National Life Stories

When many people think about history, they think about books and documents, castles or stately homes. In fact history is all around us, in our own families and communities, in the living memories and experiences of older people. Everyone has a story to tell about their life which is unique to them. Whilst some people have been involved in momentous historical events, regardless of age or importance we all have interesting life stories to share. Unfortunately, because memories die when people do, if we don’t record what people tell us, that history can be lost forever.

National Life Stories was established in 1987 and its mission is: ‘To record and preserve a wide range of voices through oral history in the UK’. Each individual life story interview is several hours long, covering family background, childhood, education, work, leisure and later life. Alongside the British Library’s other oral history holdings, which stretch back to the beginning of the twentieth century, NLS’s recordings form a unique and invaluable record of people’s lives in Britain today.

Each collection comprises recorded in-depth interviews of a high standard, plus content summaries and transcripts to assist users. Access is provided via the Sound and Moving Image Catalogue at sami.bl.uk and a growing number of interviews are made available for remote web use through British Library Sounds at sounds.bl.uk. Each individual life story interview is several hours long, covering family background, childhood, education, work, leisure and later life.

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NATIONAL LIFE STORIES

GOODFISON FELLOWS
Rib Davis (2018–19)
Suzanne Joinsin (2020–21)

TRANScribers
Susan Hutton
Susan Nichols
Business Friend

VOlunteers
Laurie Green-Eames
Jennifer Scott

TRUSTEES (at 16 July 2020)
Dame Jenny Abramsky
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NLS ADVISORS (at 16 July 2020)
Dr Andrew Flinn
Professor Leslie Hannah
Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield
Professor Harry Goulbourne
Professor Paul Thompson
Jennifer Wingate

1200 attendees.

Highlights of the Year

• In 2019 we added more than 800 hours of new recorded interviews to the collections.

• 23 oral history collections totalling 6,139 analogue items were digitised through the National Lottery Heritage Funded ‘Unlocking Our Sound Heritage’ programme, including the Book Trade Lives and Lives in the Oil Industry projects. There were 5,731 cassettes and 246 reels.

• Our oral history web page views totalled 1,217,224 in 2019. Our ‘Voices of the Holocaust’ learning resource was the most viewed.

• Two collections of interviews with haemophiliacs and their families were used as evidence by the Infected Blood Public Inquiry investigating how contaminated blood product led to haemophiliacs and others contracting HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C.

• Our national oral history training programme in conjunction with the Oral History Society had a record year: in 2019 we held 122 courses with 1,200 attendees.

• A new NLS Patrons scheme was launched with the generous support of Hodson and LuAnne Thornber.

• A major grant of £328,000 from the Arcadia Charitable Trust over three years allowed us to proceed with a new Oral history of farming, land management and conservation in post-war Britain.

• Our 2019–20 NLS Goodfison Fellow Rib Davis completed his playscript based on our Holocaust collections – Miriam – and a new 2020–21 Fellow was appointed. Suzanne Joinson will focus on three artist/craftswomen from the south coast.

• We worked with partners to document the Coronavirus pandemic as it was developing and plan to archive testimonies in the BL’s collections.

Dame Jenny Abramsky
Chair of Trustees
Review of 2019

Rob Perks
Director of National Life Stories

Collections and projects

An oral history of farming, land management and conservation in post-war Britain

Our major new project got underway, generously funded by the Arcadia Charitable Trust. We are capturing the experiences of those involved in the transformation of British farming since World War Two. Interviews with engineers John Matthews, John Fox and Nick Tillett cover advances in tractors and cultivators and applications of robotics and computer image analysis in farm machinery. George Mackay and Ed Dait take us on a journey through plant breeding and more recent kinds of biological engineering. Other scientists interviewed discuss the development of artificial fertilisers (Derek Palgrave), studies of impacts of pesticides on birds and other wildlife (Ian Newton), and the science of Britain’s most voluminous crop: grass (Nigel Young). Interviews with farmers – Poul Christensen (dairy, Oxfordshire), David Morris (sheep, south Wales), Sir John Conant (mixed, Rutland), Hugh Oliver-Bellasis (arable, Hampshire), Pippa Woods (livestock, Devon), Christine Hill (arable, Norfolk), Jill Hutchinson-Smith (dairy, Shropshire) and Nicholas Watts (arable, Lincolnshire) – take us into a world in which land is valued in several ways at once: as livelihood, landscape and wildlife habitat (see article later in the Review).

Agricultural advisers Robert Hart and Jim Orson provide vivid accounts of visits to farms and talks to groups of farmers in order to assist in the ongoing process of improving farming businesses in response to changes in policy, food prices, technology and concerns for the environment. With the interview with land agent John Young – responsible for the National Trust’s huge agricultural holdings in the 1990s – the project now turns to the experience of land owners and managers.

