

Victoria County History of Cumbria Project

LOCAL MEMORY AND ORAL TESTIMONY

1. Why are local memory and oral testimony important?

One important source of information for local history is people themselves. There are likely to be people in the community – particularly older members – with a store of memories, knowledge and experiences, and they may be able to illuminate those periods when documentary evidence is lacking. They may have specialist knowledge which does not appear in the formal record. Their memories can be particularly useful for the sections on economic history after 1945 and on communal activities in the Social History section. Oral testimony can be collected to capture these rich, often hidden, seams of local knowledge and culture, before they are lost. Possible contributors for VCH purposes might include landowners, farmers, business owners, parish council members, as well as other local residents. You might have memories of your own that you would like to share by writing or recording a personal testimony, or by speaking to someone who can do this for you.

2. What do we mean by capturing local memory?

There are many ways to capture local memory and oral testimony, ranging from informal and anecdotal conversations, to more formal, recorded interviews. You may be most comfortable simply taking notes while chatting to a friend or neighbour over a cup of tea; you might like to gather a group of people together for a conversation about their memories and experiences; or ask people to note down their own personal recollections.

Alternatively, you may wish to work in a way that is more formal or generates more 'hard' data, perhaps by sending out a survey with your key questions, conducting recorded interviews with individuals or groups, or by making short film clips of members of the community speaking. You will need to decide which of these approaches are most appropriate for you and your community. At whatever level you operate, it is important to respect the rights and integrity of the people you are talking to, to be aware of sensitive topics and issues of confidentiality and copyright, and you will need to acknowledge or credit your source when reporting or presenting material gathered from the community (unless they have requested anonymity – see below).

3. How can you use oral testimony in the VCH Cumbria project?

In many cases, you will probably simply wish to draw on the oral testimonies you have gathered to inform your research by summarising information obtained from an interview in the body of your article. In such cases your interviewee will be acknowledged as a source in

a footnote in the usual way. However, you might like to consider whether a particularly rich interview might be suitable for posting on the project website as an historical source in its own right, relating to the place you are researching. Such material might take the form of a written transcript or a digital audio or video file. Your contributor(s) would need to provide their consent for this and your material must be accompanied by a signed copy of our 'Contributor's Consent Form' (see below).

4. Recording and filming oral testimonies

Recording or filming conversations, interviews or testimonies, and then transcribing them, means that you do not miss anything that is said and helps preserve the person's testimony in their own words for the benefit of others, including future generations. This process requires careful preparation and handling of recorded material, and there are a number of practical and ethical issues to consider. In this guide we give some simple pointers to act as a protocol to be followed by all volunteers undertaking oral history interviews for the VCH Cumbria project. Should you wish to carry out recorded interviews, we strongly recommend that you visit the Oral History Society's website (<http://www.oralhistory.org.uk>), read through their excellent online guidance on 'Practical Advice' and 'Ethics', and consult their reading list. We ask that anyone undertaking an oral history interview for the project abides by the Oral History Society Ethical Guidelines, which detail the responsibilities of interviewers before, during, and after an interview has taken place. This will put your work on an ethically sound footing, and make the interview process a rewarding experience for both you and your contributors.

4.1 Recording Equipment

Although digital recordings are preferable, not everyone has access to digital recording equipment. If all you have access to is an old-fashioned tape recorder or dictaphone, these are still better than nothing, provided that the sound quality is sufficient for you to listen back and make transcripts. If you wish to preserve the recording, you will eventually need to have the tape converted into a digital file before it degrades or becomes obsolete. If you have access to a portable digital audio recorder, that would be a more versatile and durable means of recording. Some local historians, local history societies and oral history projects have recorders, so you may be able to borrow or hire one. For detailed technical advice, please see the Oral History Society's 'Practical Advice' page (<http://www.oralhistory.org.uk>). If, after recording your material, you wish to make transcripts, bear in mind that transcribing interviews can take a long time. You can also use a digital film camera, should you have one, to film individuals or groups talking. However, you will need to make sure that everyone is happy to appear on film. Bear in mind also that the sound quality may be poorer, and you will need to make sure that the camera is held steady, preferably on a

tripod or fixed surface. It would be a good idea to practice first! Whatever equipment you use, remember to:

- Make sure you have sufficient battery power and memory space with you to complete the task,
- Record a short 'test' piece before beginning the formal recording in order to check that it is working, switched on, and at the right distance to pick up sound.
- Make sure you have the informed consent of all those participating (see below)

4.2 Informed Consent

If you are making recordings, films and/or transcripts, you must seek the informed consent of contributors for the uses you intend to make of their recorded or transcribed speech. You need to be explicit about what you intend to do, and both you and the contributor will need to sign consent forms at the conclusion of an interview. In addition, if you think you might submit recorded material to us for archiving or posting on the project website, then your contributors will need to be informed. A 'Contributor's Consent Form' can be found at the end of this document. As the owner of the actual recording, you will also need to give us your consent to make the material available online. Again, we strongly recommend that you familiarise yourself with the ethics and 'good practice' of conducting oral history interviews, and in particular, read the Oral History Society's Ethical Guidelines and explanation of copyright law and consent. Discussions of copyright and consent forms may seem rather daunting, but they are there to ensure that contributors are fully aware of, and comfortable with, the public use of their comments. If you have any doubts, please contact the VCH Cumbria project.

