

# Finding very particular material in oral history collections: a research toolkit and user journey

## Introduction

How do you find material on a particular (and perhaps peculiar) topic in very large oral history collections? How do you identify which interviews in a collection of, say, 100 are useful for your purposes? How do you quickly find the parts of each interview that are of most interest, when the recording might be 3 or 5 or 8 or 20 hours long?

And what are the challenges of using interviews for purposes other than those anticipated by a) those involved in *designing* the oral history projects in which the interviews were collected, b) those involved in *conducting* the interviews, c) the interviewees themselves and d) those involved in *describing* the interviews, in catalogue entries and content summaries.

There is a large literature on what is usually called the 'reuse' of interviews (and other qualitative 'data').<sup>1</sup> This literature is very strong on questions of *interpretation* (including the additional challenges of *understanding* interviews when they were collected by others, with different aims in mind) but it has very little to say on more practical methodological matters, including ways in which particular material is *findable*. At most, we are told that interviews can be selected using archive databases, and that they need to be read, or listened to, closely.<sup>2</sup>

This 'research toolkit and user journey' aims to offer practical suggestions for finding 'difficult to find' material in archived interview collections – material not well signposted by existing guides and summaries. It is based on my own attempt – in a collaboration between *National Life Stories* and the [Understanding Unbelief programme](#) at the University of Kent – to find material on forms of **religious unbelief** in three oral history collections at the British Library:

- C1364 'An Oral History of the Water Industry': 31 interviews, recorded between 2009 and 2012, with staff and former staff at all levels within the UK water industry. The recordings are not transcribed, but have detailed content summaries with frequent time-codes. Many are online on [BL Sounds](#).
- C409 'NLSC: City Lives': 150 interviews recorded between 1987 and 1997 with workers and former workers in the City of London (in the Stock Exchange, the merchant and clearing banks, the commodities and future markets, law and accounting firms, financial regulators, insurance companies and Lloyd's of London). The recordings have detailed content summaries and verbatim transcripts. Many are online on [BL Sounds](#).
- C900 'Millennium Memory Bank': 5439 interviews recorded in 1998 and 1999 with people living in all parts of the UK, aged between 5 and 107, male and female, with a range of ethnic, educational and economic backgrounds. The recordings – which can be accessed at the British Library using the [Listening and Viewing Service](#) – are not transcribed, but the catalogue entries for each include content summaries.

As these are all British Library collections, they are accessed using the Sound and Moving Image Catalogue (SAMI). This is a *SirsiDynix* system allowing simple and advanced searches.

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**Advanced search**

title	nlsc city lives	AND	
any words or numbers	belief	AND	
title		AND	
subject		AND	
place			

Search   Reset

**Catalogue Searches**  
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The search fields ignore punctuation and are not case sensitive, but in order to search within a single collection, the collection title must be entered in full, correctly ('nlsc city lives' not 'city lives'). SAMI produces results in the form of full catalogue entries including the content summaries of each recording. Content summaries of particular interest can be manually copied and pasted into a Word document or saved (along with the rest of the catalogue entry) – using the 'mark' tool – in a 'kept' list that can be emailed to oneself at the end of each session:

[Help](#)   [New search](#)   [Previous](#)   [Next](#)   [Change display](#)   [Kept](#)   [Logout](#)

record 1 of 1 for search title "An Oral History of the Water Industry" AND any words or numbers "belief"

Mark

ns on shell

: British Library catalogue

**Sir Frederick Holliday interviewed by Alison Gilmour**  
Holliday, Frederick, 1935-2016 (speaker, male; interviewee; former chairman, Northumbrian Water Group)

**Links and access:** [Listen at British Library Sounds](#)

**Collection title:** An Oral History of the Water Industry

**Item title:** Sir Frederick Holliday interviewed by Alison Gilmour

**Other ref no.:** C1364/05 [BL REF]

**Contributor:** Holliday, Frederick, 1935-2016 (speaker, male; interviewee; former chairman, Northumbrian Water Group)

**Contributor:** Gilmour, Alison (speaker, female; interviewer)

**Access restrictions:** Open except for: Track 4 00:43:31 – 00:43:56 section closed for 100 years from 1924 until 01-01-2025; Track 15 closed for 10 years for 10 years until 10-09-2021; Track 15 00:43:20 – 00:44:00 section closed for 100 years from 1924 until 01-01-2025; Track 16 00:14:36 – 00:23:33 section closed for 10 years until 10-09-2021; Track 16 00:40:33 – 00:43:23 section closed for 62 years from 1988 until 2071; Track 17 00:57:19 – 00:57:45 section closed for 56 years from 2016 to 2072

