

Library of Birmingham Archives & Collections

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

Birmingham City Archives holds a very large number of sound recordings, amongst which are several oral history collections. Here follows a summary of these:

MS 1497 Cassette copies of recordings made by the **Digbeth and Deritend Local History Project** in 1986. The original recordings are in the City Sound Archive. Fourteen interviews with women and men who used to live in the Digbeth area from c. 1900 to 1940. Includes interviews with several people of Italian origin, as that area had attracted settlement by a number of Italian families. Memories of the area include information on the substantial markets of Birmingham, which are nearby. All interviews have a typewritten transcript. The cassettes can be listened to but may not be copied for researchers.

MS 1611 Records of **Banner Theatre Company**. Banner was formed in 1974 as a socialist theatre company by members of the Grey Cock Folk Club who wished to produce documentary shows using a multi media technique of drama, folk music, slides and actuality tape recordings. The company based their work on interviews with workers and others involved in a particular campaign or issue. Many of these recordings could be classed as oral history and they are particularly rich in information about working lives and social conditions. Most, but not all, recordings are from the Birmingham and West Midland area. There are approximately 1500 cassette tapes. Nearly 1000 have been catalogued and indexed. Transcripts exist for some of the interviews. Approximately a third of the collection is box listed. Permission must be obtained from Banner Theatre Company to consult the tapes and a listening copy would have to be made before tapes could be listened to. Tapes may not be copied for researchers.

MS 1715 Birmingham Library Services: **The People of Birmingham Exhibition**, 1991. The exhibition aimed to collect photographs, oral memories and writings from citizens of Birmingham. A particular effort was made to establish contact with elderly people and with community groups within the city. A number of Library staff were given training in the use of tape recorders, but very few completed tapes found

their way back to the City Archives. Of those that did, several are from members of Birmingham's Chinese community. There are brief summaries, but no transcripts. A draft list is available. A listening copy has to be made before a tape can be heard.

Tapes. may not be copied for researchers.

MS 1902

Records deposited by Dr Carl Chinn, local historian, include about 100 cassettes of oral history interviews. Most are elderly people; most are about past times in the Sparkbrook area of Birmingham. There is no complete list of tapes and about a third have typewritten transcripts. A listening copy has to be made before a tape can be heard.

Permission is required from Carl Chinn, The School of History, University of Birmingham.

Tapes. may not be copied for researchers.

MS 2118

Cassettes deposited by Professor Ian Grosvenor, historian. Three cassette tapes with interviews of men who came to Birmingham from the Punjab in the 1960s, about education and teaching, language, racism. There is a draft list and a manuscript transcript of each tape. These are open for research. A listening copy has to be made before a tape can be heard.

The cassette tapes may not be copied for researchers.

MS 4000

The Charles Parker Archive. This includes a substantial body of sound recordings, about two thirds of which were made for specific BBC programmes. However, given the documentary nature of Parker's radio creations, there is much information, which could be classed as oral history. The field recordings made for various programmes, e.g. 'The Travelling People' (1964) [MS 4000/2/97 and LC 1-25] are a good place to start. There is a list of listening cassettes available with summaries. There are usually, but not always, typed transcripts of actuality within the programme files. Listening cassettes CANNOT be copied for the public.

Some recordings have been digitised onto CDR as part of the Heritage Lottery Funded Cataloguing Project. 'A Future For Ordinary Folk' (2002-2004). Most are of folk songs and music, but interviews made in the 1960s and 1970s with traditional folk singers are included, e.g. MS 4000/5/1/1-9.

The recordings may not be copied for researchers

MS 2255/2/

Millenibrum

This was a project to record a wide sample of Birmingham people at the turn of the 20th century. There are about 150 oral histories and 80 video 'shorts' available. The original master copies are preserved in the City Archives.

Copies which can be listened to/ watched are available in the Local Studies and History Department of the Central Library.

There is a place and event index to the video 'shorts'.

There is a name index, subject index and transcripts for the oral histories, which are on minidisc.

Copies cannot be made for researchers.

Access to the recordings may be restricted under the Data Protection Act (1998).

THE CITY SOUND ARCHIVE

The City Sound Archive is a collection of over 1200 oral history tape recordings based within the Social History Department of Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery.

The museum first started collecting oral history material in the early 1970s and has continued to develop and expand this collection ever since. The majority of the material dates from the mid-1980s when the Museum initiated a number of recording programmes as part of the Inner City Partnership Project- 'Change in the Inner City', which produced a large number of tapes on such topics as Food & Drink, Childhood and Public Baths, in inner city Birmingham.

Oral history recordings make a very valuable contribution to social history.

'It gives us the opportunity to understand the history of the people rather than of activists, leaders of people, and formal organisations.'

It includes people and events which are often excluded from conventional history, and allows a more complete and accurate understanding of the past to emerge.

Oral history research and recording is therefore an integral part of the work of the Social History Department. Oral evidence plays a large and important role in the research and production of exhibitions and displays, and it can also serve to increase knowledge and understanding of objects in our collections.

The City Sound Archive is a very valuable resource for Birmingham-for both now and the future.

'By preserving memories oral history redresses the balance of experience against artefacts, and although it records the experience of all, it is especially valuable in preserving the history of those whose material possessions have been meagre, contemporary and transitory. They have not kept their past in their houses or their pockets, but in their heads'.

