

Guide to Longer Interviews: Oral History Practice

Introduction

This document will provide a short guide to conducting longer interviews as part of a Digital Collection Day event for the *Their Finest Hour* project. A longer interview may take place after a story or stories were identified as part of the standard interview that require more time to explore. The interview may happen on the day in a separate location or at a later date. Ideally, these interviews will be audio recorded and will be added to an audio interview collection that documents the stories brought to us by the participants. These interviews will be an important part of the digital accessions our volunteers will be submitting to our Online Archive.

The following notes will provide an outline of oral history interviewing, how it works and how interviews should be conducted.

What is Oral History?

Oral history can be best defined as a record of spoken testimony which is normally gathered from eyewitnesses to historic events and occurrences. In the case of the Second World War, large and extensive collections of oral history already exist, and are normally housed in both museums and archives.

These oral histories ordinarily comprise interviews with veterans of the armed forces, along with those who had served in auxiliary services, or laboured in industry, agriculture and other areas vital to the war effort. In many cases, there are oral history interviews with those who were not engaged in any form of military or national war service, but were civilian eyewitnesses to the events of the war, including child evacuees from bombed-out cities who were sent to the countryside, housewives, enemy aliens or conscientious objectors.

In the context of this project, it is unlikely that interviewers will get an opportunity to interview eyewitnesses to the war who experienced the conflict first-hand, as the majority will have now sadly passed on. Instead, this project will focus on the children, other descendants, relatives and friends of these eyewitnesses, mainly those members of that generation which came after the wartime generation, who will be telling the stories of their forebearers at second relief.

Reliability and Authenticity

It should be understood that oral history, as a source, can sometimes prove unreliable. It has often been the case that many eyewitnesses have either misremembered or embellished their recounting of factual events. These discrepancies with historical facts are often observed

by expert historians who have studied these events, and in certain cases, oral historians take great care to make an account of these errors in recollections of events.

Such will not be possible in this project. These stories have already been passed down in their existing form to the children, relations and friends of eyewitnesses to the conflict, and have to be treated as authentic sources. In other words, **the interviewer should take the interviewees at their word, and must record the story as it is told without interruption or correction of any kind.**

Parties to an Interview

A recorded oral history interview should normally involve two persons:

- (a) **the interviewer** – person conducting/leading the interview – asking the questions
- (b) **the interviewee** – person being interviewed – answering the questions

For the purposes of this project, **in certain cases, there may be more than one interviewer in the room**, possibly to assist the lead interviewer with additional questions or any technical support required.

There may also be more than one interviewee in an interview. This allows for circumstances where a married couple, siblings or a person acting as a carer/guardian for an elderly person may wish to be present.

However, it is recommended to keep the parties to an interview at a minimum – **ideally, only one interviewer and one interviewee should be present in an interview scenario** in order to minimise disruption/interruption of an interview, which affects the sound quality and content of a recorded oral history interview.

Method of Recording

These interviews should be audio recorded on digital audio recorders, but can also be recorded on smartphones or laptops with audio recording capabilities. Ideally, the recording device should be connected to a high-quality microphone.

The following instructions should apply when recording interviews:

1. **The interview recording should take place inside a quiet room or space**, with little or no audible background noise and no echo
2. **The recorder, or attached microphone, should be placed at an arm's length** on either side from both interviewer and interviewee
3. **A sound check should be carried out prior to the recording sessions** – a sound check should account for background noise, echoing, volume, as well as sound levels during a voice recording – the recording should neither be too loud nor too difficult for the listener to hear – adjust volume as necessary
4. **Earphones can be worn during interview sessions to monitor both sound level and quality**, but are not essential to the interview itself