**Recording date:** 2009-08-13, 2009-08-20, 2009-11-16, 2010-02-09, 2011-02-02

**Item copyright:** BL

**Recording equipment:** Marantz PMD660

**Rec. circumstances:** Tracks 1, 5, 14 and 18 are trial recordings to test the equipment

**Recording note:** audio files 19 WAV 16 bit 48 kHz 2-channel

**Summary:** to follow

**Summary:** Part 1. Track 2: [Session one: 13 August 2009] Professor Sir Frederick Holliday [FH] lists his former professional roles: Chairman of Northumbrian Water, university Vice-Chancellor, Chairman of a stockbroking company, Director of Shell, Director of British Rail. Born Worcestershire, in a council house. Comments on being old enough to have childhood memories from before WWII and during the war. Description of early childhood memories of a horse and cart carrying bananas before the war, fishing with father, early interest in natural history, eating doughnuts with father. FH's father was a factory worker. Comments on frequent walks with father, mother and sister in the countryside. Description of fishing trips on local Birmingham-Bristol canal with father and father's friend, Mick, and customs of the canal. [05:44] Father, Alfred, known as Fred [AH] born in a poor household, Bromsgrove. AH's father was a sweep. AH raised by strict grandparents. Mentions AH's work in a glass factory: Triplex [Safety Glass Company], part of the Pilkington Group. Comments on AH's initial job (aged 14) delivering groceries to large houses in Birmingham. FH's grandmother was a cook in a large house; FH's mother was the kitchen maid. Comments on FH's father and mother courting. [07:48] Description of father's attitude to family

I was limited to a maximum of three months for this research. Time was tight, while the definition of 'religious unbelief' was broad, exceeding 'atheism'. In line with the aims of the [Understanding Unbelief programme](#), my field of view had to be wide enough to capture 'the diverse types of, and aspects to, unbelief' including the existential beliefs and worldviews of those describing themselves as not religious.<sup>3</sup>

The differences between the collections in scale (n31, n150, n5439), and in the ways in which they have been described (catalogued, summarised and/or transcribed), meant that it was necessary to develop a different methodology for each collection in order to locate material on religious unbelief. They can be thought of, therefore, as three distinct case studies:

- 1. Using a small collection with no transcripts: An Oral History of the Water Industry (pp. 5-8)**
- 2. Using a large collection with transcripts: NLSC City Lives (pp. 9-12)**
- 3. Using a very large collection with no transcripts: Millennium Memory Bank (pp. 13-18)**

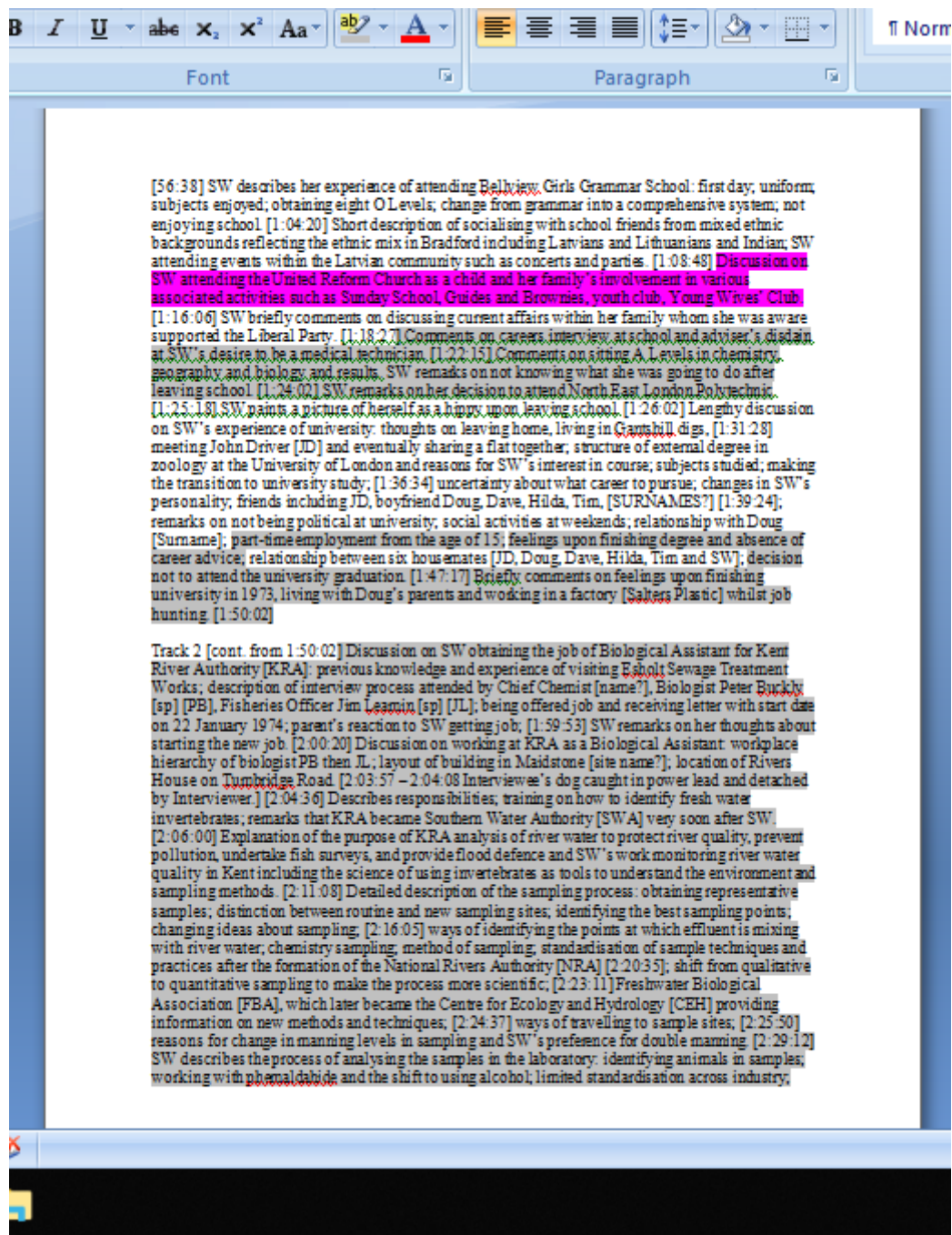
For each of the case studies, I provide a step-by-step description of methods that could be applied in any investigation, as well as specific tools for studies of unbelief. The key tools and tips are summarised at the end of each case study.

