

Section I: Oral History

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I.1: Summarising and Indexing the Oral History Transcripts Some key issues in scrutinizing and interpreting the oral history interviews

I.1.1: Introduction

Between 1996 and 2003, members of the Alderley Edge Sandhills Project conducted a series of oral history interviews with people who spent their childhoods at Hagg Cottages, Alderley Edge. The interviews of Mr Roy Barber, Mrs Molly Pitcher and Mrs Edna Younger may be described as long-life stories¹. The approach of the interviewers was to engage in verbal, face-to-face discussion, and to combine their strategy with the use of photographs, maps and other artefacts. In addition to these visual techniques, site 'walkabouts' were undertaken to stimulate memories of the environmental and architectural features around the cottage area. As a challenging form of inquiry, the research method was part of an experimental project that emphasised a multiplicity of contexts, disciplines, and specialisations. Its goal was to uncover intriguing perspectives on life experience, and to understand social roles in the Sandhills area of rural Cheshire.

As a modern historian I have specialised in the interpretation and contextualisation of oral history, and of other autobiographical forms: letters, diaries, and memoirs. This type of historical source is frequently described as personal testimony, which is the looking back on, and the reconstruction of, lived experience of the past². I have mainly focussed on British social history and women's history in the period from the end of the First World War to the nineteen fifties. My current area of research is a study of wartime separation of married couples in Britain during the Second World War, 1939-1945. I am, therefore, especially familiar with the historical period in which the once-time occupants of Hagg Cottages grew up, and with the elucidation of older people's reminiscences³. My role within the Alderley Edge Sandhills Project has been to undertake the work of closely scrutinizing, summarising and indexing the oral history interview transcripts.

By the time I became involved in the project, transcribers had already turned much of the spoken dialogue into visual texts. This was a time-consuming process that incurred a large amount of commitment and energy. The main objective of the transcription process was to make the oral interviews as readable as possible without losing important meaning or significance. It was anticipated that I transform these texts into accessible, comprehensible, and useful data for academic researchers. These might include archaeologists, archivists, scientists, or historians. However, it was principally intended that my completed notes and indexes be inserted into a data

1 Long Life Stories is how Ken Plummer defines life stories that have been gathered over a longish period of time. They are accompanied by 'gentle guidance' from the researcher, and backed up with 'intensive observation of the subject's life, interviews with their friends, and the perusal of photographs' and other artefacts. He describes it as 'a detailed perspective on the world' within the subjective realm. See K. Plummer, *Documents of Life 2: an invitation to a critical humanism* (London, Sage Publications, 2001), p.p. 20-21.

2 For an explanation of 'personal testimony' see P. Summerfield, *Reconstructing women's wartime lives: Discourse and subjectivity in oral histories of the Second World War* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 9.

3 See Y. Simm, 'Men, Women and Wartime Marital Separation, Britain 1939-1945: A Study of Personal Testimony' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2003), p. 25, for a discussion on the meaning of reminiscence.

analysis computer package. Links would then be made between archaeological and ecological finds from the site and people's memories, a groundbreaking idea that may encourage greater understanding of the whole Alderley Edge Sandhills Project. Furthermore the completed materials would become more widely available to a local, national, or international public. It was hoped that by providing access to these sources I might forge a tangible link between spoken discourse, material culture and the natural environment. There might, of course, be difficulties and complexities in interpreting interviews that I had not actually conducted myself. However, by critically addressing these materials I should be able to reveal interesting memories, and fascinating experiences, of those who lived at Hagg Cottages. An enterprise like this is rarely a one-person task. Therefore, Mrs Sarah Whitehead, a keen and committed student from the Department of Archaeology at the University of Manchester, was to assist me in the electronic side of inserting my results into a new computer package at the Manchester Museum.

In the first section of this report, I discuss the methodologies that I adopted for assessing, summarising and indexing the oral history transcripts. Secondly, I address some of the tangible, and satisfying, results of my work, including a brief discussion on the use of photographs and maps in the on-site interviews. Lastly, I suggest new trends in terms of working with, and releasing, oral histories into the public domain.