An Oral History of British Science

Tom Lean concluded his interview with Peggie Rimmer, Tim Berners-Lee’s supervisor at CERN (The European Organization for Nuclear Research – Organisation européenne pour la recherche nucléaire) in the 1980s when the idea of the World Wide Web was beginning to crystallise. Peggie played a largely overlooked but important role in creating the environment in which Berners-Lee could develop the idea successfully. She is the widow of Mike Sendall, the physicist who ran the on-line computing group at the time and who overcame CERN’s bureaucracy to get Berners-Lee the NeXT workstation with which he programmed the first version of the Web. It was rare for women to work at CERN in the 1960s and she provided computing support for two future Nobel Prize winners; wrote the ‘brochure’ to support CERN’s campaign to build the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) in the 1990s; and headed the outreach and education unit at the time when public engagement became a higher priority at CERN. Peggie reflects on her interview with Tom later in this Review.

Collaborative doctoral student Emmeline Ledgerwood completed the final interviews for her study of the Privatisation of Government Science (twenty-three in all). Amongst these were Shirley Jenkins who joined the Royal Aircraft Establishment in 1954 and logged more than 1,000 hours as a flight test observer; Tony Bravery, timber expert at the Building Research Establishment; Paul Cannon, a Ministry of Defence (MOD) authority on space weather; Ian Lindell, an MOD-trained accountant who was involved in designing new accounting systems at Farnborough; Robyn Linsdell, a construction expert from the Building Research Establishment who then joined the Construction Directorate at the Department of the Environment as a manager of government-funded research programmes; and Sir John Chisholm, the chief executive who led the defence research establishments through reorganisation and privatisation. Emmeline conducted a shorter interview with Peter Levene, Lord Levene, who was Chief of Defence Procurement in the 1980s.
Guyanese sculptor and British artist mother, Locke grew up in Guyana and trained in London. Locke’s life story explores the languages of colonial and post-colonial power, and many of the conversations unpack the dense knots of personal and political forces that inform her contemporary practice. Pollard is known especially for her collaborative work on artists’ residencies and community projects as well as, for example, imagery using portraiture and landscape to question ideas about Britishness and racial difference.

Hester Westley has been concluding a host of long and detailed recordings with art world professionals. The historical value of these recordings is always strongly reaffirmed on the occasion of an interviewee’s death; such was the case in August with the death of Berlin-born art dealer, Karsten Schubert, at the age of fifty-seven. Schubert’s recording offers a particularly astute and compelling account of the monetisation of the British art world from the mid-1980s. Schubert played a pivotal role in championing the work of artists who would become known as the Young British Artists (YBAs). In addition to chronicling the rise of artists such as Rachel Whiteread, Michael Landy, Alison Wilding among others, Schubert recounted his close collaboration with Bridget Riley. Together, Schubert and Riley successfully created a new context for the reception of her painting for younger generations. Schubert’s life story is particularly revealing because his perspective as a German enabled him to situate British art within a European context.

Hester has completed recordings with German-born typographer Hansjörg Mayer, and concluded her longitudinal interview with Lisson Gallery director, Nicholas Logsdail (the interview began in 2007 and resumed in 2015). This interview chronicles the rise of the UK’s arguably most successful international gallery of the period, capturing its growth from a modest student-run space on Lisson Grove to a multi-million pound business with two galleries in London, two in New York, and one in Shanghai. Many of the artists represented by the Lisson Gallery are also being recorded by Artists’ Lives, so the recording adds to a multiplicity of perspectives on the often thorny subject of the contemporary art market.

Authors’ Lives

Complete recordings with the writers Bernardine Evaristo, Sarah Waters and Joanne Harris were added to the Authors’ Lives collection this year. Evaristo’s recording, which began in 2015, explores her formally-experimental writing and her literary activism and was concluded just a few months before she was announced as the joint winner, with Margaret Atwood, of the 2019 Booker Prize. Evaristo joins a distinguished list of Booker Prize winners who have been recorded for Authors’ Lives that includes Hilary Mantel, Kazuo Ishiguro, Margaret Atwood, Tessa Hadley, Jane Smiley, Zadie Smith, Peter Ackroyd, Philip Pullman, Sebastian Barry and AS Byatt. Historical novelist Sarah Waters added her voice to the collection, reflecting on her agenda to draw out lesbian stories from history and describing her research-intensive writing process. In fascinating detail, project interviewer Sarah O’Reilly recorded novelist Joanne Harris, perhaps best-known as the author of Chocolat, who began publishing novels during her fifteen-year teaching career. In her recording she reveals the importance of family stories to her early writing, reflects on the breadth of her literary output, and speaks about her work as a campaigner for authors’ rights (recognised most recently in her elevation to Chair of the Board of The Society of Authors). A recording also began with novelist Cherie Chevallier, a Trustee of the British Library Board, former Chair of the Society of Authors’ Management Committee, and the bestselling author of Girl With a Pearl Earring and A Single Thread. Among the life story recordings nearing completion are those with Ian McEwan, Melvyn Bragg and Peter Hennsey.

