping future generations in touch with their heritage. Gathering reminiscences offers ordinary people a place in a history that too often favours the famous (and the infamous!) over the ordinary person. Recorded narratives link the private lives of ordinary people to the public events of the past, telling us about aspects of people's experiences of which there are no official records.

These valuable records of people's lives and experiences paint a truer picture of times gone by than history books alone can. Collecting Oral Histories is a method of preserving the hidden history of previous generations as so much information about the daily lives of our ordinary ancestors is lost forever.

Furthermore, recording the reminiscences of people who are connected to a property or an artefact can provide a deeper level of understanding of past events and help us to maintain a sense of continuity one's culture.



"WHAT DID YOU DO IN THE WAR GRANDAD?"

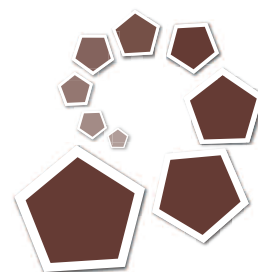


Do you already have recordings and need to find a safe way of storing them?

How could you use your precious material in an educational and entertaining way?

" WE'D LOVE TO DO IT BUT "

Ever talked about an Oral History project but been put off by the size of the task?



Do you fit into one of these categories?

A small museum with a busy curator and a lack of resources is keen to capture memories of the older generation of local people for use in the future.

In this case we would consult with the Museum in order to establish their requirements and formulate the most efficient method of gathering material. If required we could research the subject matter, possible interviewees and plan a project programme and methodology. Interviews would then be conducted by the client's own staff (with guidance from ATS Heritage if required) or by our own interviewers and we would provide digital recording to the client.

A client has previously gathered recordings stored on tapes and wants them to be indexed and organised. The curator has no plans to use them in exhibits immediately but would like them in a format that can be safely stored and provides options for future projects.

ATS Heritage would consult with the customer to establish requirements and assess existing audio material against these criteria. Audio would be transferred to a digital format and, if necessary, sound quality enhanced through the use of various filtering techniques. ATS Heritage would then process and edit the audio tracks in full consultation with the client presenting the final version on CD for safe storage and flexibility of use.

A visitor centre wants an interactive visitor information system including Oral History with linked images.

Having researched, compiled and edited oral history material, ATS Heritage would develop a suitable software interface that is attractive, relevant and presents the information in the most effective manner. The client's brief on target audience would be taken into account when devising the interface. e.g. Information could be layered to accommodate families as well as serious researchers.

The 'one step at a time' approach

Mention the subject of Oral History in conversation with a Historical Property Manager or a Museum Curator and you will receive, on the whole, an enthusiastic response. Many people have some fascinating tales to tell of projects once planned or interviews already conducted but the demands on precious time and resources, and in some cases a lack of expertise, led to the task never being completed.

Despite recognition of its value, the gathering and processing of oral history is

seen as being time consuming and expensive. When asked reasons given by consultants and curators for projects delayed or cancelled were:

- Oral History Collection would take too much time and would be too expensive
- There was a lack of available research, interview and technical processing skills.
- There were concerns about how to use the material to increase public enjoyment and the dissemination of the information gathered.

For these very real reasons, projects are frequently put away until 'next year', which



is a tragedy. After all, so many valuable memoirs are soon to be lost forever if we cannot get out there and capture them for the future. At ATS Heritage we decided to try and find a solution. We want to help you and to use our range of social research, project management and technical skills to make an oral history project "do-able". We also recognise that many organisations benefit from a 'one step at a time' approach which allows them to gather the valuable material initially and then offer a menu of further services that can be provided now or in the future.

Did you know?

ATS Heritage can translate and even record your scripts in different languages.

No More Transcripts

There is an urgent need in any Oral History project to gather the material quickly. Many organisations, although acutely aware of the importance of collecting reminiscences are daunted by the time and resources required.