I.1.2: Thinking about Oral History Data: Assessing, Summarising and Indexing

My research methodology was guided by a tendency to be flexible, as I searched out the best way of turning the oral history transcripts into readable summaries. Firstly, I had to choose a system for cataloguing my work. Following discussions with Eleanor Casella, I decided to use transcript page numbers, rather than tape counters. These indicators should become reliable points of reference for summarising the main points that emerged from the narratives. I found that a crucial requirement was to annotate the page breaks of the transcripts, especially when sending them to my colleagues as e-mail attachments. We all have different types of printers, which can produce variations in the printing of page layouts. Accuracy was, therefore, of the utmost importance. Using page numbers became a successful means of indexing these particular transcripts.

My next task was to create a dialogue with the texts, as I endeavoured to make sense of the huge amount of data contained on each page of the transcript. Since the development of oral history from the 1970s⁴, historians have searched for innovative ways of retrieving, interpreting, and archiving the meanings that derive from life stories. Ken Plummer argues that there are 'layers of life story meanings', which brings a focus on historical change. They move between the changing biographical history of the person being interviewed, and the social history of his or her life span. Among other things, these layers of meaning are drawn from wider historical moments and cultures. They are constituted through personal experience, language systems and power relations, and are emergent in local contexts and situations through interaction with others⁵.

4 The 1970s landmark study of oral history was Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford, Opus Books/Oxford University Press, 2000, 1st pub.1978).

5 K. Plummer, *Documents of Life 2*, p. 39.

In her research of wartime women, Penny Summerfield attempted to untangle what she similarly defined as 'layers of meaning' that are present in oral history interviews. In order to do so she selected key themes, topics and perspectives that seemed dominant in the transcripts. Using a system of fine sub-divisions and cross-referencing, she made connections between them, using a computer package like NUDIST. She supplemented this method with interpretation and contextualisation of individual oral history interviews. Her research was based on modern concepts, such as theories that relate to subjectivity, composure, and the production of memory⁶. These significant theories convey the idea that oral history narratives, which reconstruct part of a person's life, involve the achievement of subjective composure in personal memory⁷.

After much reflection, I decided to base my own qualitative indexing system on Summerfield's method. This included searching the transcript text to discover similarity and difference in people's memories of the past. It meant identifying markers of variation in narrator's lives, by virtue of, for example, social class, family background, geographical region, age, education, occupational identity, or religion. It also meant exploring how an interviewee composed a sense of self. It aimed to highlight the shared attitudes, beliefs, emotions and experiences of the local community of Hagg Cottages and Alderley Edge. Part of my interpretive role was to bring to light the dominant values or discourses that had shaped people's lives, attempt to make sense of them, then abbreviate them into note form. At times the narrators would reveal elements of verbal performance, as they spoke to an enthusiastic audience of researchers. The various interviewees would stimulate storytelling, encouraging colourful anecdotes, and nostalgic reminiscence. Yet, despite these free-ranging acts of memory and imagination, the transcripts were to become a rich source for revealing past memories.

As I read and re-read the transcripts of Alderley Edge Sandhills Project I realised that the researchers involved in the interviewing of Mrs. Edna Younger (nee Barrow), Mrs. Molly Pitcher (nee Barber) and Mr. Roy Barber had used a particular type of methodology. In order to learn about a local community's way of life they had adopted a method that resembled those used in anthropological fieldwork. According to Deborah Cameron, it is a method that is labelled 'ethnography', whereby researchers use participant observational techniques (e.g. recording things that happen and interviewing people). In effect they become field workers, and cross-cultural communication becomes important. They are simultaneously *inside* the culture, and in its day-to-day life, [in this case a rural childhood that was lived many years ago] and *outside* it, trying to understand the way its members [Edna Younger, Molly Pitcher and Roy Barber] think and act. As participant researchers they reflect on their own progress towards that goal. Cameron argues that the term *ethnography* has been overused in social science [and it might be argued in historical research] and it is clear that some research does not fit the standards set by 'classical' anthropology⁸. Yet, it might be argued that in the case of the Alderley Edge Sandhills Project, the team had formed regular contacts with these contributors during their archaeological fieldwork, especially in the naturalistic setting of a once-local

6 P. Summerfield, *Reconstructing women's wartime lives*, p. 12.

7 The following researchers developed these theories: G. Dawson, *Soldier Heroes, British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, Routledge, 1994); P. Summerfield, *Reconstructing wartime lives*; A. Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Oxford, Oxford University Press Australia, 1994).

