

*and were you there?*

VOICES OF CUMBRIA



AN EXHIBITION BY AMBLESIDE ORAL ARCHIVE AT  
THE ARMITT GALLERY, MUSEUM & LIBRARY, AMBLESIDE

*a handbook for oral history*

*In memory of Cynthia Thompson  
and Dr Sam Forrester*

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Ambleside Oral History Group has created an Archive of over 350 interviews, on almost every subject related to life in Ambleside, Cumbria, and its surrounding area, in the English Lake District, beginning with memories from the 1880s. This exhibition and practical guide celebrates nearly thirty years of oral history practice from humble beginnings to a new digital age. We hope we can inspire others to start recording their local communities before it is too late!

WRITTEN AND EDITED BY JANE RENOUF, MICHELLE KELLY AND PAUL RENOUF



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# foreword

Ambleside Oral Archive is one of the longest standing community oral history groups in the country, having been in continuous existence since 1976. As a result an extensive archive of over 300 interviews has been created, and the members of the group have acquired unrivalled expertise in managing all aspects of an oral history archive. With support from the Lake District National Park Authority through its Sustainable Development Fund and the Countryside Agency's Local Heritage Initiative, the entire archive is in the process of being re-recorded in digital format and a number of initiatives have been taken to make the resource more accessible to the general public.

A significant event in the widening access policy is this exhibition hosted by the Armitage Gallery, Museum and Library in Ambleside. The purpose of the exhibition and of this handbook is not only to give visitors a flavour of the work of the Ambleside Oral Archive, but also to enable the expertise acquired by its members to be made available to individuals and organisations with an interest in the histories of local communities.

In recent years the group has lost two of its longest standing members, Cynthia Thompson and Dr 'Sam' Forrester. Their contributions to the development of this archive and the skills

of the members of the group are inestimable. The fact that the more recent history of Ambleside has been so well recorded is largely due to their foresight and organisational ability. The present and future citizens of Ambleside owe much to Cynthia and Sam.

Ambleside Oral Archive would like to record its appreciation of the support of the Trustees of the Armitage and to the expertise of Michelle Kelly, Curator.

The exhibition was opened on 14 October 2004 by Dr Elizabeth Roberts, Reader Emeritus at the Centre for North West Regional Studies at Lancaster University one of the country's leading oral historians and long time friend to Ambleside Oral Archive.

Dr Rob David

*Chair, Ambleside Oral Archive*

# *introduction*

AND WERE YOU THERE? celebrates the ordinary – and sometimes extraordinary – lives and events of people who don't feature in the history books. The exhibition explores the importance of hearing history through human voices and the power of the spoken word: history, in other words, as told by the people who lived it.

For almost 30 years, the memories of elderly people living in and around Ambleside in the Lake District have been recorded, carefully stored, played to many audiences, and used by historians. This collection of memories, which form the Ambleside Oral Archive, was created to help you – and generations to come – to know and understand what life was really like in times past.

Can you imagine roads with no cars? Or ploughing with horses... or having no bathroom, fridge or electric light? And yet... it's not so long ago. Take a step back in time and learn about life in your parents', grandparents' or even great-grandparents' time, by those who lived it.

What a century it was! Few times in the whole of history could have been more exciting. Imagine those born in Queen Victoria's reign having their first sight of a motorcar arriving in Ambleside, or watching the first aeroplane fly over the Lakeland hills. Picture their excitement as the first electric lights illuminated their houses,

or getting behind the wheel of their first car or tractor, watching television or using an electronic keyboard – all in the space of one lifetime. With such rapid changes affecting everyday life, never before had it seemed so vital to record how people used to live before these small revolutions changed life forever at home and at work. This is why people in Ambleside began to make an Oral Archive of memories which cover the period 1885-2002, an archive which is still growing.

This exhibition is the first time Ambleside's unique and priceless collection of Lakeland voices has been made available on public display. Extracts have been carefully selected from over 350 interviews to give a taste of what Oral History is all about and enable visitors to eavesdrop on the past... on life in all its amazing variety, just as people remembered it.