The value of Authors’ Lives was once again affirmed with the death of biographer and cultural historian Fiona MacCarthy, a former interviewee known for her books on nineteenth and twentieth century designers and artists. MacCarthy was born into a life of privilege. Her great-grandfather Sir Robert MacAlpine built and owned the Dorchester Hotel, and it was here that MacCarthy was evacuated during the Blitz (built a decade or so before, ‘The Dorch’ was thought to be the safest building in London at the time). She was among the very last of the debutantes to ‘come out’ in 1958, but rather than settle down as a housewife, she followed her undergraduate studies at Oxford University with a career in journalism, writing for House and Garden Magazine, The Evening Standard and The Guardian. ‘Fiona MacCarthy may look like a fashion model. But there are times when she writes like a sabre-toothed tiger’ was the copy under her Guardian byline. She published her first book, on the architect and designer Charles Robert Ashbee, in 1981, and followed it up with celebrated biographies of, amongst others, Eric Gill, William Morris, Lord Byron and the architect Walter Gropius. In 1973 she and her husband David Meller (the celebrated craftsman designer; rather than the former Conservative politician) moved into Broom Hall, the office, workshop and home they shared with their family in Sheffield. Sarah was delighted to record the latter part of Fiona’s interview in her new home, The Round Building in Hathersage. This converted gasworks, designed by Architects’ Lives interviewee Sir Michael Hopkins, was described by Stephen Bayley as ‘a beautiful, comfortable, well-considered space, designed and, perhaps, a touch austere’.

BBC Radio 4’s ‘Archive on Four’ on 8 February 2020 was devoted to the life of the late novelist Andrea Levy. Sarah presented and co-produced the programme – ‘Andrea Levy – In Her Own Words’ – which coincided with the BL’s acquisition of Levy’s personal archive (led by Curator of Contemporary Archives and Manuscripts, Zoe Wilcox). The radio programme drew extensively on Sarah’s interview with Levy for Authors’ Lives (see the article later in this Review for more details).

Crafts Lives

Caron Hiller and Sarah Neufeld have agreed a grant over two years to carry out eight in-depth interviews with their older London-based craftspersons and designers leading up to the centenary of the ‘English Art Works’ in-house workshop in Bond Street. We are pursuing funding for a web resource using Crafts Lives interviews, following the template of the successful ‘Voices of art’ website.
Projects in development

Legal Lives

NLS Advisor Linda Mulcahy (now at Oxford University) and Marie Burton (Middlesex University) submitted a joint Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) grant application for an extensive project on community law centres with NLS as the archive partner for the sixty-five life story recordings that will be collected. If successful the Politics and Public Life Manuscripts section of the British Library (under Lead Curator Polly Russell) will also archive approximately 650 annual reports from law centres nationwide, some of which are currently housed by the Law Centres Network – also a project partner. The Co-Investigators are Kieran McEvoy and Anna Bryson at Queen’s University Belfast, who will lead on the Northern Ireland portion of the project.

Linda Mulcahy received funding from the University of Oxford’s John Fell OUP Research Fund to support a one-year pilot project ‘Inspiring Women: Challenging the democratic deficit in the legal professions’. We are delighted that our former NLS colleague Dvora Liberman will be the Research Fellow and lead interviewer for these recordings which will be deposited at the British Library. Linda also successfully applied for funding from the Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution (CEDR) Foundation to record twenty-five interviews about the organisation to mark its thirtieth anniversary. CEDR, the largest mediation centre in Europe, has trained most commercial mediators in the UK, and could be credited with bringing the facilitative model of mediation to the UK. It has had some involvement in most government schemes including one at the Court of Appeal.

Katharine Haydon continued a life story with Julia Aisbett, a retired senior magistrate based in Sussex who has recently stepped down as Chair of the Bench for East Sussex and oversaw a great deal of administrative and structural changes in recent years. This adds to the Legal Lives collection on the magistracy, which is so far little represented.

Design Lives

We were pleased to have been able to record a life story with Corin Mellor (born 1966), who trained as a product designer at Kingston University and worked for the London architects YRM prior to joining his father, David Mellor, as a designer craftsman. He succeeded his father as Creative Director of David Mellor Design in 2006 and his work includes commissions at the Lowry Gallery in Salford Quays, Sheffield Cathedral and Chatsworth House. Corin’s mother, the late Fiona MacCarthy, was interviewed for Authors’ Lives (see above). A recording with Ray Leigh (born 1928) is also in progress. Ray trained as an architect at the Architectural Association and later became Design Director, Managing Director and Chairman of Gordon Russell Limited, working with both Gordon and Dick Russell. With the support of NLS Trustee Amanda Game, we continue to fundraise so we can gather more interviews.

Public profile: training, presentations, publications

The focus for this year’s Review is dissemination and in the pages that follow we showcase a variety of ways in which NLS recordings have been used in public contexts over the past year. Here I overview some of NLS’s other outputs.

Exhibitions

Artists’ Lives featured on the text panels in Eileen Hogan’s Tate Britain exhibition (May – August 2019) and in the accompanying book published by Yale University Press. Four new essays were added to the ‘Voices of art’ web resource in May (blue/voices-of-art). One of these was by Elena Crippa, the curator of Frank Bowling’s Tate Britain retrospective, and the essays were timed to go online during his show. Bowling’s recording was referenced a number of times in Tate Britain’s catalogue for his show.

Web and social media

Sarah Turner (Deputy Director of the Paul Mellon Centre) working with Jo Baring (Director of the Ingram Collection) used extracts from Artists’ Lives in a podcast series about women working in sculpture. The series, entitled ‘Sculpting Lives’, and related press and social media links all credited NLS. We are very pleased with this development which consolidates our relationship with the Paul Mellon Centre as one of our funders and will help us reach wider audiences.

