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B4 the Bridge Community oral and public history in the Milford Street Bridge area of Salisbury

Barbara Gibson

Salisbury was renowned for congestion on its city-centre streets. In the early 1970s, Stage Three of the Inner Relief Road was built to ease this historic problem. Part of it followed the old route of London Road and Rampart Road.

Anne Abrahams, an oral history interviewee, remembers the problem well: 'Salisbury always had a tendency to get clogged up, what with the cattle and the traffic...'

In the late 1960s, preparations for the new road were underway and the residents along Rampart Road, Culver Street and Milford Street, Salisbury, received the letters that changed their lives forever. Compulsory purchase orders for their homes and businesses arrived out of the blue. Relocation and witnessing the demolition of their homes followed. The Beckingsale Training Home for Girls at the end of St Martin's Church Street, Number 88 Milford Street - a beautiful old Tudor building, the almshouses at the top of Winchester Street were also demolished and a strip of land was removed from the Greencroft.

Robert Fitzgeorge, another interviewee, remembers what this meant to him:

Well, it was quite a shake up when they brought that road, put that road through there because they pulled, the house down my wife was born in. 'Cause her family had to move elsewhere and, well we lost father and we lost mother and they moved to other properties, you know, old people's homes and places like that. And, very

often we're going along that road, the old Rampart Road, the dual carriageway now and, just look across and think to myself that's where the house was.'

A whole community was swept away, gone... but not forgotten.

Clare Christopher and artist Fred Fieber conceived the idea of the Milford Street Bridge Project, and along with others, established a community group to 'recover' the history of the area and paint a mural to brighten up the concrete bridge, to create a representation of the past, depicting local characters, businesses and buildings that occupied the area prior to building of the road.

Funding was secured,¹ and the project ran from January 2010 to June 2011. It aimed to involve as broad a cross section of the community as possible, including people of all ages, cultures and those with disabilities, and included the local St Martin's Primary School, Shady Bower, Salisbury. Oral history, archival research, acquiring photographs and artifacts ran alongside free, entertaining, local history activities for the community such as local guided walks, family fun days, and tea parties provided by volunteers. Collaborators were Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, Wessex Archaeology, Wiltshire Dancing, walk guide Pat Shelley, Jigsaw Youth Dance Company and others; they ran local history themed workshops and events for children and adults alike.

Oral history, meaning both the process and the final recorded product, lay at the heart of the project. Since the 1970s oral history has become a natural tool to gather his-



Section of mural by Fred Fieber showing the drover who brought livestock to market and Foster's bakery with an escaping cow in the shop.

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tory 'from below'. Paul Thompson, heralded by many as the 'godfather' of oral history, describes how it can be both transformative and empowering:

Oral history certainly can be a means for transforming both the content and purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of enquiry; it can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside; and in the writing of history ... it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.²

This project used oral history in three ways. The first was to work with St Martin's School. Oral history has become increasingly popular in schools as a creative and interactive way of disseminating many areas of the National Curriculum including history, geography, English, citizenship and Information and Communication Technologies. Alongside Ms Suzanne Harvey, class teacher of Year Six, St Martin's School, children (aged 9-11) were trained over six afternoons to research, conduct and archive their interviews. They researched the history of the area through a guided walk by local historian George Fleming (a steering group member who ran many walks for the project). Then in the classroom they learned about oral history interview skills including ethics, copyright and permissions; they developed enquiry questions for their chosen research topics of 'toys and games' and 'the area I grew up in', and learned to use the Zoom H4n recording equipment. When the afternoon of the interviews arrived the Head, Mrs Vanessa Pile, had arranged tea and biscuits in the school hall to welcome our 12 volunteer interviewees, aged up to 90, and meet their prospective, mostly nervous, interviewer children. The children gave their interviewee a guided tour and many stories were swapped on both sides even before the interviews began. It emerged that many of the visitors had attended the same school on the former site in St Martin's Church Street, 60-80 years earlier, and were really excited at coming back again, meeting the children and sharing their stories of the past. That afternoon flew by and seemed to have been enjoyed by everyone. The children were taught how to make archival CDs which are now deposited at the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre in Chippenham. They sent an audio CD along with a thank you letter to the interviewee and did a final presentation of their learning. A CD was made with extracts from their recordings and the children, along with Rebecca Seymour (a steering group member for the project) from Wiltshire Dancing created and performed a dance interpretation of some of these stories.

Extract from a school oral history interview:

Child interviewer: 'Could you tell me anything more about your childhood?'

Adult interviewee: 'I'll tell you a little more about where I lived in Culver Street. All the houses were terraced houses; nobody had a bathroom as such, as you have today. So generally speaking, once a week my father and I used to carry a big metal bath from the backyard and take it into the kitchen in the house. And my mother used to boil up a great big copper - it was called, umm, of hot water and that would be poured into the metal bath, and then, it sounds crazy today, but we all used to take turns in getting in this bath of water, so if you were unlucky you were the last one in. So I used to always try and make sure I was first or second...'

For the next oral history phase, eight adult volunteer interviewers were trained over two days, using a broadly similar training format to the children, except that these interviews took more of a life story approach, focusing on living in the area 'B4 the Bridge'.