## 1. Using a small collection with no transcripts: An Oral History of the Water Industry

In this collection 21 of the 31 interviews are 'open' to public access, with detailed content summaries but no transcripts. Listening to all 21 in full, back-to-back, would have taken 162 hours. I used the following system with each content summary, in order to reduce to a minimum the amount of listening required:

1. Copy and paste each summary into Microsoft Word.
2. Read each summary carefully, manually highlighting sections as follows (steps 3-5).
3. Highlight in grey (grey-out) sections in which material on belief and unbelief seemed unlikely to be present, such as 'Lists 'pop' drinks available from the pop man. Mentions buying groceries from Co-op van. Comments on buying pop' [C1364/24, Track 1, 5:37] or 'Description of key responsibilities as Deputy Operations Officer' [C1364/24, Track 6].
4. Highlight in colour sections clearly *about* or *related to* religion, such as 'Discusses involvement in Fifth Cambridge Boys Brigade [...] church attendance and religious beliefs; BB uniform' [C1364/7, Track 2, 34:36].
5. Leave white (un-highlighted) sections in which forms of belief or unbelief *might* be involved, such as '[father] died from stomach cancer [...] Description of [mother] telling children' [C1364/24, Track 2, [37:45] or 'KG reflects on his career and elements of luck at different points' [C1364/12, Track 9, 01:00:43].

This system resulted in 21 content summaries with large sections greyed-out, many white sections and several coloured sections (example pictured below).



I then listened in full to the parts of the recording highlighted in colour (usually references to churchgoing, religious practice) and listened with some skipping forwards and spot listening (listening briefly at roughly 30 second intervals by dragging the progress bar) to sections not highlighted. This process identified 25 separate sections of audio – across the 21 interviews – in which interviewees talk about forms of religious unbelief and/or certain existential views, such as thoughts about fate or other ways in which experience seemed to them patterned. In addition, the process discovered one 'exceptional' interview in which religious unbelief featured in detail throughout, which I discuss in a British Library [Sound and vision blog](#).

