



## Living History: What is Oral History?

Oral history is a method of documenting history through interviewing people who have first-hand experience of events. It involves interviewing people and recording their answers.

Oral history is important because it involves people's real life experiences, and often includes people whose voices would not be heard otherwise. Everyone has an interesting story to tell about their life. Many of these stories, however, are not recorded formally.

This advice about gathering oral histories comes from the Oral History Society, whose website address you can find on our links pages.

*Some of the best things you find out will be unexpected, and once you get started you are likely to be told some things you had not previously thought about. So it is essential to give the person you are recording plenty of space to tell you what they think matters. But you should not let the interview drift: it is your job to guide it. For this you need an overall plan. Group the topics you want to cover in a logical way. Often a chronological structure is best.*

*Work out how to ask the essential questions.*

*Use plain words and avoid suggesting the answers. Rather than, "I suppose you must have had a poor and unhappy childhood?" ask "Can you describe your childhood?"*

*You will need some questions that encourage precise answers: "Where did you move to next?"*

*But you also need others which are open, inviting descriptions, comments, opinions: "How did you feel about that?" "What sort of person was she?", "Can you describe the house you lived in?", "Why did you decide to change jobs?"*

*There are some points to cover in every interview: date and place of birth, what their parents' and their own main jobs were. And whatever the topic, it usually helps to get the interviewee talking if you begin with their earlier life: family background, grandparents, parents and brothers and sisters. Most people find it easier to remember their life in chronological order so from here you can move through their later life in order....remember that the best interviews flow naturally and are not rehearsed. Don't over-prepare!*

Listening is the key - Engaging your interviewee in a real conversation where you listen and respond to their answers will be much more rewarding and interesting for you both and don't be afraid to repeat questions or answer to ensure your facts are correct; it is more important that you have a true reflection of your interviewees experience than that you have to ask them to repeat themselves.