8 D. Cameron, *Working with Spoken Discourse* (London, Sage Publications, 2001), p.p. 53-54.

community. Also, they were not just collecting objective, or factual data, but were involved in a qualitative strategy. They were trying to understand the everyday life experiences of a group of people living in one locality.

The transcript texts did not resemble the more orthodox texts of oral history interviews that I had seen in many museums, or archives. Instead they revealed that the researchers had engaged personally with the processes of oral history. They were part of a growing interdisciplinary area of research that searches out a broader cultural approach to the oral history genre. As similarly discussed by Amanda Coffey, ethnographic fieldwork and the texts that derive from it are concerned with the sharing of life experiences, biographies, places, times, family and friends⁹, arguably ideas that relate to this particular project.

Like many other academics, I have discovered that the Web is an easy, relatively inexpensive, and flexible platform for finding out more about research projects. Although there is an impressive array of web sites that offer promising results I have learnt to explore them critically and cautiously, blending their results with more conventional sources. As I began my work, I decided that I already had the basis for a good methodology in the system used by Penny Summerfield. But I wanted to expand my notes to engage in a more ethnographic perspective. Or rather, I needed to explore the interweaving of relationships within the cultural setting of the Hagg Cottages archaeological site, and to understand how the transcript texts might be influenced by it. The following oral history sites offered fascinating insight into interpreting, transforming, and publishing recorded interviews that had been undertaken in a wide variety of cultural settings: The Basque Museum and Cultural Centre, Idaho, USA and the Basque Studies Library at the University of Nevada¹⁰; South Utah University, *Voices of the Colorado Plateau*¹¹; Baylor University Institute for Oral History, Waco, Texas¹²; Oral History Society, c/o Department of History, Essex University, Colchester, CO4 3SQ, UK.¹³. Since exploring these sites I have interwoven a range of innovative ideas into my work to establish a useful and workable method.

I.2: Community in the Transcript Text

9 A. Coffey, *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity* (London, Sage Publications, 1999), p. 160.

10 Over the years many people have recorded interviews with the Basque people who live in the American West. Interviews were listed and then indexed in a format that includes an exploration of rural life, and the differences between rural and urban Basques. The museum site displays a useful system of summarising and indexing the material, which I have adapted for the Alderley Edge Project. [[www.basquemuseum.com/oral history/index.htm](http://www.basquemuseum.com/oral%20history/index.htm)].

11 *Voices of the Colorado Plateau*, South Utah University, is an on-line multi-media site that shows oral history recordings and historic photographs that document people, places and things in a rural landscape. It is inspiring in that it shows what can be done with an imaginative approach to archiving materials. I was particularly impressed by its use of photographs as supportive evidence. [voices@suu.edu].

12 The Institute for Oral History, Baylor University, Texas, not only offers oral history workshops on the Web, but also indexes and summarises various projects of the State of Texas. It brings a new dimension to local history. [www3.Baylor.edu/Oral_History].

13 The Oral History Society Web Page and Oral History journal is a national and international organisation dedicated to the collection and preservation of oral history. It offers practical support and advice on all issues, and features wide-ranging news on oral history work in Britain and abroad. [www.oralhistory.org.uk].

Historians view their subjects, or interviewees, as a rich resource of memory and experience. They undertake a number of different types of oral history interviews depending on the objective of the project or the kind of research undertaken. For example, in single-issue interviewing, researchers direct their gaze towards finding out about a particular aspect, or period, of a person's life. These interviews stand alone, and frequently shape the research agenda of a specialist area of study. Turning to questions raised in social history, researchers pursue investigations into topics like work, schooling, leisure, popular culture, or childhood. They explore wartime conflicts, world events, or political careers, all topics that stimulate debate, test hypotheses and consider assumptions. Other types of interviews characterize a human centred, self-reflexive and experiential approach. They invoke a psychological approach to the life story, offering specific perspectives on the personal or emotional aspects of a narrator's life. Details, such as marriage, divorce, or sexuality, are revealed in the privacy and comfort of the narrator's own home. In this situation the interviewer is especially aware of ethical issues, and of the need for empathetic interaction with the communicator. Oral testimony can also be collected through group work. As stated by Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, such group sessions are widely used as a means of assessing attitudes and opinions. They allow for the gathering of a wide cross-section of people together at one time¹⁴.