If I had been working with a much larger collection of interviews that had content summaries but not transcripts, I accept that the method described above may not have been practical. In this case, I would have needed to search the summaries using keywords. Obviously, words such as 'atheist', 'agnostic', 'nonbeliever' and 'unbeliever' could have been used, though in this collection they would not have pinpointed any interviews, *even those in which one of these words is used at some point by the interviewee*. For example, one interviewee used the words 'atheist' and 'agnostic' in a story about and comments on his son, but the summary of this part of the recording does not contain either word, instead reading 'Story about elder boy, Jonathan, climbing on servant's back while he was praying'. Another interviewee says in his recording 'I was never christened. You know, so [laughing] I'm a, I'm a, I'm a nonbeliever, I'm an atheist or whatever you want to call me. But, you know I was never Christened' in a section that is summarised as follows: 'Comments on JP's family's religious affiliations: JP was not christened but DP was christened.' Clearly, if we want to find even something as simple as *direct* reference to atheism using content summaries, we need a *range* of keywords up our sleeves. And if we are interested – as I was – in forms of unbelief *in addition* to those that might be named 'atheism', then the range of keywords needs to be wider still. We need a word bank.

Using the time-codes (start and finish times within the full recording) of the audio clips, it is possible to work backwards by finding keywords in the summary describing the section of recording from which each clip was taken. For example, consider this clip, which is useful for establishing the interviewee's distance from his parents' religion:

They met through the chapel and used to go every Sunday. We didn't have any- they were also T-total at that time – until I was about I think 12, 13 we didn't have any alcohol in the house and we started to have a- there was a bottle of sherry appeared at Christmas.

*Interviewer: [laughs] [C1364/17, Track 2, 3:49-4:08]*

The summary entry for this section of recording from which it was extracted reads simply: 'Description of parents' background' (I had left in white in my highlighting system). In theory – if a bigger collection was being used – it could have been found by searching the summary for 'parents' or 'background'.

Many of the other keywords and phrases identified in this way are more easily anticipated, because they are used by those summarising the content of the recordings to characterise accounts of childhood engagement with religion (always Christianity in this collection):

'church', 'Sunday school', 'guides', 'brownies', 'cub', 'religious', 'christened', 'attendance', 'attending', 'Catholicism', 'Sunday routine', 'Baptist', 'Nonconformist', 'Salvation Army', 'Mission Hall', 'parade', 'confirmed', 'churchgoer', 'Methodist', 'routine'. Other words and phrases are more surprising, because they are words used to describe interviewees' comments on what they took to be signs of religious belief in others ('praying', 'kneeling', 'bowing') or forms of existential reflection that are not connected (by interviewee or interviewer) to religion: 'father', 'mother', 'parents', 'discussing', 'philosophical', 'charity', 'voluntary work', 'feelings', 'retirement', 'doubts', 'final', 'reflection', 'leaving', 'desire', 'death', 'tumour', 'funeral', 'died', 'cemetery'.

In the paragraph above, words and phrases are reproduced exactly as they appear in the summary, for example 'doubts' not 'doubt'. But in searching summaries in other collections, it would be sensible to use root parts of words, to maximise the instances found, such as **doubt**, **baptis**, **philosoph**, **Methodis**, **religi** and so on.

### **Key tips and tricks for small collections with summaries but no transcripts:**

- Use coloured or otherwise marked summaries to target listening on those parts of recordings most likely to contain material on your topic.
- Develop and apply a bank of words and root parts of words used in the content summary to describe relevant sections of recording.



## 2. Using a large collection with transcripts: NLSC City Lives

In the case of the collection 'NLSC City Lives' I was working with a much larger collection – 92 interviews open to public access. Because each has a verbatim transcript I could search these to produce a sub-sample of interviews. I used religion-related search terms to *exclude* from this sub-sample interviews in which:

- a) The interviewee says that they have religious belief, such as 'I was confirmed as an Anglican at the age of about 22 [...] I was at that stage, and indeed still am, a committed Christian. And I was then, and I've continued to be since, a committed churchgoer now in the Church of England' [C409/37 p10-11]
- b) The interviewee *might* have religious beliefs that are not discussed (the interview features no discussion of religion or religious belief at all)

This process of sifting left 44 transcripts. I could reasonably expect material on religious unbelief to be present in those sections of interviews in which the interviewer asks *about* engagement with religion (this is almost always asked in the first few hours on childhood, sometimes followed up later in the interview). But I was also aware that material on unbelief might be scattered across interviews. In her own empirical work, for example, Lois Lee (2015) found that 'existential worldviews' featuring forms of religious unbelief cropped up in 'fragments' and were expressed in accounts of particular life events, situations or contexts.<sup>4</sup> It was therefore necessary to 'read' each transcript in full (as quickly as possible) in order to catch 'fragments' of unbelief as well as to pay particular attention to certain 'turning points' and significant moments. The method employed was as follows:

1. Paste transcript into Word
2. Use mouse wheel or down arrow to continuously scroll through the document at such a speed that it is only possible to scan the text.
3. Pause to type enough words from salient sections in order to recall the content, taking care to include key phrases exactly as they are transcribed. This is one example:

