



Conducting the ‘advanced’ in-depth Oral History interview

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I would like to emphasise at the outset that there are no set of rules about conducting research and someone else might well have approached this very differently.

Initially I’d like to talk generally about the role of research and then move on to tell you a little about the research directions I have taken for some of the projects with which I’ve been involved. I hope that in describing my experiences, digressions and revisions you might see how research has influenced those projects.

Sometimes the commissioning entity will have a clear idea of the focus of their project and the outcomes hoped for – and sometimes not! Funding may set limitations on whether a collection of recorded interviews remains a collection of tapes, whether the material is to be used in a particular publication or whether the material contained on those tapes is to be harvested differently over time by researchers, in local publications or exhibitions.

Indeed every project you undertake will be different, and will be shaped by the commissioning body, the funding available, the timeframe for the project, whether it’s a team approach or you’re working alone, and of course the period of time about which the interviews are conducted – such as the depression or a particular event – and this is a very short list!

WHY SHOULD WE DO RESEARCH AT ALL?

We undertake research in order to try and equip ourselves to glean as much from the interview as possible. Researching a subject, the events surrounding a particular time period or the place in which your project is located, will give you some background information – but never quite all!

Research allows you to approach a subject from different directions and will also equip you to take the interview to another level and elicit more information about particular areas of discussion.

Whilst having the knowledge is important, it is also a skill to remember to ask the interviewee to articulate information about a particular event or site for the tape so that future researchers may also know exactly where that site was, or which event you and the interviewee are discussing. This could be something as simple as spelling a person’s name, clarifying an address or their work site.

There is no end to the range of sources of information and in essence your research only will be restricted by time (usually yours) and money (usually that of the commissioning body).

RESEARCH TOOLS

The internet - The internet is a great tool, but it's like the wooden spoon in the kitchen, just one more tool – a direction finder and not a deity. It is how you use it as a resource that justifies its status. It's immensely convenient to be able to access resources such as parliamentary, archival or council websites, and to locate books or articles from the comfort of home, but it can *NOT* replace all other alternatives.

Indeed the City of Sydney Historian, Dr Shirley Fitzgerald, referred to this when giving the Annual History Lecture in 2000, **History! You Must be Joking**. She recounted an enquiry from a member of the public about her search for the origins of the phrase *youth is wasted on the young ...* Using the internet as the sole source of information the only references she was able to find were to the band, *The Smashing Pumpkins*, which used this phrase in its lyrics. Any reference to George Bernard Shaw was lost!

Sites and Location - Never underestimate the value of actually visiting a site or locality. If an oral history project involves a particular place it is an elementary reminder that you will gain much by visiting the site - even if it's familiar to you, walking its dimensions and inspecting its structure will refresh your memory of it and provide you with added flexibility to perhaps respond to a comment the interviewee may make.

Libraries and Archives: Your local library is a good starting point, catalogues frequently link through to catalogues at other institutions and the ubiquitous "trawling" can sometimes unearth tracks which may lead in a variety of directions.

Government agencies have a wealth of resources – and all take time – whether in real time, such as at archives, or on the net to make your initial search.

MY PROJECTS

Three community projects with which I've been involved and how the parameters of this project influenced the research and the direction the questions took.

Each project was clearly delineated by a particular period of time and a specific location – they are:

Goat Island – wartime and 1940s

ShoroC on a Shoestring - the Depression and the 1930s on Sydney's northern beaches in the local government areas of Manly, Mosman, Pittwater and Warringah, and

Tamil Community and their Neighbours in Strathfield

GOAT ISLAND

This was a personal project (with no commissioning body) and I interviewed people who lived on Goat Island. Research could be the proverbial piece of string! I'd chosen to look broadly at the 1940s, during wartime when Japanese submariners wreaked havoc and the harbour was a hive of activity.

Goat Island has always been quarantined from the public.

Despite its proximity to the largest city in the country, its history is not widely known: Remnants of Aboriginal history remain but material from middens was used in the production of limestone; convicts worked the quarry and for a time lived on Goat Island; it was used as an ammunition store; and during its 20th century history as a working depot for the Sydney Harbour Trust and later the Maritime Services Board the public was not allowed to visit on whim. It's now managed by Department of Environment and Climate Change and visitors in their thousands come to the Island each year.