As I scrutinized and assessed the interviews that were collected for the Alderley Edge Sandhills Project I realised that they were not like the standard oral sources so often found in museums or archives, but could be put into a different category. While they obviously contained many of the elements mentioned above, the personal testimonies were created within the context of community. They also brought an interdisciplinary approach to oral history, merging personal memory, archaeology and a range of other specialities. The on-site team of interviewers and interviewees were engaged in the kind of research that puts community at its heart. So what is a community? Rina Benmayor suggests that it is not restricted to geographic or national homogeneity. Rather, community:

... consists of collective formations of individuals tied together through common bonds of interest and solidarity. What they lay claim to vary according to the specific community, but includes such things as land, homes, beliefs, language(s), artistic expression, traditional or newly emerging practices, or anything else which is seen by them as defining qualities of who they are, what they want, and what they seek as a community¹⁵.

For the purposes of the Alderley Edge Sandhills Project the idea of 'community' might be based on common histories, mutual interests, and a variety of identities. In an outpouring of the past Roy Barber, Edna Younger and Mollie Pitcher described the ways in which they had collectively shared in the practices, rhythms and patterns of rural living. I identified the broad framework of events that shaped their past, as they spoke of specific experiences that included: close companionship; seasonal customs and traditions; trees, birds and wildlife; play and leisure activities; food and

14 H. Slim, P. Thompson et al, 'Ways of Listening' in R. Perks & A. Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, Routledge, 1998), p. 118.

15 Concept Paper #4 of Cultural Studies Working Group, Inter-University Program for Latino Research (1988) cited by Rena Benmayor, 'Testimony, Action Research, and Empowerment' in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (London, Routledge, 1991), p. 165.

drink; health and well-being, school days, and religion. In other words their personal testimonies emphasised the pursuits of the countryside that had special meaning for them. As they described key events, changes and landmarks in the past, they constructed stories of the people around them. The network of family, friends and neighbours kept meeting each other, yet took on different roles in relations to each other. Each person in the close-knit social community possessed an ascribed status that was fixed by family origins or class divisions. For example, it might be argued that the children of Hagg Cottages – Edna Barrow, Roy and Molly Barber – developed coping mechanisms that enabled them to behave in ways appropriate to their status.

To demonstrate the way in which these transcripts demonstrated particular rural community ideals I have chosen one incident in Edna Younger's first interview. In composing her story of the 'aristocratic people' who lived around her in the village community during the twenties and thirties, she retained an air of respect and deference. She referred to her neighbours, the Misses Pilkington, the Handasyde-Dick's, and Lord and Lady Stanley, as 'a very different breed'. In her first interview of 1996, John Ecclestone asked her:

JE: But was it two communities?

EY: Yes, Oh yes, quite definitely

JE: Who kept themselves to themselves? With their own...

EY: Well, they'd had a different upbringing, altogether. Yes. We would call them in those days 'the aristocrats'. They were people that had a different education altogether, to, to the village people, and they'd lived different lives, and they'd always lived in big houses, and they were very nice people, very nice people, and very good to the village people I always found.... Lord and Lady Stanley, although you know, they were of a different breed, so to speak, you were made as welcome in their house as in any cottage¹⁶.

According to Joan Sangster, in order to contextualise oral histories that contain such values as class, gender or culture, we need to survey the dominant ideologies that shaped the world of the narrator. In order to do this we need to set the spoken narrative into historical context¹⁷. The nineteenth century essayist William Cobbett described rural life in terms of 'a beneficent landowner, a sturdy peasant and a village community – self-supporting and static'¹⁸. For many years these landowners had been the dominant social class in Britain, and it was a model of rural society that remained in place during Edna Younger's childhood. But it was an old hierarchy that was gradually breaking up. As businessmen left the cities and moved into the countryside, their greed destroyed the social relations that existed between landowners, farmers and labourers. The decline in status of the landowners was

16 Edna Younger (Transcript 1), p. 15. Interviewed by John Ecclestone, 1997.

17 J. Sangster, 'Telling our stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history', in R. Perks and A. Thomson, (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London, Routledge, 1998), p.p. 88-93.

18 W. Cobbett cited by N. Abercrombie and A. Warde in *Contemporary British Society: A new introduction to sociology* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988), p. 316.

symptomatic of the changes that occurred in British industry and agriculture in the years following the Second World War. Edna Younger's dominant memories in this interview were of the differences that she felt existed between those people that formed the fabric of her small community in that earlier period. Her personal remembrance concerning the relations of a class-based society not only provides the historian with understanding of patterns of behaviour, but also brings fresh interest to bear on rural and local history.