Following the death of landscape artist and interviewee Anna Teasdale in January 2020, Hester Westley wrote a tribute to her, with embedded audio extracts, for the Sound and Vision blog. Dan Snow, broadcaster and editor of the ‘History Hit’ podcast series, invited Hester to discuss her experience of making life stories. Hester also penned an obituary of Anna for The Guardian.

Emma Abotsi has been working at the British Library as a British Sociological Association Fellow, using the Library’s collections to explore the experience of racism and its impact on the educational projects of young Africans, Caribbeans and Asians in the UK since the 1960s. Emma has created a web resource for ‘A’ Level Sociology students featuring ten British Library collection items, five of which are audio clips from the Sisterhood and After collection.

Emmeline Ledgerwood contributed an online ‘paper’ to the British Society for the History of Science Twitter conference. This was a novel approach to sharing academic research, with contributors from around the world presenting their work on Twitter by submitting threads of twelve tweets. Emmeline’s thread introduced some of the findings of her PhD research, and showcased the use of oral history in researching twentieth century history of science. The thread included nine audio clips from her interviews combined with images provided by interviewees or gathered during the course of Emmeline’s archival research. Links to the British Library online catalogue provided the references. The thread can be viewed here: https://twitter.com/BSHSNews/status/1227584766842679296.

The production was designed by Sally Jacobs who has also been interviewed by NLS. Colin’s recording is generously funded by the Linbury Trust.
Paul Merchant spoke about narratives of change in the lives of agricultural engineers; and Niamh Dillon gave a paper about the intersection between architecture and changing organisational culture in the second half of the twentieth century. Mary Stewart, Charlie Morgan, Camille Johnston and I led a popular session on ‘The changing work of oral history: a reflective workshop exploring the impact of technological developments on our own practice’ (see image below).

We also had a presence at international oral history conferences. In June Charlie Morgan gave a paper entitled ‘Oral history in a GDPR world: online access and sensitivity reviews at the British Library’ at the annual conference of the Oral History Network of Ireland at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick. And in October I travelled to Salt Lake City in Utah, the venue for the annual meeting of the US Oral History Association, where I contributed to a panel on ‘The applied use of technology in oral history’ with a paper on ‘Oral history and technology: the changing work of oral history in the UK over 50 years’, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the British Oral History Journal.

Publications
Paul Merchant’s article, ‘What oral historians and historians of science can learn from each other’, was published in the British Journal for the History of Science. Emmeline’s essay, ‘MPs on the subject of STEM: what can oral history tell us?’ has been accepted by Parliamentary History and is scheduled to be published in June 2020. Her blog post on Airey Neave, which used sound clips from the British Library oral history collections, was published in the Conservative History Journal in September. Sally’s essay for Nature on women’s careers in science, ‘The women who cracked science’s glass ceiling’, went live online on 6 November. This featured quotes from several OHBS interviews. Tom Lean’s chapter on repair and synthetic pesticides in agriculture. We thank him warmly for all his hard work for An Oral History of British Science and An Oral History of the Electricity Supply Industry in the UK and wish him well.

Our trustees and advisors, past and present, are invaluable in supporting and guiding our main collecting activities. This year we said farewell to Richard Ranft, who retired as Head of the BL Sound Archive, and also to Hodson Thornber who stepped down after several years as both a trustee and an advisor for An Oral History of the Electricity Supply Industry in the UK. We welcomed new trustee Dr Andrew Flinn. Andrew is a Reader (Associate Professor) in Archival Studies and Oral History, Deputy Vice-Dean for Research in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Departmental Graduate Tutor (Research), and the former Director of the Archives and Records Management (ARM) MAA programme (2005–2015) in the Department of Information Studies at University College London (UCL).

With the generous support of Hodson and Luanne Thornber we have been working with Christine Buccella from Craigmyle Fundraising Consultants to review and develop NLS’s fundraising strategy. Christine spearheaded a new NLS Patrons Programme which we hope to see expand significantly in the coming years. We welcome our new Patrons warmly and look forward to talking to them further at forthcoming NLS events.

With great pleasure we received a generous legacy from former trustee, the late Dundas Hamilton, to help us with our work, and a kind donation from the estate of oral history pioneer George Ewart Evans.

2018–2019 NLS Goodison Fellow Rib Davis completed his playscript drawn from NLS’s Holocaust collections. Miriam does not attempt to dramatise the Holocaust itself, rather the challenges and contradictions that arise from any attempt to present the Holocaust to the public. Rib writes further about his play later in this Review. We appointed Suzy Jonson as our NLS Goodison Fellow for 2020–2021. She will be based in Worthing working on a number of outputs derived from our interviews with Ann Sultan, Barbara Mullins and Juliet Pannett from Artists’ Lives and Crafts’ Lives, all women artists and makers inspired by the south coast. Suzy is a published writer and novelist and her books include A Lady Cyclist’s Guide to Kashgar which was a US national bestseller, translated into sixteen languages. She regularly contributes to the Guardian, New York Times and Vogue.