The most time consuming aspect of the work by far is in transcribing the interviews. In general, it will take six hours of work to type up one hour of narrative. Written transcripts so often lack the essence of the original material; intonation and vocal expression are lost; dialect 'sanitised'; vocal expressions of emotion turned into mere words.

To alleviate some of these problems, prominent social scientists have begun a move away from the transcript and now prefer indexed CDs with a catalogue of subject areas. The interview can be split into any number of tracks and listeners can use the index to select the pieces that are most relevant or interesting to them. The key advantage is that once this vital work has been done, and the interviews are safely on CD, further phases of the work can be completed at a later date when time and resources allow.



The 'no transcript' method is proving extremely popular and has now been adopted by prestigious sites such as the Royal Naval Museum in Portsmouth and the Imperial War Museum.



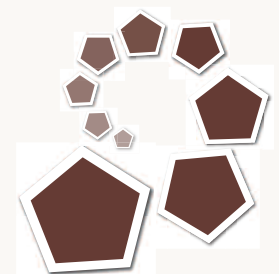
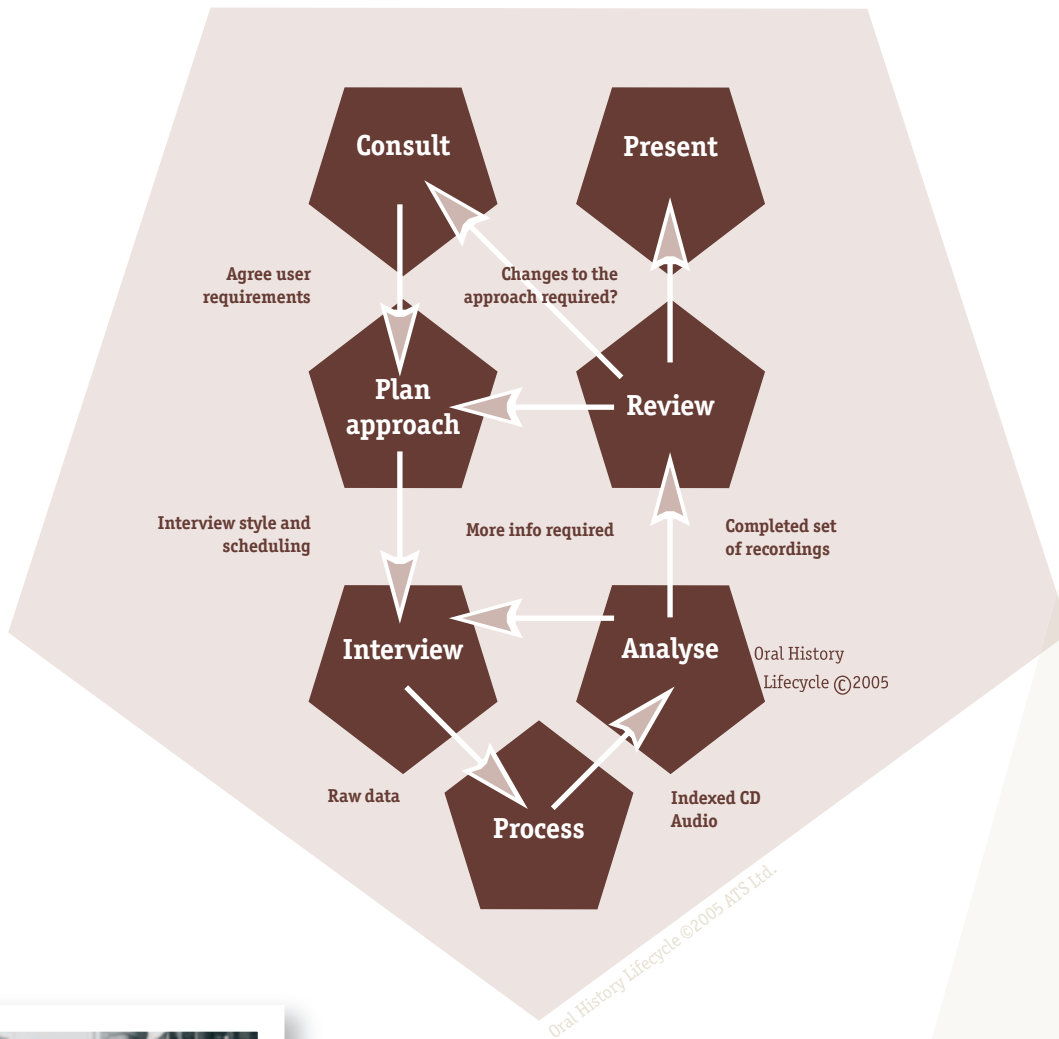
Oral History Life Cycle