My interest in Goat Island developed from my grandfather's work there. As one of two marine engineers working shifts on the Island, he lived there with his family during the 1940s. I wanted to learn more about the lives of these people – their immense pride in their employment and the island, the social divides on the island, the practicalities of shopping, schooling and socialising; the impact of illness and travel, whether there was a sense of isolation, how living on a small island in a very small community in the middle of one of the most beautiful urban locations influenced these people's lives.

So my questions were focused on these people's experiences of living there. Rather than specific questions I went with a series of topics I wanted to cover and worked through these. Sometimes the interviewees gave expansive answers which covered a number of topics so, as I'm sure you all recognise some dexterity was required.

RESEARCHING GOAT ISLAND'S HISTORY

I started my research at the State Library where a search of the catalogue produces 23 entries.

Contemporary heritage studies predominate among this collection and they can provide a very useful starting point for your research. There is usually a brief history of the place, hopefully footnoted and with a bibliography.

The heritage studies for Goat Island were written in the last decade and listed the changing government instrumentalities which managed the island.

Annual reports of the relevant government entities made reference to the island, with endless statistics about the water capacity of fire-fighting vessels moored there, the tonnage of shipping stock repaired or built in the shipyards and the harbourmaster's report. Whilst these official reports on activities associated with maritime Sydney refer to the island the activities happened seemingly without people.

Heritage Reports

Annual Reports – Sydney Harbour Trust / Maritime Services Board / Port of Sydney / Public Works / National Parks & Wildlife Service

Colonial reports

Thesis on Sandstone in Sydney

Maritime journals

Ferry history

Newspaper articles

Since my principal interest was the residents of the Island I could have conducted an interview without any prior research. However, an understanding of the maritime landscape of Sydney's working harbour - an awareness of the infrastructure and administrative role of a government

department the size of the Maritime Service Board (MSB) added to my understanding of the stories these people told.

Living as they did in the midst of the harbour, with family members working for the MSB the interviewees were universally immeasurably proud of their role in the MSB and felt a sense of supremacy about their work and the Island. Whatever happened on the harbour, they'd seen it all!

Most interviewees were asleep on Goat Island when the Japanese torpedo struck *HMAS Kuttabul* at Garden Island. It was something they responded to as part of their duties and unless I knew about that event and sought their reaction to it – it would never have occurred to them to discuss this with me.

And I'm sure you know well that you can research a whole raft of issues surrounding a place and then someone asked me about toilets– what did they do with human waste? A perfectly logical question yet with all the hours of research I'd undertaken that was an elementary issue I'd missed in my obsession with people's daily lives!

SHORO C ON A SHOESTRING – THE DEPRESSION AND THE 1930S

In 1999 ShoroC Councils of Mosman, Manly, Pittwater and Warringah – suburbs north of Sydney Harbour, commissioned an oral history project titled *ShoroC on a Shoestring the depression and the 1930s*. The project was site specific – interviewing 72 people across these municipalities.

The area covers 289 square kilometres – reaching across a landscape of developed city suburb to semi-rural areas and bushland at its perimeter – and much of it edged by water.

Through the Australian Centre for Public History at UTS I worked as part of a team of three on that project - with Professors Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton.

Here the demands of the brief set the structure of the questions: we were to interview people from a range of backgrounds about their memories of the depression and the 1930s in these particular areas of Sydney. Of course these people are now in their 80s and would then have been teenagers.

We all bring with us some knowledge of the depression and there is a wealth of material available on the subject, internationally and domestic events later in the thirties.

Because of the youth of most interviewees during the period their memories of the depression were sometimes received memories and part of their families' stories. Reaching back more than 60 years meant most interviewees were recalling youthful memories not just of the decade but also reminiscences of a universal economic period whose title instantly resonates with certain images. This was one of the challenges of the project: interpreting the expression of events which predate the interviewee's memory yet form part of each family's repertoire of rememberings.

Once again - - the parameters of the brief, the location and the ages of the interviewees during the period of the project shaped the focus of our questions.

