

# Voices and the Archive: Oral History, Research and Researchers

Ambleside Oral History Archive



October Gallery, 24 Old Gloucester Street, London, WC1N 3AL  
Wednesday, 20th November 2013, 10:00 – 16:00

Abigail Knight - David Clark,  
Graham Smith - Joanna Bornat - Sarah Gudgin,  
Robert Wilkinson - Jane Renouf - Julia Brannen.

# Abstracts and biographies of speakers

## Abigail Knight

### Biography

Abigail has been a Research Officer carrying out research about children and families for 18 years, mainly at the Institute of Education. Before that she studied history and worked as a local authority social worker. Her PhD is in childhood sociology and she has an interest in researching many aspects of children's and their families' lives, including the experiences of looked after children and disabled children, family food practices and young people's lives outside school. Recent publications include 'Supporting young parents', 'The emotional wellbeing of young people seeking asylum in the UK' and papers for 'Child and Family Social Work' and 'Families, Relationships and Societies'.

## Lord David Clark of Windermere

### Biography

Rt Hon Lord Clark of Windermere served for 26 years as an MP (first for Colne Valley and then South Shields). A Cabinet Minister in Tony Blair's government responsible for Freedom of Information and the People's Panel, he is a member of the House of Lords. His current parliamentary activities include being the longest serving trustee of the History of Parliament Trust, vice chair of the All Party History and Archives Group, the latter involving taking a lead on WW1 commemorations. An academic with a strong interest in oral history before entering the House of Commons, his PhD

was on the history of the Labour Party in West Yorkshire. Author of several books, his current research is based on oral histories of early Labour pioneers. He is currently Visiting Research Professor at the University of Huddersfield.

## Graham Smith

### Abstract

*The fascists keep killing my grandfather: oral history archiving and thought collectives in the digital age*

Oral history's 'dirty little secret' was said to be the lack of visibility and use of interviews after they had been archived. However, in a new digital age much of this is changing with hundreds of thousands of interview extracts available on the Internet. However, discussions amongst archivists and researchers about reusing oral history have tended to focus on the curation and accessibility of archived interviews that have resulted from academic projects. In this paper, I want to explore the reuse of oral histories conducted for different reasons, by different groups outside of traditional research circles and their subsequent on-line presentation.

The example I choose is a personal one: a case study consisting of several interrelated stories. It not only speaks to the interconnectedness of the digital age, however, but also to the boundaries and ghettos that have grown up within the virtual world. In part it is the story of the exploitation, by commercial and political interests, of civilian

deaths in wartime, including that of my paternal grandfather. It is also about the wider reuse and repackaging of oral history that is happening beyond academic research. This paper suggests that because of such developments new curatorial, ethical and epistemological challenges and insights are becoming evident.

### Biography

Graham Smith is chair of the Oral History Society. He is employed as a senior lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London, where he teaches and researches oral history, the history of medicine and public history. He has published across a range of disciplines, including medicine, mainly on memory and narrative. As well as being active in university politics, he likes food, football and writing about himself in the third person.

## Joanna Bornat

### Abstract

*Re-using the archive for an exploration of children's personal experiences of death, 1920-2010: a case study*

In preparation for a Funding Council submission to research children's personal experiences of death during the period 1920-2010, Jane McCarthy raised a small pump-priming grant to review archived oral history collections in England. Child risk and resilience, and young people's mental health are significant sources of public policy concern and significant



AMBLESIDE, STEPPING STONES

bereavement is a known risk factor for poor outcomes (Fauth et al, 2009). Yet our broader knowledge of young people's experiences of (primarily parental) death is very limited; it is largely medicalised and psychologised, based on particular samples, and neglecting social and cultural contexts. Yet notably, it provides few insights into the meanings children and young people make of death, and their import over the life course (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006). Using archived data sets has unique potential to offer innovative perspectives on this key aspect of childhood experience.

This project will focus on narratives of a variety of deaths encountered during the early years, broadening and deepening understanding of both the contemporary and retrospective significance of such experiences, in social and biographical contexts. The idea is to consider these as sources for evidence of memories of personal encounters with deaths experienced by people before they were 18. Any likely oral history data would be used alongside other sources: a sample of archived interviews with children and young people interviewed within the past fifteen years; Mass Observation repositories; recent online websites for bereaved young people; and other historical contextualizing sources. In the latter regard, Helen Frisby was employed to identify the types and nature of available archived data in early 2013. Later in the year, Joanna Bornat, with a background in oral history research and an interest in re-using archived interviews following her involvement in the Timescapes programme, was taken on as a consultant with a view to assessing various oral history collections as to their suitability for re-use.

In this paper we identify issues that have arisen from her visits with the intention of provoking discussion which will be helpful to the development of the children and death project. These issues include: researchers' and archivists' approaches to preserving metadata; developing an understanding of the original researcher's perspective and intentions; identifying the limits and potential of understandings of community as a focus; working with search terms on someone else's data; drawing a sample from archived data collections.

### Biography

Joanna Bornat is Emeritus Professor at The Open University and has a long-standing interest in remembering and ageing. She is joint editor of *Oral History*. Her recent publications include articles, chapters and an edited collection published from three research projects all involving oral history-based research: *Timescapes* where her focus was 'the oldest generation' and secondary analysis; the contribution of South Asian doctors to the development of the geriatric specialty and religious and secular ceremonies in late life in three European countries. She is currently working on the fourth edition of *The Voice of the Past* with Paul Thompson and has been reviewing archived oral history collections for Jane McCarthy's research into childhood experiences of death.