409/8

...[T]ragic accidents – colleague whose sons died in car accident

...that left one gap and by extraordinary chance I was put in as deputy

Married at St Mark's Church

cancer – “if died certainly makes you realise...good to be alive” “ I think it catches people for no reason”

Final q – “how have you changed” leads to discussion of relig which seems to be not believing in God but not being an atheist! \* last para

1. Use notes to re-find particular transcript sections. For example, to re-find the discussion of death in the example above, I could search the transcript for the phrase ‘catches people’; to re-find discussion of religion, I could search ‘how have you changed’.
2. In order to find the associated section of the *recording* it was usually necessary to compare the transcript with the summary, because in this collection the transcripts do not have time-codes but the summaries do.
3. Cut and paste sections from transcripts of most interest.

This process produced 36 extracts across 17 interviews. These extracts cover what could be called four different kinds of utterance.

**One:** more or less ‘direct’ statements of and comments on personal religious unbelief that follow from questions about religious engagement and belief, such as:

*Interviewer: I had the impression, from what you said about your childhood, that you are not actively religious?*

Correct. [...] I’m not interested in religion. There seem to me so many different types of religion. There must be some purpose in life, but what it is I can’t divine and I’m not going to spend time guessing about it. And so the rituals of the church leave me completely unmoved. [C409/09 Reel 5 Track 1 (part 9)]

**Two:** expressions of existential outlook, often concerning the perceived role of ‘fate’, luck, ‘strange’ or ‘uncanny’ sequences of events and ‘circularities’ in life, such as:

If I'd gone up to Cambridge in October '49 as I should have done as I had a place and if my tutor hadn't been mistaken and given the place away, I would have gone up then and I would never have had seven or eight months to spare between the end of my National Service and going up to Cambridge. And what did I do with that time? My father said "Why don't you come into Barclays Bank for a little while?" And I did and I did it during the long vacations and finally decided to come into the bank. I'm quite certain that I wouldn't have come into Barclays Bank if there hadn't been that strange succession of circumstances. [C409/01 F1002]

(In one case, the interviewee makes their own connection between their views on 'fate' and religious belief: "I'm not religious or anything like that, but if that's not fate, you tell me what is.")

**Three:** comments on beliefs about afterlife, often used by the interviewer as a religion-related question, such as:

*Interviewer: And do you have religious beliefs? I mean do you have some belief about what happens after death, or not?*

I think that they have actually got slightly weaker. I mean I just don't know quite to be honest what I believe. I mean I'm quite clear about right and wrong and that kind of thing, and there must be something up there somewhere, but I find it difficult to- with the sort of Church of England- I mean it's a good habit to get into, but I mean I find it...I mean I do not say the Creed when I go to church, because I don't actually I think, I'm not sure I believe it. [C409/97 Part 5 (tape 3 side A)]

**Four:** extracts in which the interviewee, in the absence of religious belief, values religion in some way, such as:

I became a convinced atheist at Oxford and that hasn't prevented me from having a very nice relationship with the Church and with different churches. And if you are, you know, completely atheistical then you can [...] appreciate the good things that the Church does do, and you can in many cases support them, because a lot of things the Church does are not done by anybody else

*Interviewer: When you say what the Church does, do you mean in social terms?*

In social terms, and also when people get born and married and die, and compassion for suffering. [C409/134 F5288-A/Part 20]

Working backwards from the content of the 36 extracts of these four different types, it is possible to suggest a word/word-root bank that might be used in transcribed collections in other investigations of unbelief. These are:

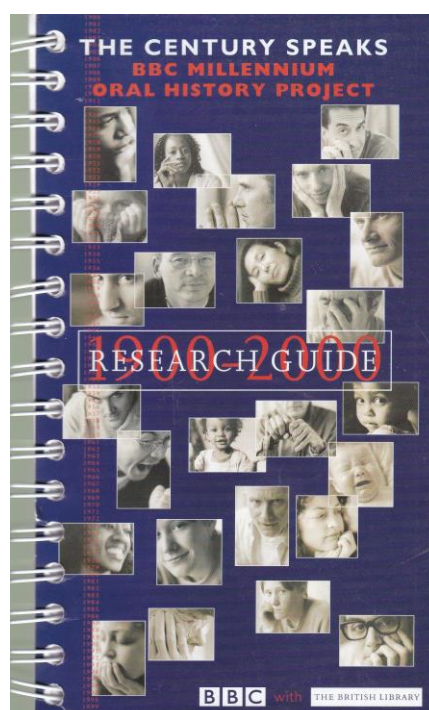
relig, confirmed, purpose, rituals, church, agnosti, belie, hereafter, death, up there, etern, universe, almighty, luck, fate, athie, extraordinary, horoscope, circ, strange, uncanny, die, death, afterlife, fortune, suffer, pain, cruel, life, digni
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### **Key tips and tricks for large collections with transcripts:**

- If possible, use search terms in each transcript to exclude from further consideration those interviews that are unsuited to your study.
- Apply a method of rapid scanning of transcripts, noting sections of particular interest in such a way that they can be *found again*.
- Develop and apply a bank of words/root parts of words that tend to be used by interviewees in sections that are of most interest to your study (such as 'strange' in the case of unbelief).