T Lummis 'Listening to History'

Suggested Reading

Evans, George Ewart-'Where Beards Wag All: The Relevance of the Oral Tradition' Faber (1970)

Lummis, Trevor-'Listening to History' Hutchinson (1987)

Thompson, Paul-'The Voice of the Past: Oral History' Opus (1978)

Perks, Robert & Thomson, Alistair-'The Oral History Reader' Routledge (1998)

Journal of the Oral History Society-published twice yearly

Major Recording Projects to Date

The Birmingham Gun Quarter

A project started in 1981-includes interviews with past and present employees and employers of the Birmingham gun trade. Attitudes to and opinions about the gun trade and its subsequent decline are explored. Much descriptive information about the Gun Quarter and what it was like to work there.

Aspects of this project published by H White & R Trudgeon, 'Birmingham's Gun Quarter: A Skilled Trade in Decline', in Oral History Vol. II No. 2 (1985) pp.69-85.

1. Birmingham During World War I

Oral History recording programme contributing to an associated exhibition on Birmingham and the Great War mounted by the Museum between November 1981 and January 1982. Interviews with Birmingham men and women who remember World War 1. Includes aspects of life in the armed forces, the Home Front, the outbreak of war and war work- particularly women munitions workers.

A cassette of edited extracts from the Sound Archive used during the exhibition entitled 'I Was There: Birmingham & The Great War' (1982) is available for £3.95 plus p&p.

2. Life on the Midland Canals

A project started in the mid 1970s to record the story of canal life in the Midlands. Includes interviews with men and women who lived and worked on the canals throughout the Midland area.

A cassette of edited extracts recordings made, entitled 'The Boatman's garden' (1983) is available for £3.95 plus p&p.

3. Birmingham's Rural Past

A programme undertaken in 1982 and 1983, to record the growth of the suburbs, and the eclipse of Birmingham's rural society. Includes interviews with people employed in farming and in rural crafts.

4. Change in the Inner City

A major programme of sound and photographic recordings funded by the Inner City Partnership Programme from 1983 to 1985, which looks at various aspects of change at home and at work during the 20th century in the inner city area of Birmingham. Major recording projects include: -

a) Childhood

Interviews with Birmingham people recalling their childhood memories of work, play, school etc. Associated booklet, 'City Children: Birmingham Children at Work & Play 1900-1930' by Michael Glasson (1985) is available for £1.95 plus p&p.

b) Food & Drink

Explores how tastes in food and drink have changed over the years. Includes interviews with people involved in all aspects of the catering trade e.g. cooks, cafe owners, industrial caterers, market traders, shopkeepers, publicans and numerous consumers. Associated publication, 'A Taste of Change: Some Aspects of eating in the Inner City Birmingham 1939-1985' by Karen Hull and Peter Jenkinson (1985) is available for £1.95 plus p&p.

c) Birmingham Public Baths

Interviews with people who worked at the Public baths and Wash-Houses in Birmingham, and with those who used them. Associated booklet, 'Turrets, Towels & Taps' by Richard Wilkins (1984) available for £1.95 plus p&p.

d) Immigration

Oral history research and recording project about people's experiences of immigration to Birmingham. Includes interviews with people who have come to Birmingham from all over the world.

5. Birmingham During the Second World War

Oral history project contributing to the exhibition, 'A City At War: Birmingham 1939-1945' which was held at Birmingham museum & Art gallery between May and September 1985. Includes tape and recorded interviews of people's experiences at home, at work, in the armed forces etc. Associated booklet, 'A City At War: Birmingham 1939-1945' by Phillada Ballard (1985) is available for £1.95 plus p&p.

Oral history recording project forming part of an exhibition 'Waiting for the All Clear: Life in Birmingham during the Second World War' which was held at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery in 1995 and 1996. Interviews contain memories of The Blitz, Women in the Munitions Industry, Civil Defence, Home Front and VE Day. A History Resource Pack, 'Waiting For All Clear' by Lucy Harland, Elfyn Morris, Elizabeth Frostick and Jan Anderson containing taped extracts and photographs, is available for £5.00 plus p&p.

6. Take Hearts: People, History & Change in Birmingham's Heartland's

An oral history project contributing to an associated exhibition 'Take Heart: People, History & Change in Birmingham's Heartland's' which was held at Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery in 1993. The interviews reveal people's experiences of living in the Heartland's, Birmingham's largest urban development zone, including the areas of Duddeston, Nechells and Bordesley. An associated book by Elizabeth Frostick & Lucy Harland price £4.95 and a Schools Resource Pack by Anne Roach, Elfyn Morris, Elizabeth Frostick and Jan Anderson price £5.95, both with the same title as the exhibition, are available.

7. Birmingham's Diverse Communities

An oral history recording programme undertaken by the Birmingham Black Oral History Project records people's experiences of migration to Birmingham from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia. The primary focus is on the older generation of people who arrived to the city in the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s.

A series of interviews made with people from the district of Mirpur in Azad Kashmir to coincide with an exhibition called 'Home from Home; British Pakistanis and Kashmiris in Mirpur and Birmingham' in 1997. People of all ages share their memories of arriving in Birmingham, visits back home and their experiences of the city today.

8. Other Topics

In addition to the above, oral history recordings have been, and continue to be, made on various aspects of Birmingham life. These include recordings about local trades, (jewellery, stained glass, cork manufacturers, artists, pearl workers, markets), former occupants and employees of Blakesley Hall in Yardley, and various local history projects such as those in Hay Mills, Handsworth, Yardley and Smethwick. Recent oral history recording work includes women's lives and the women's suffrage movement.

Enquiries to: City Sound Archive, Social History Department, Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, Chamberlain Square, Birmingham B3 3DH. Tel. 0121 303 1675