5. **Make note of the exact date and time of the interview**, together with the details of the interviewee
6. **Check that the RED light is on** – on any recording device, a RED light should switch on, which indicates that recording is in progress – if the light is not on, no recording takes place – **make sure that the RED light remains on for the duration of the interview.**
7. **When the interview ends, press the STOP button on the recorder**
8. **Before ending the session, check the recorder to ensure the track was recorded and play the track to make sure that interview was recorded correctly** – sometimes an audio recorder can fail to record a track due to full storage or a simple error made by the interviewer
9. **Note the total time duration of the interviewer, shown on the track information on the recorder** – add this information to the notes on date, time and interviewee details
10. **Back up the interview immediately by uploading a copy to a TFH project laptop**

How to conduct an Interview

When conducting an audio interview, it is vital that **the interviewee should be made to feel comfortable and relaxed before, during and after an interview.** It is the **sole responsibility of the interviewer to ensure that the interviewee feels at ease** during this process.

A close-up interview where questions are asked about matters concerning a person's family involves building trust between both parties. Being asked to disclose information about loved one, relative or friend who has since departed can also be an emotional and nerve-wracking experience for the interviewee.

Therefore, **interviewers must treat each and every interviewee with a combination of care, thoughtfulness and respect.**

There is a **standard procedure to be followed** when inviting an interviewee to an interview:

1. **Approach the designated interviewee, and calmly introduce yourself**
2. **Ask them if they are ready to be interviewed, and invite them to the interview room**
3. **Show them to their seat, and ask them if they would like a glass of water**
4. **Explain to them that the interview should last about 30 minutes but normally no longer than 1 hour, and offer to share with them the questions that you will ask**
5. **Reassure them by telling them that if they wish to stop at any point, the interview will be paused**
6. **Inform them that if there are any questions they do not wish to answer, or anything they do not wish to discuss, they can skip it and move onto another question**
7. **If the interviewee gets emotional or upset at any time, ask them if they wish to stop and then pause the recording**
8. **If the interviewee wishes to end the interview at any time, simply thank them for their time and stop the recording**

At the end of a recording session, always thank the interviewee for their time and honesty.

Structure of Interview – Questions

At the start of every interview session, it is important to start at the beginning.

Begin by pressing the **RECORD** button. Once the RED light is on, **immediately state the name of the interviewee, followed by the location and date of the interview.**

Begin the interview by asking the following questions:

1. **Could you tell me a little bit about yourself, and where you are from?**
2. **Who (loved one/relative/friend) or what (document/artefact) will you be speaking to us about today?**
3. **What did this person do during the war?**
4. **What is your connection to this person and artefact?**
5. **When was this person born, and where did they grow up?**

After these questions are answered, **invite the person to tell you the story/stories that was identified in the Collection Day as worth exploring in more detail.**

Let the interviewee talk at their own pace. Once they have begun telling the story, **try not to interrupt them and ask as few questions as possible.**

The questions you may want to ask will vary from interview to interview, but here are some common ones to assist:

1. **When did this event happen?**
2. **Where did this take place?**
3. **In which unit/vessel/squadron of the Army/Navy/RAF did this person serve (if serving in the armed forces)?**
4. **How long did this person serve?**
5. **When did their service end/when did they leave the armed forces?**
6. **What was their attitude to the war/the Allies/the Axis Powers?**
7. **What is the significance of this artefact/document/photograph that you have brought today?**
8. **What does this artefact/document/photograph mean to your family?**

Once the interviewee has finished telling their story, **you might also want to ask them additional questions.** Again, these will vary from interview to interview but some general ones are:

1. **Where did your family/families live during the war?**
2. **Were any family members killed/wounded during the war?**
3. **What did other members of your family do during the war?**
4. **Did any other family members serve in the armed forces or auxiliary services?**
5. **What is the significance of the war to you, and to your family?**
6. **Do you feel that the war effort of the UK and the Commonwealth was important?**
7. **How would you like to see the Second World War commemorated/remembered in this country during the centenary (2039-2045)?**

8. Did your family house any child evacuees, Jewish refugees or American/Allied officers during the war?
9. Did any members of your family have any encounters with enemy personnel, including enemy Prisoners-of-War (POWs)?