If you feel excited and inspired by the tales you heard in the exhibition – make history yourself! Start by asking your parents and grandparents what they remember – or set up an oral history group in your own locality. This handbook will give you a few tips on how to get started.

# *part one: talking history*

Imagine if you could hear the voices of ordinary people from history? What would the servants of Henry VIII have to say? Or the sailors who fought at the battle of Trafalgar? Or the schoolchildren of Victorian England? Or a farmer's wife in 1700?

Imagine the fascinating stories they would have to tell and all the things we could learn about the past, things the history books don't teach you!

Twentieth century technology has made this dream a reality and during the last forty years a source of history known as 'Oral History' has developed.

Oral History is 'eye-witness history'. It is the spoken testimony of witnesses to both the great events in history and the details of ordinary life. It records the memories, opinions and stories of individuals from all walks of life and provides the opportunity for them and us to reflect on personal experiences. It is a perspective on the past

as recorded by the people who were actually there; the people who saw it, lived it and laughed and cried through it.

The minute details of everyday lives are often left out of mainstream history. Oral history archives are able to redress the balance and allow the listener to 'feel' history – the sheer exhaustion of hard physical work before machines made life easier – the smell of an earth closet toilet shared between five large families... or the sting of the cane on your hand if you got into trouble at school. A century ago, day-to-day life was recorded only by diary writers, or those fortunate enough to own a camera – and most people regarded photography as something to be used only on special occasions, such as having a family portrait taken. It was true that the local press would report on newsworthy events, such as exceptionally bad weather or a passing visit by royalty. By and large, however, there were few other ways to

record life in detail, or to understand what people felt about their individual lives – whether they were happy or sad, satisfied or discontented.

Oral History offers the chance to learn about the stories of ordinary people. It is also about HEARING what kind of experiences people had by the way they tell their stories. The human voice expresses joy, sadness and humour in a way that written words can never do, allowing listeners to relate to their lives, empathise, sympathise and compare. Oral history allows listeners to judge for themselves what was important in people's lives, and what they cared about most, often by the emotion in their voices – something that other historical resources can never truly tell us.

## *part two: making history*

### *The things people told us*

#### *Growing Pains!*

Ambleside's first oral history interviewees (who were already elderly when they were recorded in the 1970s) took us as far back as the 1880s, to previously unrecorded or little known facts about events which occurred long before anyone could film or tape them. There were plenty of surprises about life in those days. One lady told us that as a ten-year-old child she was so small that teachers at her 'dame' school in



Kendal in 1886 seated her with the seven-year-olds, to make the classroom look tidier! This same lady recalls the miners from the Forest of Dean who lodged with her family during tunnelling work for the Thirlmere Aqueduct – and going underground to see it before the water started to flow in 1894. Many others told of how children often walked 3 or 4 miles to school having risen at dawn to milk the cows or deliver milk first. Classrooms were sparsely furnished with little more than wooden benches, desks and slates and teachers even stoked the boilers, lit the stoves and made hot drinks at break-time, such was their dedication.

#### *Work hard, play hard!*

Our respondents have told us how traditions such as the annual Rushbearing procession and sports days lightened the tedium of everyday life for children. Some gained scholarships to the Kelsick Grammar School in Ambleside – but many gifted children from poorer families missed the opportunity of further education and left

school at 14 to go into service as kitchen maids or as hired farmhands, shepherds, quarrymen, gardeners or gamekeepers. There was plenty of fun to be had for working people. The 'Bioscope' brought silent film shows to the town, and there was amateur drama, costume tableaux, folk dancing and amateur operetta, and several local dance bands kept people dancing till dawn at the Assembly Rooms. By the early 1900s Ambleside had also acquired a college for young ladies founded by Charlotte Mason, and a subscription library established by Mary Louisa Armit which nurtured the small but influential circle of intellectuals who were resident in the area.