There is no comprehensive publication about life north of the harbour during this period, subsequently two publications followed from this project – *Cracking Awaba: stories of Mosman & northern beaches communities during the Depression*, by Associate Professor Paula Hamilton (published in 2005 by the ShoroC Council Libraries), and *Hiking for Health*, a facsimile reproduction of a 1936 hiking book published in 2003 by Manly, Pittwater and Warringah Councils.

Since many interviewees had a strong attachment to place and the landscape figured prominently in their memories, familiarity with the geography of the area was vital for the interviewers.

As well as an understanding of the wider events of the decade it was imperative to research the history of the area because most interviewees' lives as young people was spent in that locality and we needed to be familiar with transport routes, the prominence of surf clubs and culture, the places they fished and swam – all of which were the focus of their lives in the 1930s – and hopefully have better follow up questions.

WHERE DO WE BEGIN OUR RESEARCH ON THE PERIOD

There has long been an active history society on the northern beaches which published a journal – Manly, Warringah & Pittwater Historical Society

The ShoroC Council Libraries (Manly, Mosman and Dee Why and Mona Vale) have extensive local studies sections – and dedicated librarians with an encyclopaedic knowledge about their locality – and the tenacity to know where to find some piece of information

There were also thematic histories; Heritage Studies of Manly and Warringah and Manly; of the Rock pools of the northern beaches, the histories of the surf clubs, unpublished theses.

Scour the bibliographies of these texts and remember footnotes

Carroll Collection - www.mosman.nsw.gov.au – pictorial collection from 1860-1970

Wellings Collection at Manly Library

Newspapers

National Archives publishes a number of research guides, including

Working for the dole: Commonwealth relief during the Great Depression, Don Fraser, 2001

Extensive fiction has been written around the depression providing a flavour of the period

Census

Literature

Histories of the areas

Ferry history

Photographs

Because the majority of interviewees were still teenagers in the period, we asked questions about which schools they attended. Across simple question such as “where did you go to school” and follow on questions about transport to and from, subjects studied and leaving school, elicits a great deal of information about modes of transport, the long journeys for some students, parents' economic circumstances, religious associations and a great mix of private and public education. At least 20 different private schools are represented in this group and whilst some travelled as little as a few blocks others went by ferry and train as far as Burwood.

Research also meant identifying significant events in Sydney which impacted the lives of people living on the northern beaches during the period of the project's scope. In 1932 the Harbour

Bridge opened and made a huge difference to people travelling from the north across the harbour, businessmen, travelling salesmen, fruiterers and market gardeners taking goods to the city.

Another question such as “what work did your father do” – brought forth a variety of employment: some hard working for 7 days a week; other men who owned large businesses in the city; one man’s father died at sea and his mother took over his job; grocery and paint salesmen; out of work marine engineers – *and* builders, tomato growers, carters and highly successful entrepreneurs. The interviewers’ familiarity with the area, the sort of work available locally, different modes of heating, shopping or materials, sold amplified our understanding of interviewees’ responses.

Whilst the collection has replicated the social profile of the entire region -- which was predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon and protestant -- we were interested to learn about other ethnic groups in the region. Census figures show the area was not completely Anglo-Saxon and most interviewees remembered the Chinese market gardeners. But we were unable to track down any members of the Chinese community from that district who lived there in the 1930s. Though there are articles in the local history journal about the Chinese market gardens of Manly Vale nothing has been written about the people themselves.

Material about the Yugoslav market gardeners at Warriewood has been written – some of whom still live there from the 1930s.

TAMIL COMMUNITY AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Strathfield Council commissioned a project on the Tamil community – titled *The Tamils and Their Neighbours Oral History Project*. This project was conducted through the Australian Centre for Public History at UTS.

The brief was to interview people who have migrated from Sri Lanka and settled in the Strathfield area over the last 25 years, recording their experiences of migration and interaction with the wider Strathfield community.

As far as we could ascertain at the time no oral history project has previously been conducted in the Tamil community.

WHERE DO WE BEGIN TO RESEARCH THIS PROJECT?

One of the early starting points was the State Library. There was some material relating to Tamil literature and a search of newspaper articles produces quantities of references to the Tamil Tigers. Few of us are unaware of the terrible internal conflicts in Sri Lanka but the project was to have a more general focus and anchored by the brief – its location was Strathfield.