Many congratulations to our Senior Academic Advisor Sally Horrocks who was awarded the ‘Best Supervisor’ Superstar Award for ‘her enthusiasm and unfailing support to students’ in the University of Leicester Student Voice Awards, and also a University Distinguished Teaching Fellowship for her work with postgraduate research students.

Finally, I write this in the midst of the coronavirus when all face-to-face interviews have been postponed. There is a sense that our world has shifted and that our history might in the future be written in terms of before and after the virus. Over the last thirty years NLS has captured ways of life, values and attitudes that might well have extra historical resonance as we enter life after the virus and begin to document how people lived through the crisis. Meanwhile we have been working with a range of partners, including the BBC and the ‘NHS at 70’ project at Manchester University, to gather personal testimonies and reflections about Covid-19, and I have been chairing a British Library-wide Coronavirus collecting group to co-ordinate our activities during the crisis.
Oral history at the British Library:
what else has been happening?
Compiled by Mary Stewart, NLS Deputy Director

For the longstanding Oral History of British Photography collection Shirley Read interviewed Magnum photographer Mark Power. He recalled the influence on him of his father’s engineering skills, photographs and home-made flower-pot enlarger. After studying illustration and fine art Mark began to work in photography during his travels in Asia and Australia, and talked of difficult early days trying to make a living as a photo-journalist. Mark described his pride and pleasure in developing the Victorian tradition of photographing buildings under construction, starting with his self-generated documentation of the building of the Millennium Dome through a series of panoramic photographs. In line with all the interviews in this collection, we have captured in-depth descriptions of photographic kit, and the networks of family, colleagues and friends throughout his life. Mark noted the support and camaraderie of curator David Chandler and his colleagues and friends throughout his life. Mark Power. He recalled the influence on him of his father’s collection Shirley Read interviewed Magnum photographer Mark Power. He recalled the influence on him of his father’s collection.

Shirley also interviewed Belfast-born artist photographer Hannah Starkey, recording her memories of family life in the city during the Troubles. Hannah studied in Scotland, in Baltimore, USA, and finally at the Royal College of Art in London. After college Hannah started work in the advertising and fashion industry and was outraged at the misogyny of some of the imagery accepted as standard. This prompted her to find new ways of photographing women and giving them the power to represent themselves, principles which she applies in her teaching and public speaking, including in her current role as the first Artist in Residence for the Guildhall, City of London. In her interview she talked of the sometimes solitary nature of practice, her collaborative work with the women she is photographing in the City, and her appreciation of the support of her printers, framers, suppliers and gallerists, Maureen Paley and Tanya Bonakdar.

Concluding this year was an interview with artist photographer Tom Wood, known in Liverpool as ‘Photieman’, discussing his recent publications and exhibitions including ‘Mother, Daughter, Sister’ at the Rencontres in Arles in 2019 which drew on his early passion for collecting postcards. He talked about his family’s move to Wales and how he has made an extensive video record of his son’s early years; also about teaching, about the connections between his love of music and photography, and about collecting books.

We have continued to develop the ongoing Oral History of Oral History collection. Robert Williamson has recorded thirty-five hours with Doc (David) Rowe, celebrated folklorist, former trustee of the Oral History Society (OHS) and recipient of the English Folk Dance and Song Society Gold Badge. For the last fifty years Doc has been recording folklore events across the UK in audio, video and photography. In his interview Doc reflects on the changes in both the content and technique used to make his individual recordings, and his thoughts on the developments in folklore events throughout the British Isles during his lifetime. Robert has continued to record with Hywel Francis, an early trustee of the OHS and former MP for Aberavon. Hywel talks about growing up in a mining community, his role in the miners’ strikes and his political career, together with his interest in recording histories of miners and mining communities in South Wales. Hywel was instrumental in rescuing and saving miners’ libraries, many of which are now held by the South Wales Miners’ Library at Swansea University. He has recently published a book Stories of Solidarity which is in part a tribute to his father, Dai Francis (1911–81), who was general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers in South Wales.

Robert started two new interviews in 2019. The first was with Craig Fees, pioneering oral historian and archivist of therapeutic communities, and a current OHS trustee. So far the recordings have concentrated on his American and Japanese childhood. The other new interviewee this year has been Professor Penny Summerfield, whose ground-breaking research has explored method and the formation of gender identity, with a particular focus on the Second World War. Penny worked at Lancaster University (1978–2000) where for the final six years she was Professor of Women’s History, and in 2000 she moved to Manchester University, heading first the School of History and Classics (2002–3) and then the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures (2003–6). She is currently Emeritus Professor of Modern History at Manchester University.

The British Library’s National Lottery Heritage Fund Unlocking Our Sound Heritage project was continuing at pace until the impact of the coronavirus, with the team hard at work digitising and cataloguing thousands of recordings from the Sound Archive – including many oral history gems. By the end of 2021 we expect all of the NLS collections still held on analogue carriers to be digitised and made available online (subject to permissions). The ten regional hub partners across the UK are also hard at work digitising material held in local and regional archives, and the core NLS team has been advising on the most efficient methods to summarise and catalogue the material.