4.4 Tips on conducting an interview

For detailed advice, please look at the principal oral history text books, talk to local historians who have experience of oral history interviews, and consult the Oral History Society website (<http://www.oralhistory.org.uk>). Here are just a few simple tips:

- Agree a comfortable and acceptable place to meet (preferably somewhere quiet!).
- Make sure you understand your contributors' roles and relationship to the place/topic you are going to discuss with them. It would be a good idea to take an Ordnance Survey map with you to identify specific places and features mentioned during the interview.
- Think about the themes you want to cover. Make a short list of essential preliminary questions (e.g. their name, date of birth, occupation), followed by some simple, thematic questions that you would like to ask over the course of the conversation.
- Before you begin the recording, explain how you are going to conduct and record the interview, and the uses to which the recorded material will eventually be put. If you intend to send material for posting to the project website, please explain this.

- Make sure your recording equipment is working and at the right distance.
- Remember your questions, but allow the conversation to flow naturally, allow the contributor plenty of time to speak, and let them speak for themselves. Don't be afraid to explore unplanned topics or trains of thought.
- At the end of the recording, talk your contributor through the content and purpose of the consent form(s), and give them opportunity to sign; of course, they are free to decline or put limitations on the use of the material.
- Make sure you exchange contact details, so that if contributors have any doubts or queries, they can get in touch.
- After the interview, remember to let your contributor(s) know if/when their material is made publicly available on the project website.

5. Privacy and Anonymity

Many contributors will be happy to be named and credited in reports drawn up following informal conversations, or in sound files, films and transcripts, and this is preferable as it gives the information validity and a sense of identity. However, if they wish, contributors can remain anonymous in any publicly available material. As the researcher/interviewer, you will need to keep a record of your contributors' names and contact details, but you can make sure that all the material made public remains anonymous by editing their names out of reports, copies of recordings or transcripts. You may also need to consider the privacy and interests of any third parties who are mentioned during the course of an interview (please see the 'Ethics' advice provided on the Oral History Society website for more information on this - (<http://www.oralhistory.org.uk>).

6. Using Oral Testimony in VCH parish/township histories

'Secondary' use

You may simply wish to draw on the oral testimonies you have gathered in your draft parish/township history. In this case, please make sure you acknowledge your sources (unless they have requested anonymity) in a footnote. The normal formula for such a reference should be along the following lines: 'Recorded interview with John Smith, Carlisle, 28 July 2014.' or 'Inf. From John Smith, Carlisle (2014)' – the latter in cases where the interview has not been recorded. Where a contributor wishes to remain anonymous, it is probably simplest to use the traditional VCH formula: 'Local inf. (2014).' If you have recorded an interview then your contributors will need to have given you their consent and signed a 'Contributor's Consent Form'.

'Primary' use: submitting recordings and transcripts for posting on the project website

If you would like to archive your oral testimonies with us or post them on the project website as digital audio files, film files and/or as a written transcript, please submit them as

digital audio recordings in a standard digital format (such as a WAV file) or video clips as MPEG files. Transcripts should be sent as Word files if at all possible. Your contributors will need to provide their consent for this and your material must be accompanied by a signed copy of our 'Contributor's Consent Form'.

And finally...

If the practicalities and permissions of capturing local memory and oral testimony sound daunting, please don't be put off! People are often very happy to share their recollections, and this may prove to be the most important and interesting aspect of your research. You may well find that you prefer to gather evidence through informal conversations and to make 'secondary' use of it, rather than creating and archiving full oral history recordings.

VICTORIA COUNTY HISTORY OF CUMBRIA: ORAL TESTIMONY

CONTRIBUTOR'S CONSENT FORM

*Interviewers, please print off both pages of this form for your contributor to read and sign, and return **a completed form for each interviewee** by post to the address given below.*

INFORMATION FOR CONTRIBUTORS:

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by a local researcher as part of the Victoria County History (VCH) Cumbria project. The VCH is an internationally respected work of reference which ultimately aims to write the history of every town and village in England. No VCH town or village histories had been published for the historic counties of Cumberland and Westmorland before the VCH Cumbria project was launched in 2010. Led from the Department of History at Lancaster University and working with volunteer local historians, the project has embarked on an ambitious programme of work to start the process of researching and writing the history of every place in Cumberland and Westmorland. You can find out more by visiting the project website at www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk

We are seeking your consent to use your testimony to inform research on a VCH parish/township article and to be cited as a source of information. In addition, we also ask consent to include your testimony on our project website, which serves as a resource bank for every community in Cumbria for which a VCH article will be written. By making the recorded material publicly available in this way, it will preserve it for future researchers. Please therefore complete and sign the second page of this form and hand it to your interviewer.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to get in touch via the following address:
VCH Cumbria Project, Department of History, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YT.
Email: s.rose2@lancaster.ac.uk or a.winchester@lancaster.ac.uk .

VICTORIA COUNTY HISTORY OF CUMBRIA: ORAL TESTIMONY CONTRIBUTOR'S CONSENT FORM

Interviewee

Name:.....

Address:.....

Telephone:.....

Email:.....

Interviewer

Name:.....

Address:.....

Telephone:.....

Email:.....

In regard to the interview/s which took place on:

Date/s:.....

Regarding the following common(s):.....

Declaration by the Interviewee:

I confirm that I consented to take part in the recording *(please tick)*

I give my consent for the recorded material to be used
and cited in a VCH parish/township article *(please tick)*

I agree to the recording to be made publicly available
on the Cumbria County History Trust Website
www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk *(please tick)*

Signed by Interviewee:

Name in block capitals:.....Date:.....