ATS Heritage offers a full Oral History Service, from consultancy, collection and Project Management, through to audio-visual presentation. Our Lifecycle diagram is designed to clarify the stages of managing a project.

The most important consideration when starting a project is to ensure that the customer's requirements and objectives are fully understood by the project team. This can only be achieved through discussions and effective research. From this work a project plan and interview methodology can be created that is carefully tailored to the individual.

When a strategy has been agreed, we can research and locate suitable interviewees if they have not already been identified, and conduct the interviews. Our experienced researchers and interviewers are acutely aware of the need for a sensitive and discreet approach when dealing with people and their valuable reminiscences. If you prefer to use your own interviewers, we would be happy to provide training and guidance.

Once recording is complete, we would carefully analyse the material to ensure that it meets the original requirements. If this were not the case then further research and interviews would be conducted until the objectives have been achieved. The final material can then be processed, edited and, if necessary, we can help you to present your material to the public in a variety of ways.



Preparation - The Secret of Success

The secret of any successful Oral History project is in the preparation and focus. Spending sufficient time at the beginning of the project means that there will be much less wasted later on. Experienced researchers know (often learnt the hard way) that the first question that needs to be addressed is "What do we want to find out?", a question that often poses more difficulties than one might imagine. Careful background research needs to be carried out at this stage to ensure that the interview process gives us the most valuable material. An appropriate project plan can then be devised.

Planning the Interview

The interview strategy then needs to be carefully designed. How many interviewees do we have? Is there anyone else worth talking to? Do we want uniform questions so that we might compare interviewees or are we after specific information from specific people? How many interviewers are we using? Do we need training sessions to ensure consistency of methodology and awareness of personal bias etc? Once we have answered these questions we are ready to draw up an outline interview plan. When we have set our subject areas we can send a list of these to our prospective interviewees to give them an opportunity to organise their thoughts.

Interview Techniques

One of the main advantages of interviews is that they allow the interviewer to extract a wider range of information than from a questionnaire. The interview plan will therefore need to be flexible enough to allow for useful transgressions (the little things can tell us so much), yet structured enough to ensure that relevant subject areas are covered. What we do not want is random conversations and this is where the skilled interviewer is crucial. Knowledge of the subject area and interview training and experience, gives an ability to know when to probe further and when to gently redirect.

Presenting to the public

Once the research material is collected, it would be a missed opportunity were it not presented to the visiting public. This may be as part of an existing collection, web page or other data set. However, where the opportunity exists, presenting an oral history on a touchscreen or an audio system can create a real 'wow' factor. A very popular method is to use one of ATS Heritage's specially modified 'Talking Telephones' that can hold up to 10 individual MP3 audio tracks.

Talking Telephone



Authentic recordings from HMS Victory

Editing audio

If you wish to use recordings as part of your public displays, our experienced researchers and technicians can skillfully edit the material ensuring that important information is preserved on a realistically timed audio track. Any visual images available, whether on video or photographs can be displayed on a screen with original 'voiceovers' taken from the narrative. We have Audio Engineers and recording studios available to help with this task.