# *part three: living history*

## *Recording the Present*

Nowadays, mass media charts life round the globe, carrying even the most minute details of what is happening to people day to day, from the remotest, most inaccessible corners of earth. In a world saturated by video recorders, in which television and newspapers have created vast archives of footage and print and where CCTV cameras record us as we walk in the street or park the car, is there any point in oral historians continuing to record people's first hand accounts of life? Does oral history have any role in the modern era?

The answer is a most emphatic 'yes' – because oral historians, unlike filmmakers or documentary producers, do not edit material to fit an objective. They have no aim other than listening silently to what people want to tell them. An oral history interviewer has no bias or pre-determined agenda other than to find out about a specific subject, and doesn't set out to prove a point. Oral history interviews must

be left intact, never shortened or shaped. Material is never censored or removed, nor is any interview manipulated by editing to sensationalise a story, make one part seem more important than another or more exciting. To leave material exactly as it is recorded is the only way to ensure interviewees are never mis-represented. Few other sources of information are available in this uncut form, and the oral history interview is a personal one-to-one encounter in which a respondent can talk at length without interference. This is why, as interviewers, oral historians should be careful never to let their own beliefs and prejudices influence the line of questioning. At the heart of oral history the importance lies purely and simply in the story itself and the emotions expressed in its telling which underline its significance to the teller. Unlike stories recorded by the media, there is no interest in the front-page headlines it might make, its commercial value, or how it might damage or benefit popular causes. The interviewer is merely a conduit through which history passes.

## *Is oral history just about the past?*

In 2001, Ambleside Oral Archive began to record testimonies of people involved in contemporary events, to capture details and opinions while still fresh in the mind and before memories fade. As it happened, this period turned out to be one of great incident for Lakeland communities, whose farming and tourism economy was devastated by the Foot and Mouth epidemic. Shortly after this, the government proposed a ban on fox hunting, which (though well supported by many) is seen by many Lakeland farming families as gross unwarranted interference in their traditional way of life and an attack on their cultural heritage. Both topics have been explored thoroughly in recordings made with people whose lives are most greatly affected by them. These recordings will add substantially to the knowledge future generations have of foot and mouth – and the arguments which are being expressed about fox hunting. Without oral history, the only knowledge available to our grand-



children and great grand-children might otherwise have been based solely on statistics, or Defra reports produced by officials hundreds of miles away or heavily edited media accounts written by those without first hand understanding of the subject.

In a world dominated by bureaucracy and officialdom, it becomes more important than ever to listen to people telling their own stories. To record those stories remains the role of Oral History.

### *Extracts from the Archive 3*

*Oral history can also capture contemporary issues and those who have been heavily involved in something all their lives can have important opinions on the modern state of affairs. This gentleman, born in 1935, was interviewed not only about the local Mountain Rescue but also spoke about the current risks and dangers posed by over-reliance on mobile phones.*

*R:* Yes. In the past, say the early 50s, late 40s, mid 50s when the teams were sort of just starting, rescues numbered about 20 a year, now we're talking about 100 rescues per year and when we're also talking about how many rescues there are in the Lake District, we're talking about 400 and odd incidents in the Lake District each year. Now that's more than the whole of Scotland. Scotland has about 300 plus and the Lake District has 400 plus. Now that's because the Lake District is very accessible; you can drive your car to within a few hundred yards of the fell path or the edge of the fell and you're on the fell in all sorts of inadequate footwear, inadequate gear in

a very short time and those are the people which are our best clients. They sort of fall down, break their legs and that's why it's a very accident prone area in the Lake District. So that's the main bulk of our work, is people being – I would say irresponsible, because they don't know any other way. They've never been to the Lake District before, they just don't know what the fells....

*I:* They're ignorant of its dangers.

*R:* Ignorant of the dangers of the fells, loose paths, very steep paths and they just walk up in any sorts of clothing and any sorts of footwear. So that's why the Lake District is very, very sort of accident prone. It's a very, very lethal place at times if people don't know really what they're doing. I mean it's furthest from their minds to seek the weather forecast, or to go up in boots or clothing and they just don't bother.