

Making an oral history recording

Some advice for schools from Suffolk Record Office



What is an oral history recording?

Oral histories are recordings of people talking about their life and memories.

These recordings are really useful ways of finding out about the past because:

- They might give us information we wouldn't find anywhere else
- They tell us about people's personal experiences
- They give us a sense of what somebody is like



Who takes part?

Usually two people take part in an oral history recording:

- **The interviewee** – the person who is talking about their life and memories
- **The interviewer** – the person asking the questions

Top five tips for oral history interviewers

1. Choose a quiet place to make your recording. Any noise that you can hear will sound even louder on the recording!

Think about:

- Can you hear other people nearby?
- Can you hear any noise from a road?
- Is there anything in the room that makes noise (for example, a ticking clock) that you need to remove?
- Do you need to put a sign on the door asking people not to come in while you are recording?



2. Plan what you are going to ask

Before you sit down to do your interview, you should have some ideas about what you want to ask your interviewee. You might want to have these on an iPad as papers might make a noise.



3. Listen carefully

Your interviewee might say something you want to ask more about. You can either ask another question, or just ask 'Can you tell me a bit more about that?'.



4. Take it in turns to speak

In normal conversation we usually show we are listening to what someone is saying by speaking or making sounds when they are speaking. As an oral history interviewer, you will need to make sure you don't make any sound while your interviewee is talking. This will mean anyone listening to your recording later can hear clearly what your interviewee is saying.



5. Make sure everyone is comfortable before you start

You will get better answers from your interviewee if they are relaxed and sitting comfortably



Some question ideas

Here are a few ideas to get you started planning your questions:

- Can you tell me about what has changed since you were a child?
- How many toys did you have when you were a child?
- What are some of your favourite memories from when you were at school?



It's a really good idea at the end of a topic to ask your interviewee if there is anything else that they wish you had asked about.

When you start the recording

Before you begin asking your questions, there are some important pieces of information to ask before you begin. So that people who listen to the recording in the future know what they are listening to, you should:

- Say what the date is
- Say where you are making the recording
- Say your name
- Ask the interviewee their name and how it is spelt, and if that has always been their name
- Ask the interviewee when and where they were born

After the interview

When you have finished your recording, have a think about what you would like to do with it? Will you play it to other people? Will you give a copy to an archive to keep safe, and so that people can listen to it in the future?