The enthusiastic oral history interviewers recorded 32 interviews up to five hours long, mostly conducted in the interviewees' homes, gathering memories of a past community and seemingly another culture, some of which are now represented on the mural and reproduced on the CD. There are so many different stories of happy times, hard times, family life, school life, work, local shops and businesses, toys and games and playing in the streets, local characters and so on, including anecdotes about Mr Foster and Foster's bakery and their wonderful cream horns; cows straying into the bakery and how they cooked the poultry for local people's Christmas dinners, plus many stories of the Greencroft, the site of many bonfires and dramas for bonfire night:

Ken Edwards, interviewee :

'Well yes and then come bonfire night people from all over town used to come to the Greencroft and bring their own fireworks and you'd have circles of groups of families all setting off their fireworks, it wouldn't be allowed today because of health and safety, but nobody got hurt, nobody got hurt. And people watching other peoples' fireworks from about six o'clock to ten eleven o'clock at night people up there and it was quite a, quite a community, quite a gathering but everybody used to come to the Greencroft bonfire yeah. So we used to do that for many years. I can't remember when we stopped or why we stopped, when the road went in I suppose so I was getting too old then.'

This gives an important glimpse of what these individual and social memories mean today, and how they've been shaped and reframed with the passing of time whilst drawing on the past to make sense of the present.

Additional teams of volunteers transcribed 18 interviews, created clips from the recordings and compiled the CD, organized a 'memory sharing day'; ran the exhibition in Salisbury Library and the final procession from the mural on Milford Street Bridge to the Arts Centre. Emily Naish, volunteer archivist, has desposited our research and the

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recordings - the historian's primary sources - in Wiltshire and Swindon Archives with copies of the recordings at Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum. Here, the outcomes of the project can be accessed by the public, used for research and education, broadcast, and are a resource both now and in the future.

The third way of using oral history was to run a two-day family oral history workshop, enabling local people to record their relatives and friends to create a lasting legacy for themselves. Using similar training methods and principles as above, the workshop was orientated to the particular needs of these participants. Strategies to 'add value' to these family sources such as ways of interpreting and archiving were explored. This event formed part of the many activities to celebrate the ending of our project.

What was special about oral history for this community project was how the Road and the Milford Street Bridge today served as a 'bridge' between the communities and families who live in the area now. Common ground connected so many people from different walks of life, different generations, and cultures; and it also included the local school. It enabled people to learn and share skills, have fun, as well as giving the chance to recover and secure for the future the varied and rich history of the area 'B4 the Bridge' first hand from the memories of very special interviewees.

Appendix

Our guiding principles were to work within the Oral History Society's Ethical and Legal Guidelines³ and in the spirit of Frisch's 'Sharing Authority'⁴ throughout the whole process of creating the oral history, its subsequent interpretations: our CD of extracts, our exhibition, final procession and the production of the mural – creating a public history.

Frisch drew on the debates of unequal power relationships between researcher and the subject that maybe manifested during the processes of the interview, interpretation and the creation of public history. He recognized that oral history has the capacity to redefine and redistribute intellectual authority through these processes by working in joint collaboration with, and devolving intellectual authority to 'the people' or communities. This shared authority can be empowering on both sides:

'If oral historians need to understand that their method can do more than the extraction of knowledge from human history mines, public historians need to realize their method can do more than merely distribute such knowledge. It can, rather, promote a more democratized and widely shared historical consciousness, consequently encouraging broader participation in debates about history, debates that will be informed by a more deeply representative range of experiences, perspectives and values.'⁵

The spirit of the whole project was an aim to 'share authority' between interviewees, our 40 volunteers, steering group and project workers, the school and our 'collaborators'.

What is special about oral history is that it engages the 'orality' of the sources. It tells

us things that written sources cannot. We can ask our sources questions and check our interpretations with them. If you notice from the extracts from the recordings above, they appear flat, without emotion. From our oral sources we can analyse the rhythms and tonal range of the speech, the dialect, ways of speaking, associated emotions and how the story affected them. We can hear the changes in velocity of the narration of the story and hear and try to interpret the silences; we can 'hear' what has not been spoken about or forgotten - all these can give extra layers of our understanding to meanings of their stories.⁶ Also, 'They tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did.'⁷

Paul Thompson observes 'And old people especially benefit too. An oral history project can not only bring them new social contacts and sometimes lead to lasting friendships; it can render them an inestimable service. Too often ignored, and economically emasculated, they can be given a dignity, a sense of purpose, in going back over their lives and handing on valuable information to a younger generation.'⁸

Barbara Gibson, *Spoken Histories*, was the lead oral historian and steering group member for the Milford Street Bridge Project.

Notes

- 1 Our funders were: Heritage Lottery Fund, Salisbury City Council, Wiltshire Council, O2.
- 2 Thompson, Paul (2000) *The Voice of the Past*, Third Edition. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- 3 Oral History Society, "Is your Oral History Legal and Ethical?," Oral History Society, <http://www.oralhistory.org.uk/ethics/index.php#eg>.
- 4 Frisch, Michael (1990). *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral History*. State University of New York Press.
- 5 *Ibid.*, xxii.
- 6 Portelli, Alessandro. "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, Perks, Rob and Thompson, Alistair (2006) eds, Second Edition. Routledge.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 8 Thompson (2000), 12.