

Suggestions for a successful oral history project focussing on material culture and built heritage

These notes describe organising group oral history sessions using ARCH's low tech methodology. It can also be used to identify people for recording longer interviews is desired. A good general background to oral history collection can be found on the Oral History Society website, which includes a section on community group projects.

Preparation

- Do as much preliminary outreach work as possible linking to lunch groups, heritage societies, care in home individuals, care homes etc before the sessions.
- Identify your area of study.
- Order maps, and source photographs. Ideally have both the 1st and 2nd edition Ordnance survey maps at 25 inches to one mile, and if possible digital or paper versions of the HER maps as close to this scale as possible. Paper copies of the 1st and 2nd edition maps are available from the National Library of Scotland. If budget permits, laminate the maps. If you are successful in booking a venue with internet access, these maps can also be projected onto a screen (from the National Library of Scotland website maps.nls.uk for the OS maps and in some cases the local HER website. Websites such as Am Baile, SCRAN and the RCAHMS may have local photographs, as might local photographic archives.
- Prepare permission forms, which must conform to GDPR regulations (the summary of how they relate to oral history projects on the Oral History Society website <http://www.ohs.org.uk/gdpr-2/> is essential reading.
- Prepare your recording forms, and purchase dots for the maps if you will be putting dots on paper maps.
- Source recording equipment if you are going to record some key individuals. Local museums, archives or some organisations may have equipment to loan. If you need to buy your own, check out the Oral History Society website for advice.
- If you are going to make digital recordings of some individuals, find transcribers. This is a skilled task, and may require fundraising to pay for their services.
- When applying for funding, also include a paid scribe for the group sessions.
- Identify places to store results which will allow the maximum number of people to have access to the project results after the project has finished – both on paper and digitally. This may be in several formats, but at the least should be passed to the local HER and Canmore. A downloadable list of sites is also a good way, and don't forget the local library. Additionally you might want to create a local display and/or booklet (eg memories about houses along a street). However, each type of output will also require time to process and create, so this must be built in at the start.
- Identify and book local venues. If you can find one with internet access, this will allow flexibility in map purchase, and perhaps some data entry during sessions. Consider holding some sessions in care homes.
- If your community does not have good public transport, see if there are ways that you can help people get to your venues, e.g. carpooling or raising some money for taxis.

- Publicise your sessions using posters and a press release to the local paper. In your publicity **make it clear** that the sessions are also for people who are simply interested in the area as well as people who have lived there for years.
- Try to involve the schools. They can come to the sessions (eg question adults about wartime in the area), or can photograph and get GPS readings of sites identified in sessions. Getting schools on board always takes longer than you think!
- Time of year can be a factor. Snowy, slippery weather can prevent some of your people attending.

Sessions

- Format: 5 x 2.5 hours each
- Have large tables for maps to be laid out. Bring weights.
- Provide a portable hearing loop if possible if there is none in the venue.
- Have plenty of coffee, tea and biscuits and generous breaks to allow people to sit down and chat.
- Ask for volunteers for scribes, but try to arrange with some people ahead of time in case people are shy about volunteering. Even better, when planning the project, have one person paid to take notes. Try to have at least two people recording at the same time, and if possible, build in 5 minutes at the end of the session to allow for them to compare results and clarify.
- Ensure all participants fill in the permission forms.
- Sessions will take their own directions, but it is useful to focus on four main points:
 - What buildings, sites or features in the landscape recorded on the maps no longer survive;
 - What buildings, sites or features have been altered;
 - What buildings, sites or have appeared after the maps were made;
 - Do people know of any traditions of buildings, sites or features which are not on the maps and for which there is no surviving evidence on the ground?
- You can take a thematic approach to sessions or geographical or a mixture.
- The facilitator should not be afraid to ask questions to clarify points, to confirm spellings and to ask if anyone else has heard the same thing. If possible you want to have more than one source for statements.
- Internet access helps, allowing you to use the geo-referencing facilities of the National Library of Scotland website, overlaying 1st and 2nd edition maps with aerial photos.
- At a minimum each entry on the recording sheets needs to take note of the map number on your dots and the person supplying the information.
- Try if possible to get the HER/Canmore number on the recording form as people talk. This will save a lot of time in post production! But usually this isn't possible...
- Having spoken to the HER Officer in advance, you will have a clearer idea of what information they would like entered directly to the record.
- If possible have a portable scanner and computer in the room, so that old photographs can be scanned. Build in time to do this. Make sure the person with the photograph is happy for it to be reproduced to the public. This saves the dangerous practice of borrowing priceless items.
- Try to build in a walk as well to look at some of the sites. This may be best build onto the project as an optional extra, since some people will not be fit enough to do so.
- People will identify others. Encourage them to invite people to attend, or to ask questions or visit people in care homes.

