



Research Local Heritage Module

Format: 6 x 2.5 hr sessions, with additional trips if desired to the archives, museum and sites in the area.

Ideally builds on the Oral History module, but not essential

The role of the facilitator is to introduce the range of resources available for finding out more about local heritage. The facilitator must do a certain amount of research to know what is there, but should hold back from simply presenting the facts. The aim is for the module to be a voyage of discovery, with participants discovering different facts (even if you as facilitator already knows them).

There are clearly a huge number of sources available. The main ones I use are the Highland HER /Canmore and online maps on the NLS website. A range of handouts are available signposting to other online and paper resources (examples in ARCH website Document Library). Some people will want these, while others will not. Increasingly I have come to see how invaluable the British Newspaper Index is, now that they have included a range of local papers. A subscription is worth building into your budget. The Old Statistical and New Statistical accounts are also key sources.

I tend to avoid the term 'research' with the group, as some may find this overly academic and therefore perceive it as not for them. Instead, the sessions are billed 'to find out more' about topics which were raised in the oral history module (and indeed during many of the oral history sessions I would flag questions up as something we could investigate later).

Some people will not be overly interested in active research, so it is important at the sessions to have something they can do, for example exploring handouts and books, looking at old maps, exploring old photos or even still sharing memories. I always stress that no work is ever expected outside of class – and nevertheless you will find that some people spend hours trawling websites, visiting archives, checking out sites etc. Encourage people who want to do so to take pictures of sites identified during the oral history module. If anyone sends/emails any contributions, be sure to respond within a day or so about them – and state at the beginning of the next session what has been sent in.

The underlying basis for the session is the sites and features listing compiled during the oral history module, and information from research should be integrated into this, always with the sources noted. Some topics will naturally form, some fairly standard in each community (schools, landowners, wartime etc), but others will surprise you. For example, a recent course has led us to investigate early fox farming in Britain.

While looking back at the oral history module, work in this module should look ahead to the final display module. Try to ensure a wide range of topics from prehistory to modern times. The information in the sites and features listing will be used to update heritage databases, so ensure that you get the information you need. Remember also that you will be producing a binder which will include all the information gathered – the sites and features listing, panels from the display and all the other material which wouldn't fit into these. Generally the binder will be organised by your topics, and will reflect the display panels.

In Week 1 and 2 of the module, the aim is to recap memories and get people thinking about possible topics to look at in more depth. In week 1, I brainstorm a list of topics, trying to get participants to suggest them, or if not, phrasing them as questions. This can then be typed up at the end of week 1, and two or three main sources can be compiled in a handout and sent out. Use these sessions to defuse anxiety about 'research'. The two basic tools of mapwork and HER should be introduced and reinforced.

This then leaves 4 weeks for more informal research. In the first couple of weeks of the research module, I take materials already handed in or uncovered in my initial research, and group these into packs, to allow different topics to be handed out to individuals and groups. For more detailed contributions than will fit into the transcript, prepare summaries (crediting where the source is from) and print these off for the binder. I make physical packs because computer sources create bottlenecks and many people are not comfortable with them. Where possible we want active learners, not passive watching someone else do something. Ensure that relevant sections from resources you have compiled for background reading are also printed out / extracted and put in the packs. It does no good if you know about them, but the rest of the group does not.

I've also tried to guess what some people might want to do, and have packs made up for these topics to get them started. With so many people and such wide interests it's difficult to plan this in detail however – each class will be different. Try to slant some of the topics to your participants' interests and backgrounds. For example, if you have retired engineers in the group, there may well be some topics (bridges etc) to explore. People with artistic interests may want to illustrate some of the features/finds. Photographers may be persuaded to photograph the features identified, or even go into the museum to photograph. Some topics will be more complicated (eg estates), but others much easier and accessible. Try to focus on topics which can be done in the time available.

Each of these research sessions starts with recaps, where people will tell us information they have found out in the previous week. This can take up to an hour, but is important for people to share their interest and excitement. Then break into groups with the packs. Some may only want to read what's in them. Others may want to take it forward. As facilitator you will have to circulate through the groups. Try to have those who are a bit more computer literate split amongst the groups, so that for example, one person is interrogating NLS maps, one the HER, others as interests and talents allow. At the end of each session try to recap and signpost gaps still to fill.

None of this is fixed in stone, and here you need to be flexible. If people appear to be floundering, do more larger group investigations using the projector - eg seeing what we can find on OS maps. Keep an eye out for people on their own who do not seem to have found a group or topic. It's good to have some thoughts on what you could do in these cases. For example, you could give them a book/the Old or New Statistical accounts, and ask them to extract relevant information. Or direct them to the physical OS maps (which can be obtained from the NLS at A0 size at a reasonable cost) and ask them to note interesting features (and maybe pair with someone who is computer literate so that they could use NLS maps to get grid refs). Or you could direct them to the group doing newspaper reports. We can also do a hybrid approach: some full group search, and then some individual.

The key is to remember that the process is more important than the results! It is more important that people find out and discover information themselves, even if you already know the answers, or could do a more comprehensive job. When in a group, start with a question, and then explore with them ways to find the answers.

The temptation as facilitator is to do all the research yourself in preparation. This is rarely possible, and often means it is too easy to slip into the expert. Try to find the line of preparing enough, but also discovering alongside participants.

As people work, encourage them to write down what they find - and crucially to always list their sources - and to question them. I constantly ask 'How do we know this?' Where possible this information should then be integrated into the transcript. Within the groups encourage someone to be recorder. For the ones you work with, it may be you.

Additional fieldtrips during this module could include

- Visits to the local museum to see any objects from the community. You will need to set this up weeks in advance. Much of the material is likely to be off display, but this is often a real drawing point for the participants.
- Visit to local archives. There is a wealth of material and careful selection will be necessary. I tend to focus on valuation rolls, kirk session records, and then anything else which they might have. Again, you will generally need to make arrangements weeks in advance.
- Visit some of the sites. This requires attention to detail: permissions from landowners, logistics of car parking, timings, and ideally a reconnaissance trip. Where possible, I get participants involved in the planning: they will know car parking, may have a good relationship with landowners etc. You will need to do a thorough risk assessment. There are many templates on the web, but the Doors Open Day website has a useful template.

Not everyone will want to go on these, which actually makes them easier to organise. If people want to do visits on their own, help where possible (eg with museum/archive contacts). If people are checking out places on their own, try to lightly encourage them to be safe and responsible.

You can also think about inviting guest speakers, but with limited sessions ensure that you leave enough time for participants to do their own work.

At the end of the module, you will certainly not have finished the research – this is true for any research. But you should hopefully have a range of information organised by topics and ready to be used to create the display, for putting into the binder, and for updating the HER.

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