### 3. Using a very large collection with no transcripts: Millennium Memory Bank

In the case of this collection of over 5000 recordings it was necessary to sample. Taking advantage of the Millennium Memory Bank's range and diversity of content, I designed four samples – A, B, C, D – that seemed likely to capture forms of experience *not* captured by 'An Oral History of the Water Industry' and 'City Lives' (in which the majority of interviewees were born between 1920 and 1960 in at least nominally Christian families). Sample A included those aged 18 and under at the time of interview. Samples B, C and D attempted to locate recordings with interviewees, of any age, from family backgrounds involving Judaism, Hinduism and Islam.



In order to restrict the size of each sample to a manageable number, it was necessary to use another search term in each search (in addition to the age ranges or words Judaism, Hinduism etc.) Reference to the original project 'Research Guide' (cover pictured) revealed that the interviews had been conducted with the explicit aim of collecting accounts of

experience and opinion within 16 themes, one of which was 'Beliefs and Fears'.<sup>5</sup> When the recordings were uploaded to the British Library catalogue, each interview had been tagged with the themes that – in the opinion of interviewer or cataloguer – were covered most fully by that interview. This tagging was documented in the 'subject' field of SAMI, so that typing 'beliefs' (or belief\$ but not belief) into the subject field limits discovered interviews to those tagged for the theme 'Beliefs and Fears'.

Thus, **Sample A** (interviewees  $\leq$  18 tagged for theme 'Beliefs and Fears') was generated using this SAMI search:

Advanced search		
title	Millennium Memory Bank	AND
name	198? OR 199?	AND
subject	beliefs	AND

198? finds all years of birth in the 'name' field in the range 1980-1989. 199? finds in the range 1990-1999. This is because the 'name' field searches the part of the catalogue entry called 'contributor', which includes the interviewee's name and date of birth (as well as the name of the interviewer and the particular BBC Radio Station involved in the recording).

Note that the following is *not* an equivalent search and will find many more results (370 instead of 183).

Advanced search		
title	Millennium Memory Bank	AND
name	198?	OR
name	199?	AND
subject	beliefs	AND

This is because using OR in the drop down menus, rather than by typing into the search box, breaks the link with the collection title, so that a search is made for '198?' in 'Millennium Memory Bank' **as well as '199?' and 'beliefs' in other collections**). This aspect – even 'quirk' – of SAMI applies to any search.

**Sample B** (tagged for theme 'Beliefs and Fears' with 'Judaism' or 'Jewish' in content summary) was generated using this SAMI search:

Advanced search		
title	Millennium Memory Bank	AND
any words or numbers	Judaism OR Jewish	AND
subject	beliefs	AND

**Sample C** (tagged for theme 'Beliefs and Fears' with 'Hindu\$' in content summary) was generated using this SAMI search:

Advanced search		
title	Millennium Memory Bank	AND
any words or numbers	Hindu\$	AND
subject	beliefs	AND

Adding '\$' after Hindu ensures that SAMI searches, in addition to the word Hindu, for words containing Hindu: Hinduism, Hindus.

**Sample D** (tagged for theme 'Beliefs and Fears' with 'Islam' or 'Muslim' in content summary) was generated using this SAMI search:

Advanced search		
title	Millennium Memory Bank	AND
any words or numbers	Islam OR Muslim	AND
subject	beliefs	AND

SAMI displays each sample like this:

**Search Results**

title "Millennium Memory Bank" AND any words or numbers "Judaism OR Jewish" AND subject "beliefs" search found 88 titles.

