
Memories of War: Conducting Oral History Interviews



Since December 2019, Elmbridge Museum have been gathering oral history recordings of the Second World War from people who remember it, as part of our Elmbridge at War project. Now, we're encouraging residents across Elmbridge to get talking.

In this pack, you can find guidance on how to conduct your own Memories of War interview, from the comfort of your home.

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What is Oral History?

Oral history is the practice of recording spoken memories and opinions, often for historical use.

Oral historians interview willing participants, sometimes for hours on end and more than once, about their lives. Within these life stories, interviewees may recount their lives from birth to present, and recall their experiences, thoughts or feelings about historical events they witnessed or eras they lived through. In this way, oral histories always reveal much about human perspectives or experiences.

Why are we doing this?

With the 75th anniversary of V.E. (Victory in Europe) Day coming up in May 2020, recording oral histories provides a great way to learn about the Second World War in our local area. The thoughts expressed in oral history interviews also provide a great insight into the present day - often reflecting modern issues.

The spoken word can also offer much more than the written one. Intonation, pausing, emphasis, and emotion are all important factors which can be lost or misinterpreted when something is written down. For this reason, it's essential to record oral histories.

Above all, oral history interviews provide a brilliant opportunity to get talking with friends and family, and record life histories which will last forever!

How do I take part?

Anyone and everyone can take part in recording oral histories.

On the following pages, we have provided a checklist, suggested interview format, tips, and a question schedule as guidance for recording Memories of War.

Please email the Elmbridge Museum team at ebcmuseum@elmbridge.gov.uk or call us on **01372 474 568** if you have any questions or to get in touch after completing your interview. We'd love to hear about how it went!

What you will need

Checklist

- **An interviewee.** This can be a friend or relative who remembers the Second World War. (Note: if there's no one you know who fits these categories, then you can always conduct a life interview which focuses on a different historical topic!)
- **Permission.** If you're recording someone, it's important to get their permission in writing first. You can find advice about how to do this [here](#). If you have any further concerns check the [Oral History Society website](#) for full guidance on preparation and ethics.
- **A phone or computer.** If you're not living with your interviewee, you'll need to phone or video call them to conduct the interview.
- **A recording device.** Interviews are usually recorded on a digital voice recorder, but you can also use a mobile phone if you don't have one of these. If you are conducting your interview on the phone or computer, remember to check your recording device is positioned well enough to pick up both voices.
- **Questions.** Make sure you have a list of questions or themes you want to cover in the interview. It might not be necessary to use these, but it is good to be prepared. You can find some suggested questions at the end of this manual.
- **Pen and paper.** It is likely that the interviewee will say things you want to question further. Make sure you have pen and paper to hand, so you can make occasional notes when this happens. By doing this, you will be reminded to come back to these topics later without disrupting the flow of the interview.

Conducting the Interview

Below you can find practical guidance on how to conduct the interview, tips, and some suggested questions to ask.

Format

1. Outline the Memories of War project to your interviewee – What is it? Why are you conducting the interview?
2. Outline the interview style. Mention the themes you are going to cover and the amount of time it might take to do this.
3. Get the interviewee's permission to be recorded. Explain the permission form to them, step-by-step if they are unclear on what some parts mean. This should be signed before recording starts.
4. Begin recording. Start off by introducing yourself and the interviewee, naming the project, and stating the date and time. Then begin asking questions – you can find further guidance in the question schedule provided on the next page.
5. Finish the interview. Stop recording and thank the interviewee, letting them know about the next steps and when they can expect to receive a copy of the recording.

Tips

Do conduct some general research on the Second World War before starting the interview, so you understand any historical or cultural references made by the interviewee. You can find useful background information on the [Elmbridge at War online exhibition page](#).

Do keep interruptions or your own input to a minimum. Sticking to one person speaking at a time helps the clarity of the final audio clip.

Do allow pauses. Sometimes, giving the interviewee time to think before jumping straight to the next question can prompt them to think over the question and say more.

Do check regularly during the interview that your recording device is still recording.

Do listen carefully. The best interviews are made when the interviewer asks pertinent questions based on the interviewee's answers.

Do send the interviewee a copy of the recorded interview after it is complete.

Don't push people to answer questions on things they are not comfortable talking about.

Don't stick rigidly to the question schedule. This should be a prompt rather than a script – instead, listen to the interviewee and expand on what they say as much as possible.

Questions

Context

This should take up a small section at the start of the interview, but it is essential that you have some background to the interviewee's life as this will enable you to ask more relevant questions later about how they experienced the Second World War.

For each question, ask follow-on questions depending on the answer given.

Personal Data

What is your date of birth?

What were your mother's and father's occupations?

Good to ask about grandparents' occupations too.

If female interviewee and married, ask maiden name.

Background

Where were you born?

Where did you grow up?

Tell me about your family life in Elmbridge?

Who did you grow up with? Brothers / sisters? Who was in your family?