Processing the results

- Build in enough time to do this! You will need to decipher handwriting on sheets, match to the HER/Canmore numbers and format the information in the way the heritage databases would like it. This can often take another full day.
- Inevitably you will have to add grid references to sites. The geo-referencing facility on the National Library of Scotland and HER websites are a real help here.
- **IMPORTANT:** circulate the draft to all participants after each session, and stress they need to correct mistakes. This will involve posting out to non-internet users, and so must be done soon after the sessions. All participants should be encouraged to 'sign off' the final report.
- Be sensitive to including people's names for people who have not signed the permission forms. It is better to say 'A local resident reported that ...' rather than to name them without permission.
- Provide training and support for people to upload photos and in some cases information to the HER or MyCanmore.

Recording key informants

- If you have not had training in oral history recording techniques see the Oral History Society website www.oralhistory.org.uk.
- Find a quiet room without an echo, and if more than one person is in the room, ensure that only one person talks at a time, and identifies him or herself. Come prepared with questions which are structured, but open ended.
- Again, build in enough time (and budget) for transcribing.

Prepare a report of your results, which should include:

- a brief introduction to the project and to the area, detailing the timescale of human use and habitation reflected in the archaeological sites and features and the historic buildings recorded.
- a description of the method of recording.
- a list of all the records generated (a gazetteer), with the name of each of the places, remains or buildings and their locations (a national grid reference helps) followed by a short paragraph giving the information recorded, and the contributors. This will form the basis of bulk entry to heritage databases, and can be printed off and made into a pdf file for downloading
- a list of any photographs submitted to the project with captions explaining which record they relate to and who contributed them, together with copyright notices if appropriate.
- a short conclusion detailing how many records were generated and summarising the contribution this makes to understanding the past of the community.
- Acknowledgment of funders, contributors, facilitators and transcribers.
- Your report to the HER or Canmore will need to be in a format they want. Care should be taken when sending information to the HER/Canmore. This will be used by hundreds of people, so try to be as accurate as possible. Think about using phrases such as 'There is a local tradition that ...', rather than simply stating things as fact. Reference people and publications. And try to ensure that grid references are correct.

Publicising your Results

- Make sure the community knows where to find the results. Do a press release to the local press. Place information in the local library, museum or local heritage group.

Perhaps create a small display which can tour these venues. Approach the local school to see if they would be interested in having a talk about what was found, perhaps by some of the participants if they are interested.

- Ensure that your report is also available, at least to the HER and ideally in printed form to the local library, museum and heritage societies.

What happens after the project?

- As the project progresses, try to show how people within the group or setting could carry this on later. The 'low tech' use of maps and photographs requires little outlay, especially if the maps are already there, with only venue hire and possibly a facilitator needed. The more that members of the group have been involved in post production, the more chance that this less glamorous element will be undertaken.
- If possible leave your maps in the local community.
- Links with local heritage and community groups might provide another way to ensure continuing meetings, or to meet other likeminded people.
- Signposting during the sessions to other activities will allow progression to other courses, groups, events and activities.

This Document: v.1 July 2022