Pages << 1 2 3 4 5 >>

#1	<b>C900/10099</b>	<b>1999</b>
<a href="#">Details</a>	<b>Millennium Memory Bank</b> Lipson, Gerald Herbert, 1929 Sep. 20- (speaker, male; Film Distributor)	
<a href="#">Mark</a>	RECORDING	
#2	<b>C900/12115 C1</b>	<b>1999</b>
<a href="#">Details</a>	<b>Millennium Memory Bank</b> Kaufman, Harvey, 1950 Jun. 01- (speaker, male; Researcher)	
<a href="#">Mark</a>	RECORDING	
#3	<b>C900/15133 C1</b>	<b>1999</b>
<a href="#">Details</a>	<b>Millennium Memory Bank</b> Walmsley, Mark Brunson, 1948 Mar. 13- (speaker, male; Teacher)	
<a href="#">Mark</a>	RECORDING	
#4	<b>C900/15067</b>	<b>1999</b>
<a href="#">Details</a>	<b>Millennium Memory Bank</b> Walmsley, Ruth Diane, 1943 May. 31- (speaker, female; Massage Therapist / Administrator)	
<a href="#">Mark</a>	RECORDING	

Clicking on the blue box labelled 'Details' brings up the catalogue entry for that recording, including its content summary:

**Summary:** 01 Disk skips

**Summary:** 02 I'm lara coles I'm sixteen years old, I was born in Birmingham in 1983. 12' Earliest memories at garden parties, playing with sister, nursery with friends, birthday and Christmas and Easter parties. 25' Mentions schools attended, began nursery at 2 1/2. Secondary school is predominantly Asian, with children from other races, school has special needs unit. 1.19 I'm mixed race, mother is Asian and father is white. Mother's parents born in India and came here about 45 years ago and father's parents were born in London, Nan is still alive. Disk skips

**Summary:** 03 00' my mothers parents are Hindu, live in London but six months of the year are spent in India and the other six are spent in London. 27' Goes down to see them once every two months and they talk on the phone quite a lot. Disk skips

**Summary:** 04 00' because grandparents live far and spend a lot of time in India the Hindu religion does not play a big part of my life. Has been to India and spent four months there ate the Asian food, wore their cloths, went to the temple, felt she found herself, it was very spiritual. 30' when I am back at home I have no religion, I don't believe in god. 52' I think of myself as mixed race. People first used to think mixed race was Afro Caribbean and white and looked at me funny but my friends accept me for who I am. Disk skips

**Summary:** 05 03' People react like that from surprise, but I know at least six mixed race families on my road that are Asian white families. 18' people are not racist or I have not experienced any racism, because in Handsworth Wood there are a lot of mixed race families, and in Rimmingham there are. 36' I have been able to act Asian. 1 17 my parents don't want me to have an arranged marriage

With each summary, I followed this method:

1. Scan/read summary.
2. Use the 'mark' feature in SAMI to place those entries that seemed to be of most interest into a 'kept' list.

Go back Help New search Previous Next Change display **Kept** Logout

Record 2 of 88 for search title "Millennium M

[Mark](#)

Nearby items on shelf

**Search for**

Explore the British Library catalogue

**Millennium Memory Bank**  
Kaufman, Harvey, 1950 Jun. 01- (speaker, male; Resea

**Electronic access:** Play this (at British Library only)

**Collection title:** Millennium Memory Bank

**SHELFMARK:** C900/12115

**Contributor:** Kaufman, Harvey, 1950 Jun. 01- (spe



3. Email 'kept' list to myself (an alternative to the use of 'mark' and then emailing the 'kept' list, is to simply make a note of catalogue numbers – C900/12115 in the example above – and then use these to re-find particular entries at any time, by typing the numbers into the 'any words or numbers' search field).
4. Listen to interviews in 'kept' list, using the content summary to guide listening (there are no time-codes in the content summaries for this collection, but the approximate position of content can be judged, and the playback position adjusted by comparing the content summary to the 'content' of the audio).
5. Transcribe key sections of interviews.

My four samples found **384** potential interviews. Scanning summaries reduced this to **81** (39 in sample A, 14 in sample B, 15 in sample C and 13 in sample D). Listening to (parts of) these 81 recordings resulted in the identification and transcription of **38** extracts which I transcribed. For example, these sections of summary identified recordings C900/01066 and C900/09149 as targets for listening:

does - table tennis, football, tennis... if F wants sweets or a magazine...

**Summary:** Band 31: ...he can have it, but if he's just had something - like a magazine... he might have to wait a while for it, he couldn't just have it the next day. F likes play station magazines... he describes them. F used to have pocket money, but it gradually died out... most of his friends probably get about £5 a week. F doesn't think much about religion... he'd like there to be a God, but he's not sure, he can't imagine a head in the clouds, watching over everybody!... if someone asked him to describe God, he'd just say a head in the clouds... he doesn't pray, he wasn't christened, etc....