How would you describe your family?

Did you do things together as a family? Hobbies? Religion?

Did you grow up in a political household? / Were current affairs a topic of conversation?

What was your experience of school?

What were your hobbies, growing up?

Tell me about your childhood friends.

Second World War

This is the main part of interview. Most time should be spent on these questions.

The start of the war:

What do you remember of the start of the war? Do you remember where you were when the war broke out?

What was the atmosphere like where you lived? How were you / your family / friends / neighbourhood feeling after war was declared?

Did you know anyone who had memories of the First World War? What was their reaction / attitude when the Second World War broke out?

What do you remember of the preparation for war? Were you given any instructions or advice on what might happen?

What did you expect the war to be like? Did it differ in reality?

Did anyone you know sign up to fight in the war when it started?

Were people around you mostly in favour or against Britain's involvement in the war?

When were you first directly affected by the war?

How did your family life change after the war started? Was this gradual or immediate?

Did war industry come to Elmbridge immediately?

Can you describe the main ways Elmbridge changed because of the war?

Bombing / Air Raids:

How did you and your family prepare for air raids?

What was the procedure for air raids at your school / place of work?

Can you describe the experience of an air raid to me?

Did you have a shelter in your home?

What was it like inside an air raid shelter during an air raid?

What do you remember of the bombing of Vickers factory?

How was the community / you individually affected by the Vickers bombing?

Can you tell me about any other times when bombing occurred in Elmbridge?

How did bombing affect the morale of residents of Elmbridge in general?

Did you have a local ARP / ARW? What was their role / what do you remember them doing? What were they like?

The enemy

What were local attitudes towards the enemy? Was there any strong anti-German feeling?

Would you say that people in Elmbridge were particularly patriotic during the war? In what ways did this patriotism show itself?

What do you remember of the local prisoners of war at Thames Ditton? What was your impression of them?

What were the local attitudes towards the prisoners of war? How did locals treat them?

Was there much interaction between the prisoners and the local community?

What was the attitude of the prisoners like?

What happened to the prisoners of war once the war ended? Did they return to their country of origin or stay in Elmbridge / Britain?

Soldiers / knowledge of the Front Line

What are your memories of the Canadian soldiers stationed at Oxshott and Esher Common?

Did they interact much with the local community? If so, how?

What was the local attitude towards having soldiers training so close to home?

Did the presence of the soldiers cause any disruption / changes within the community?

What was your knowledge like of what was happening on the front line? How were you informed of Britain's progress in the war?

What was the attitude of the returning soldiers?

What are your memories of soldiers at the convalescent hospitals? (Can cite example depending on where in Elmbridge the interviewee is from)

Were people satisfied or dissatisfied with the way the government was fighting the war?

The Home Front

What was your experience of rationing?

Whereabouts in the local area did you go to buy food during the war? Did you do this as a family or individually?

Did you find the 'make do and mend' attitude particularly hard to live with?

Did the women in your family perform war work at home? If so, what did they do?

What do you remember of the work of the Women's Land Army in the area during the war?

Was there any local opposition or favour towards war industry in Elmbridge?

General life during the war

This section is determined by what the interviewee has stated as their interests in the context section. Ask them if these hobbies and interests continued during the war or stopped, etc.

Did the war affect the amount of leisure time you had / the type of activities you could do? If so, how?

Which activities you particularly enjoyed doing during the war?

What aspects of life during the war did you particularly like / dislike?

How did home life change / stay the same during the war?

How did your social life change / stay the same during the war?

Were people any more or less religious during the war?

Do you remember going to church much during the war?

What were holidays like during the war? (Did you have any?)

What could you do for entertainment in the local area during the war?

Did you go into London much during the war? Why / why not?

The end of the War

Where were you / what were you doing when you found out about the end of the war?

Was VE Day particularly sudden / unexpected or not? Why?

What was your reaction / how did you feel on hearing the news of the Allied victory?

What was the feeling in the local area?

What did you do for the rest of VE Day after hearing the news of victory?

Did your street have a celebration? (If so, what did you do? If not, why not?)

Did your family privately celebrate?

Did life change much immediately after the end of the war?

What was the attitude of the troops coming home / the reaction to the troops coming home?

Were there memorial services to those killed straight after the end of the war? When exactly did this practice develop?

What was the attitude of those who had lost loved ones at the end of the war?

Concluding

General reflection questions to round things off:

Do you think the Second World War has shaped your life in any particular ways?

In what ways? (This line of enquiry may require a few different branches and prompts but take the time to let it run)

How have you found this experience of talking about your memories and your life?

Have you remembered more or less than you expected?

Have you remembered anything you'd forgotten about?

Has it made you think differently about anything? Has it strengthened your views on anything?

Standby questions to dig deeper, get more information, or refresh the topic:

How did you feel about that?

What was that like for you?

Can you tell me more about that experience / time in your life / etc.?