NLS has had a long and proud tradition of working in partnership with large-scale projects from both the community and academic sectors, in order to enrich and build the national oral history collection at the British Library. For all such partnerships NLS core curatorial staff are involved from the outset, feeding advice into funding applications relating to equipment, recording techniques, archiving and data management, ethics and training, and continuing to support the project through to the deposit and cataloguing of the material into the Sound Archive. Working in this way embeds best practice throughout the project and ensures that the material is archived efficiently for both the project team and NLS. 2019 again saw the successful completion of a number of partnerships, covering a diverse range of subject areas.

Further strengthening the health and medical collections is Thalidomide Stories: an oral history of thalidomide survivors (C1843), funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). Run by the Thalidomide Society and supported by NLS and the Science Museum, this project has captured the voices of fifty thalidomide survivors, recorded by survivors who received training in oral history interviewing. Thalidomide was prescribed in the UK between 1958 and 1962 under the name Distaval and given to pregnant women suffering with a range of conditions including morning sickness, insomnia, anxiety and even some common viruses. However, the drug had not been robustly tested and led to babies being born with a wide range of impairments such as missing or shortened limbs, missing or damaged eyes and ears, vital organ damage and facial paralysis. It is estimated that there were at least 10,000 pregnancies affected in the UK and 2000 live births, but by 2018, when the project commenced, there were just 466 UK thalidomide survivors still living. The recording of their unique first-hand testimonies will help to raise awareness and understanding of the thalidomide disaster among the wider population and future generations.
Following in the footsteps of two excellent projects on Haemophilia and the HIV epidemic caused by infected blood supplies, NLS partnered once again with the Brighton & Sussex Medical School to archive sixty-three stories of healthcare workers active in the early days of the HIV crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. Funded by NLHF and spearheaded by Project Manager Nicky Perry, the interviewing team travelled across the UK to record testimonies for the AIDS Era: an oral history of HIV healthcare workers during the 1980s and 1990s (C1759). Teams of volunteers listened and highlighted themes and audio clips for use on the excellent website: healthcareworkersinhiv.org.uk. The core NLS team were delighted to attend the project launch in November at Conway Hall, where the speakers included Sir Norman Fowler, Rob Perks, core project team members Jane Bruton, Nicky Perry, Sian Edwards and several interviewees.

We were delighted to archive ten oral histories recorded by Claire Wintle at the University of Brighton as part of her research into museum practice in the UK between 1945 and 1980. Dr Wintle used archival research and oral histories to consider how curators with responsibility for ‘ethnographic’ or ‘world cultures’ collections grappled with the professionalisation of their field, post-war recovery and the ‘end’ of empire. These are archived as Interviews on world cultures and museum practice (C1847). Covering a similar timespan in the community arts was the excellent For Walls with Tongues: Community Murals of the 1960s and 1970s (C1803), run by Greenwich Mural Workshop and funded by NLHF. The project recorded twenty-six interviews with British muralists working around the country, and also produced a book, website forwallswithtongues.org.uk, and a photographic exhibition of the muralists’ work at the University of Greenwich.

Sharing the collections: going public with life story recordings

Each year National Life Stories projects add more than 800 hours of new digital recordings to the British Library’s oral history collections, and over the coming two years we will conclude our major initiative, started some years ago, to preserve and digitise all NLS collections held on older analogue reels and cassettes. This will liberate large amounts of oral history content for online global access via a newly updated and relaunched British Library ‘Sounds’ website, much of it previously only available onsite at the BL in London and Yorkshire. NLS material will join thousands of hours of other BL oral histories being digitised through the ‘Unlocking Our Sound Heritage’ initiative supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Similar work is also underway at ten national and regional hubs around the UK, collectively digitising many thousands more hours of oral histories dating back to the 1950s.

In addition to the huge research potential that this new digital archive represents, we are also confident that it will lead to many new uses of NLS interviews in new contexts reaching many new audiences; we hope to inspire a whole new generation to listen to one another and value the unique life stories, experiences and insights that we all have and can share. As the articles overleaf amply demonstrate this is already happening: recordings are being used in exhibitions, in radio programmes and podcasts, and in theatre; by students and curators and academic researchers.
Discovering the richness of Artists’ Lives for the Cornwall as Crucible exhibition

Lara Wardle, Director, Jerwood Collection

When the notion of featuring recordings from Artists’ Lives was discussed at an early stage of the exhibition planning for Cornwall as Crucible, I had little idea whether I would find appropriate clips that would provide context for the exhibition’s themes. Once I started the hugely enjoyable process of listening to the recordings, it was not a case of searching for clips, but rather selecting the best out of so many.

Listening to Margaret Mellis describe Naum Gabo humanised a giant of the art world whom I have previously found somewhat unapproachable and difficult to decipher. Mellis has opened up a wonderful way for me to think about Gabo in her description of him:

“He was very nice … everybody liked him and he had a frightfully nice Russian accent and … he didn’t seem to be doing any work, in fact he seemed to do nothing at all really except for eat yoghurt and go for walks”

Of course, it is not just Mellis who talks about Gabo, but many others including the wonderfully eloquent Wilhelmina Barns-Graham who recalls Gabo describing his new-born daughter Nina as ‘the best work of art I have ever done’ (Wilhelmina Barns-Graham interviewed at her home in 1992 by Tamsyn Woolcombe, Artists’ Lives).