**Summary:** Band 32: They respect people who are religious... his mother says she's brought him up to have "values" but he's not sure what that means. What's important to him is having a good home.

[C900/01066]

**Summary:** Track 7 -

**Summary:** I can't see it happening. I'm not religious in the way I follow the religion, my children are brought up learning Hindu and Sikh religions. When my Father died his ashes were put in a local river. The Hindu's believe in taking ashes back to India.

**Summary:** Track 8 - Who are we / or travel \*\*

**Summary:** It's a shame but I've never visited India. My partner is in Bombay and says they're more advanced than in England. Women have a life of their own, children all have computers. The children's

[C900/09149]

The sections transcribed from each of these were as follows:

*Interviewer: Do you have any sort of belief – like religious belief or, you know, belief in greater things?*

Erm, I'm not sure really; I haven't thought about it that much. Erm, erm, I think I'd like there to be a God to like watch over everybody and check that everything's going ok. But, I'm not really sure – I can't really imagine a head in the clouds watching over everybody.

*Interviewer: [laughs]*

I don't really think about it that much.[...]

*Interviewer: Do you go to – you don't go to church at all?*

No, no.[...]

*Interviewer: So that suggests that your parents also are not religious?*

Well, we're not, no, we're not religious but we're just [pause] normal.

[C900/01066]

And:

*Interviewer: Are you still religious?*

I'm [pause] oh I don't know actually. [...] I just practice it my own way, but I am not sort of religious in the sense that I am going to pray five times a day, observe all the rules and regulations set up by one man; I'm religious in my own way. I'm from Sikh background, I've been living with a partner from a Hindu background for 14 years, and my children are brought up in both Hindu and Sikhism, so if that makes me religious, I don't know. [C900/09149]

### **Key tips and tricks for very large collections with no transcripts:**

- 'Play' with the catalogue (SAMI in this case) to discover which parts of the catalogue entries for the collection you are interested in are searched by each search field ('title', 'name', 'any words or numbers', 'subject' in this case).
- Use this understanding of the catalogue to design your samples, using AND and OR – as well as symbols ? and \$ – to extend or restrict the search (in the case of SAMI take care to use OR within search fields, rather than in the drop-down menus, if you want your search to remain tied to a particular collection title).
- 'Save' most promising results by direct copy and paste or by using of the 'mark' and 'kept' functions.
- Use content summaries to identify parts of interviews to listen to, transcribing sections of most interest.

## Conclusion

The methods described in this toolkit and user journey allowed me to surface material on religious unbelief, from three oral history collections, that I could not otherwise have found in a relatively short research period. In particular, it has resulted in the identification of nearly 100 extracts across the three collections, the majority of which have been cut and edited in audio form and transcribed (if they were not already). These extracts have provided the basis for six blog entries, an extended audio essay (to appear on the Understanding Unbelief website), a public talk at the British Library (scheduled for 17.06.19) and a pitch for a radio broadcast.

Paul Merchant

21.01.19

For more general help on BL catalogue searches (not limited to SAMI) see the useful guide on the [British Library website](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Including Abigail Knight, Julia Brannen and Rebecca O'Connell, 'Re-using community oral history sources on food and family life in the First World War', *Oral History* (2015), 43(1), pp. 63-72; April Gallway, 'The rewards of using archived oral histories in research: the case of the Millennium Memory Bank', *Oral History* (2013), 41(1), pp. 37-50; Mike Savage, 'Revisiting Classic Qualitative Studies', *Historical Social Research* (2005), 30(1), pp. 118-139; Joanna Bornat, 'A Second Take: Revisiting Interviews with a Different Purpose', *Oral History* (2003) 31(1), pp. 47-53; Paul Thompson, 'Re-using Qualitative Research Data: A Personal Account', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (2000) 1(3) <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1044>; Natasha S. Mauthner, Odette Parry and Kathryn Backett-Milburn, 'The data are out there, or are they? Implications for archiving revisiting qualitative data', *Sociology* (1998), 32(4), pp.733-745.

<sup>2</sup> For example, from Knight et al., 2015, p. 64: 'We carried out an in-depth reading of the transcripts of the selected samples'.

<sup>3</sup> Lois Lee, Stephen Bullivant, Miguel Farias and Jonathan Lanman, (2017), Understanding Unbelief: Background, available at: <https://research.kent.ac.uk/understandingunbelief/about/background/>

<sup>4</sup> Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular* (OUP, 2015), at pp. 148-149 and p. 172.

<sup>5</sup> See also Rob Perks, 'The Century Speaks: A Public History Partnership', *Oral History* (2001) 29(2), pp. 95-105.