## Sarah Gudgin

### Abstract

*A museum perspective to working with oral history*

The Museum of London first began collecting oral history in 1985 as part of its Port and River project, embarking upon a major programme of interviewing which focused on men and women who had worked in the London Docks in the twentieth century. The Museum soon realised the potential that oral history offered as both a means to capture the past and document Londoners' lives and memories, but also as a vehicle for communicating the human experience of the past in its galleries and exhibitions. Since then, an ongoing programme of oral history interviewing at the Museum has resulted in a diverse collection of over 5000 hours of material relating to London and the lives of Londoners. The Museum of London was also one of a very small number of museums in the UK to employ full time specialist oral history staff, and has been recognised as a leader in the field in the active collection, archiving, interpretation and display of people's memories.

This paper will focus on how the oral history archive has grown and evolved; how the Museum has worked with and developed oral history and oral history projects, as well as how the status of oral history has changed within the Museum. It will also consider some of the issues relating to the documenting and researching of the collection and highlight the challenges of making it accessible to more people.

### Biography

Sarah Gudgin is an oral historian with over 15 years experience of working in a museum setting and with diverse communities across London. On joining the Museum of London in 1998 she worked on the ground breaking and innovative London's Voices programme before being appointed to the role of Curator of Oral History and Contemporary Collecting in 2001. In addition to being responsible for a unique and diverse audio collection, Sarah has carried out numerous in-depth life story interviews, curated exhibitions, created sound installations and developed interactives for galleries and displays. Sarah has participated in a number of community oral history projects and has been involved in many developments concerning how oral history is collected, how it is interpreted, utilised and displayed at the Museum of London.

## Robert Wilkinson

### Abstract

*Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop - 30 years recording memories in North East London*

This talk is about the formation of the Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop and how it has recorded aspects of community life in a London borough. Robert will also speak about the challenges of recording and, more importantly, archiving and making the recordings accessible.

### Biography

Robert Wilkinson worked in local government for 30 years until he retired in 2007. He is a founder member of Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop

and since retirement has worked on a number of oral history projects at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, Bishops Park, Fulham, a sound trail in two burial grounds in Hampstead, potters influenced by Bernard Leach and Olympic themed exhibitions. He also works as a freelance interviewer for the British Library and is treasurer of the Oral History Society.

## Jane Renouf

### Abstract

*Ambleside Oral Archive: Social history in the making*

The talk is about: creation, growth and development of the Ambleside Oral History Archive; taking stock of its contents; thoughts about interpretation; exploring the ordinary – and discovering the extraordinary; and finally - does oral history gathering have a future?

### Biography

Jane Renouf was born in 1949 in Oxford; educated at a convent boarding school and the University of Kent (English & Philosophy); Reporter, Croydon Advertiser, 1970s; moved to the Lake District and new career in freelance writing, editing and reporting for newspapers, magazines, *Westmorland Gazette*, Lake District National Park Authority, etc. Books published by Penguin Books, Harper Collins, Red Bank Press and The History Press, and subjects covering biography, local art history and oral history. Also worked in business with husband Paul, and for Cumbria County Libraries since 2004.

## Julia Brannen

### Abstract

*Oral history and life in Westmorland in the early 20th century*

In this short presentation, I will talk about the process of using the Ambleside Oral History Archive as part of a project (Novella – Narratives of Varied Everyday Life and Linked Approaches) that uses narrative data to study food and families in hard times. I will talk about how we identified and accessed the archive, some of the methodological challenges of using the data as well as some of the substantive themes about food and family life in Westmorland during the early 20th century.

### Biography

Julia Brannen is Professor of Sociology of the Family, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London and an academician of the Academy of Social Science. She has researched and written about the family lives of parents, children and young people in Britain and Europe, working families and food, and intergenerational relations. She has a particular interest in methodology including mixed methods, biographical approaches and comparative research. Recent books include: *The Handbook of Social Research Methods* (Sage 2010), *Work, Family and Organisations in Transition: A European Perspective* (Policy 2009), *Transitions to Parenthood in Europe: A comparative life course perspective* (Policy 2012).

# Programme

- 9.30-10.00 Registration
- 10.00-10.05 **Dr Abigail Knight**, Research Officer, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education  
Welcome and why this seminar?
- 10.05-10.30 Interview with **Lord David Clark of Windermere** by **Professor Julia Brannen**  
Early attempts at oral history
- 10.30-11.15 **Dr Graham Smith**, Senior Lecturer, Oral History, Royal Holloway, University of London  
The fascists keep killing my grandfather: oral history archiving and thought collectives in the digital age
- 11.15-11.30 Coffee
- 11.30-12.20 **Professor Joanna Bornat**, Emeritus Professor in Oral History, Open University  
Re-using the archive for an exploration of children's personal experiences of death, 1920 - 2010: a case study
- 12.20-13.00 **Sarah Gudgin**, Curator of Oral History and Contemporary Collecting (formerly at the Museum of London)  
A museum perspective to working with oral history
- 13.00-14.00 Lunch
- 14.00-14.40 **Jane Renouf**, Ambleside Oral History Group  
Ambleside's Oral Archive: Social History in the Making
- 14.40-15.10 **Robert Wilkinson**, Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop  
Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop - 30 years recording memories in North East London
- 15.10-15.30 **Professor Julia Brannen**, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education  
Oral history and life in Westmorland in the early 20th century
- 15.30-16.00 Tea and panel discussion: Creating and using oral history for research  
Chair: **Professor Julia Brannen**



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