It is this multi-faceted quality of the recordings that makes delving into them so rewarding: listening to different people’s descriptions of the same person or their differing versions of the same event provides an unrivalled glimpse into their worlds. My research gave me direct access to artists, the majority of whom I have not had the fortune (or age) to meet in person: the recordings took me into their homes where the telephone sometimes rang, or into their studios where they made their work, and placed me next to the interviewer, absorbing anecdotes, memories, opinions and more.

Cornwall Crucible: Modernity and Internationalism in Mid-century Britain, an exhibition organised in collaboration with Jerwood Collection, opened at The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham until 19 February 2020.

Crafts Lives interviews in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Silver Gallery

Elizabeth Wright, Crafts Lives Project Interviewer, National Life Stories

In 2016, NLS was contacted by Rachel Church, Curator in the Sculpture, Metalwork, Ceramics and Glass Department at the V&A, about the possibility of including clips from recordings of silversmiths and jewellers as part of an interactive display within the Silver Galleries Discovery Area.

We were delighted with this opportunity to collaborate with the V&A, since the work of so many Crafts Lives interviewees is held by the museum – including key pieces such as Rod Kelly’s chased silver bible cover, commissioned by the V&A to celebrate the opening of the Sacred Silver and Stained Glass gallery in 2005.

As part of the approach to interviewing for Crafts Lives, Frances Cornford and I had been encouraging designers and makers to talk in detail about pieces held in public museum and gallery collections. We hoped that this might enable listeners to view some of the work discussed, so were pleased to be able to make a direct link between the audio and the artefacts by including clips within the gallery.

The process of working with the V&A involved a discussion about the content of our recordings, and how short clips can be sourced from the longer in-depth interviews. As an example, we provided a CD of existing clips from interviews, and then Rachel Church and colleagues used interview content summaries and the BL Sounds website to identify extracts for editing.

The clips selected include Rod Kelly on large silver trade workshops, Michael Lloyd on training at the Royal College of Art, Jane Short on the process of shaping a silver ring, Susan Hare on testing gold and silver, and Stuart Devlin on Computer Aided Design. Listeners can select tracks via a digital touchscreen to play over speakers within a comfortable corner of the Silver Discovery Area at the V&A, South Kensington.
Innovations in digital art and oral history: Royal College of Art students

Eleanor Dare, Head of Programme for MA Digital Direction, Royal College of Art and Mary Stewart, Deputy Director, National Life Stories

In spring 2019, based in both the British Library and the Royal College of Art School of Communication, seven students from the MA Digital Direction and Information Experience Design courses participated in an elective module entitled ‘The Other Voice’. After listening in-depth to a specially curated selection of oral history interviews, the students learnt how to edit and creatively interpret oral histories, gaining insight into the nuanced ethical and practical implications of working with other people’s life stories. The module was led by both of us and Matt Lewis (Sound Artist, Musician and RCA Tutor). The culmination of this collaboration was a two-day student-curated showcase of work at the British Library – attended by over 100 staff. Members of the group also presented their work and reflections on using oral history in creative practice at the Oral History Society’s annual Regional Network event. The group were delighted to win the ‘Teaching and Learning’ category at the prestigious British Library Labs Award, and the elective successfully ran again in spring 2020 ably led by Matt Lewis.

Karthika Sakthivel and Giulia Brancati were moved by the testimony of Crown Court Clerk Irene Elliot, who was interviewed by Dvora Liberman in 2014 (C1674/05). Responding to Irene’s description of her mother’s hard work bringing up five children in 1950s Preston, Giulia created ‘On the way back’: an immersive installation featuring two audio points – one with excerpts of Irene’s testimony and another an audio collage to evoke the emotions and events in the interview. Two old-fashioned telephones played the audio, which the listener absorbed while curled up in an armchair in a fictional front room.

Karthika was inspired to sew for the first time and she created a sonic quilt, entitled ‘Memory Foam’. Each square of the patchwork quilt was adorned with an object that Irene described, and was lined with conductive fabric that when pressed triggered an audio clip that corresponded with the relevant testimony. Karthika commented:

“The initial visitor interactions with the piece gave me useful insights that enabled me to improve the experience in real time by testing alternate ways of hanging and displaying the quilt. After engaging with the quilt, guests walked up to me with recollections of their own mothers and grandmothers – and these emotional connections were deeply rewarding.”

The group were honoured that Irene and her daughter Jayne travelled from Preston to come to the exhibition.

Listening to ceramicist Walter Keeler’s (C960/27) detailed description of making a pot inspired James Roadnight and David Sappa to travel to Cornwall and capture audio and video recordings for ‘Meditations in Clay’. This was an immersive documentary and installation combining interviews conducted at the Bernard Leach pottery with audio-visual documentation of the St Ives studio and its rugged Cornish surroundings. Those attending the showcase were bewitched as they watched the landscape documentary on the large screen and engaged with the selection of listening pots, which when held to the ear played excerpts of the oral history interviews.