There was an excellent book on migrant statistics – nothing on Sri Lanka but there were references to Indians and Indian Tamils, in Melbourne in particular, and from this example similar stories of educational achievement and professional success echoed in Strathfield’s Tamil community where children are frequently introduced first by name and their “99.something score” in the HSC follows almost immediately.

A recent publication compiling extensive research undertaken among Tamil refugees in Norway made little reference to the Australian experience but it was illustrative about some customs

and cultural practices. There are articles in medical journals on the effects of trauma among the Tamil community.

The Australian People – the encyclopaedia edited by James Jupp (published in 2001 by CUP) – has a section on the Tamil community but otherwise there is an absence of material with a local focus.

You may already know about the Migration Heritage Centre – an excellent site (www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au) which showcases the work being undertaken in various migrant communities. You can also see images of people who've been interviewed and their stories are also available to be read on site.

A search of the Migration Heritage Centre's website produced nothing about the Tamils or the Sri Lankan community. But that has changed since this paper was presented. There has been an exhibition and seminar titled "*Serendib to Sydney – Sri Lankan settlement in NSW*".

This exhibition was jointly hosted by State Records and the Migration Heritage Centre and Christine Yeats (at State Records) had co-ordinated the seminar and discovered Sri Lankan convicts, a family who came from Sri Lanka in 1816 to work with the British Army and over time there have been some hundreds of immigrants from Sri Lanka – then of course Ceylon.

Unfortunately information about these immigrants is not sitting in a file neatly labelled Tamils or Sri Lankans. Rather the information is embedded within records relating to the activities with which those people were associated – convict, jail and land records. Frequently references were found via broad titles such as "Indian Hawkers".

And again, remembering the brief (and location and timing) – I was required to look at people settling in Strathfield in the last quarter century.

One interviewee was Anandavalli, a world renowned expert practitioner of Indian dance. She made her public debut at the Victoria and Albert Museum at the age of 9 and said of her life as she travelled and danced round Europe with her mother that she was treated like a little princess. Since 1987 she has had her own dance company at Homebush and has since travelled to India to refresh her life's work with the assistance of a major government arts grant. Her students live in not only in Strathfield / Homebush but also in Canberra and Melbourne, continuing the traditions and arts learnt in Homebush.

As I prepared for her interview I was anxious about how quickly I could bring myself up to speed as an expert on Indian dance! Why should I? That was an absurd idea, so back to the internet and a search on Google.

Using both Anandavalli's name and the name of her dance company (Lingalayam Dance Academy) by which to search, a raft of articles emerged with reference to her history, reviews of her concerts at the Seymour Centre and the Art Gallery. Even she was unaware of some of the entries and was delighted with these discoveries.

IN CONCLUSION

As evident from my experiences with these three projects there is no perfect list of research sources. It's an evolving process which requires lateral and creative thinking and is often shaped by constrictions of time and funding.

And of course in addition to the details of research, as oral historians we all want each interview to be perfect!

Researching for oral history is not only about the subject matter but how we make use of that information and how the interview is conducted.

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The accompanying bibliography, list of archives and suggested venues for research is barely a glancing brush!

A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Oxford companion to Australian history, edited by Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre with the assistance of Helen Doyle and Kim Torney, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, revised edition, 2001

The Australian people : an encyclopaedia of the nation, its people and their origins, edited by James Jupp, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, c2001.

Australians, a historical library. (Australians: A Guide to Sources), Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, Broadway, 1987

General sites

Libraries/Archives at: Powerhouse Museum; Art Gallery of NSW; National Trust
Bureau of Statistics

Archives

City of Sydney Archives
National Library of Australia
National Archives – research guides
State Records NSW
RTA (Roads and Traffic Authority) – maps and plans
NSW Parliament website
Conference papers
Unpublished thesis at university libraries – some available online
Museum publications
Local government publications
Journals – industry
Heritage Reports
University calendars and journals
Photographic collections, eg, Macleay Museum at the University of Sydney,
Royal Australian Historical Society
Local Shires Association
Water Board