As I continued to analyse the transcripts and convert them into note form I discovered more emerging themes concerning the childhood experiences of family life: walking to school; playing in the copper mines; facing the rigours, and enjoying the pleasures of country life; describing the village streets, meeting the neighbours, and growing up. The three friends – Edna Younger, Roy Barber and Molly Pitcher – walked around the dig at Hagg Cottages, and there was a notion of a 'coming back' to their childhood community. Revisiting a place that had meant so much to them, and conducting the interviews as a 'walkabout', was a way of freeing their minds. It helped them to identify a broad framework of events that shaped their past¹⁹.

Whilst their stories unfolded, photographs and maps were a good support for jogging their memories and corroborating the facts that arose. Reminiscences were shared and self-confidence renewed, especially as family members were once more identified. These photographs formed a framework to several of the Hagg Cottage interviews and established some kind of chronology to the life stories. The combination of photographs and oral history interviews is called 'photo elicitation'. 'In a most striking way, all manner of details about childhood relationships, friendship, family ritual and family history can be highlighted²⁰. For the archaeologists and botanists, the use of photographs was a unique opportunity to compare evidence and aid their investigations at the dig. Molly Pitcher's maps were a particular resource for establishing the layout of the cottages, and for finding the traces of past lives. According to Slim and Thompson, maps of the past are useful for showing previous land use patterns and charting landscape change over many years²¹.

As I attempted to untangle the roots of a lost childhood at Hagg Cottages, the Copper Mines, and Alderley Edge village, I reflected on the way in which images and memories were interlinked into a network of meanings. As similarly expressed by Annette Kuhn, by exploring the transcript texts, I could bring together 'the personal with the familial, the cultural, the economic, the social, the historical'²². I could explore connections between public and local events, structures of feeling and emotion, family dramas, relations of class, national identity, gender, and private memory. Above all, in exploring the texts I had condensed them into a form that made them more publicly accessible. Once again, the interviews of Roy Barber, Molly Pitcher, and Edna Younger become a shared history, but this time with a wider community.

I.3: Oral History and the Community

19 H. Slim and P. Thompson, *Ways of listening*, p. 120.

20 K. Plummer, *Documents of Life 2*, p.p. 64-65.

21 H. Slim and P. Thompson, *Ways of listening*, p. 122.

22 A. Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London, Verso, 2002), p. 5.

A lot has been written on the advantages of introducing oral history into the community. Museums and archives are increasingly aware of the need to collect, preserve and share oral histories, which involves a large amount of transcribing, summarising and indexing. New media technology opens up even more possibilities, providing a gateway into the public sphere. Community researchers of Aboriginal history, Karen Flick and Heather Goodall, describe the use of interactive multimedia in history as 'an accepted and desired strand for storytellers and audiences alike'. Despite the continual frustrations of technical difficulties the use of the computerised form nonetheless holds exciting possibilities. Spoken histories can now have a 'public platform'²³. Well-known British collections, such as those held at: The Imperial War Museum, London; The Mass-Observation Archive, Sussex, and The North-West Sound Archives, Lancashire, are gradually putting their oral histories into computerised format. This is a laudable situation, and will hopefully continue. However, as the work at the Alderley Edge Project has demonstrated, there are theoretical and methodological developments in the oral history field that can be advanced even more. The first is the blending of archaeological and scientific evidence with tape-recorded interviews. The second is the expansion of interpretive history as supplementary evidence in museums and archives. While indexing and cataloguing is important, the deeper layers of meaning that exist within the text should not be lost. I am arguing that as each transcript text is summarised and indexed, a textual analysis of it should also be preserved for posterity. In the words of Raphael Samuel²⁴, 'The information which he [the historian] brushes aside as irrelevant may be just the thing upon which a future researcher will seize – if he is given the chance'²⁵. Despite the constraints of time and financial resources, the active reclamation of community history offers a challenge for future research.

23 K. Flick and H. Goodall, 'Angledool stories: Aboriginal histories in hypermedia', R. Perks and A. Thomson, (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, p.p. 421-431.

24The historian, Raphael Samuel, was a much revered collector of the spoken word and people's memories. He died in 1996.

25 R. Samuel, 'Perils of the transcript' in R. Perks and A. Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, p. 392.