Raf Martins responded innovatively to Jonathan Blake’s 1991 interview (C456/104) describing his experiences as one of the first people in the UK to be diagnosed with HIV. In ‘Beyond Form’ Raf created an audio soundscape of environmental sounds and excerpts from the interview which played alongside a projected 3D hologram based on the cellular structure of the HIV virus which changed form and shape when activated by the audio. Kingsley Tao was also inspired by Jonathan Blake’s interview, creating ‘Stiff Upper Lip’ a short film exploring sexuality, identity and reactions to health and sickness which featured clips from the interview.

Responding to Donald Palmer’s rich description of the front room that his Jamaican-born parents ‘kept for best’ in 1970s London (C1379/102), Alex Remolux created a virtual reality tour of the reimagined space featuring clips of the interview, entitled ‘Donald in Wonderland’. We were delighted Donald could attend the showcase to experience it himself.
Miriam: memories of memories – drawing on Holocaust testimonies for a stage play
Rib Davis, 2018-19 National Life Stories Goodison Fellow

Miriam, a stage play, is the result of my period as National Life Stories Goodison Fellow, 2018-19. It is a theatrical response to the Holocaust testimonies held in the NLSt collection. The play does not attempt to dramatise the Holocaust itself; instead, it dramatises the challenges and contradictions that arise from any attempt to present the Holocaust to a public.

I have written many scripts over the last forty years; this has been the hardest of them for me to write, for a number of reasons. Most obviously there is the emotional impact of the source material, which is hard to read and even harder to listen to – it is in the nature of oral history that the voice carries so much more than a transcript ever could. Then there is finding a truly dramatic form which allows the exploration of the themes, so that the script doesn’t descend into becoming a lecture. And finally there is simply the weight of responsibility that anyone working in this area must feel – the need to get things right, and to somehow do ‘justice’ to those who suffered the Holocaust. And it is this final point, this responsibility, which ultimately becomes the driving force behind Miriam herself, the central character of the play.

The play, then, is not so much about the appalling events of the 1930s and ’40s but rather is about how we deal with those events now, here. The setting is a museum, where Miriam – herself the child of a Holocaust survivor – is tasked with putting together an exhibition on the Holocaust. In trying decide how this exhibition should work, she re-visits conversations she had with her mother about the Holocaust and its aftermath, and she also becomes increasingly aware of the ways in which the trauma is passed down the generations, including to her own daughter and son-in-law. She is forced to confront the question of what such an exhibition should be trying to achieve, finishing with a very different vision from that of her colleague at the museum. Her identity and even her life become threatened by events that she realises are connected.

I spent more than a year of the Fellowship researching – listening to testimonies, reading first-hand accounts, reading tomes by historians and theoreticians, meeting others who have written on the Holocaust and visiting exhibitions. I was exploring both the presentation of the Holocaust and also some of the approaches to how memory works, for inevitably the play is dealing with memory – the creation of memory, the ellipses in memory, the selectivity of memory, collective memory, how memory changes and how it is also reinforced, and ultimately how it is put to use. Linked to this, the characters have to confront the creation of narrative from those memories – the creation of narrative in the testimonies and their own creation of narrative in their exhibition – and the meaning of that narrative. As a result, the form that emerged for the play itself – not only its content – explores those same themes.

While the starting point for the script was the testimonies held in the National Life Stories collections, I eventually decided that this should not be a documentary play: a number of the events portrayed have drawn directly upon those testimonies and other documentary material, but I needed the characters and their actions to be fictional.

The script has been through a number of iterations, with trusted readers giving invaluable criticism of each version. I now feel that it is ready for script-in-hand performance. Feedback from this will lead to the final performing version – then it will be handed over to my agent to secure a full production.

Excerpt from Miriam:

**MOTHER** You know, I forget the things I would love to remember, and I remember the things I would love to forget. Now if the rabbi could just help me out with that one… It’s not very fair is it.

**MIRIAM** Not very.

**MOTHER** All these years, to try not to remember – how can you get yourself to not remember something? And I think that’s why it hasn’t gone away. Ever. I haven’t had anywhere to put it. Well, where would you put it? I ask you, where would you put it? For that sort of thing, there isn’t a shelf in the brain.

Rib Davis has run many oral history projects, including at The Lightbox gallery and museum in Woking. His script output includes twenty-five plays and dramatised features broadcast on BBC Radio, such as the series Beyond Reasonable Doubt and Unwritten Law on Radio 4 and Everything Will Be Fine for Radio 3’s Between the Ears. Television work includes episodes of Thames TV’s The Bill and his own adaptation for BBC TV’s Screenplay 2 of his award-winning stage play No Further Cause For Concern. Apart from his conventional stage plays he has written and directed numerous large-scale community documentary plays, most of them based upon oral history, including Every Other Garden ’Ad a Pit for the DH Lawrence Centenary Festival in Eastwood. His book Writing Dialogue for Scripts is now in its 4th edition.
I first met Andrea Levy in 2014, a decade after the publication of Small Island, the literary phenomenon that carried away the Orange, Whitbread and Commonwealth Writers Prizes. I had been working on Authors’ Lives for some seven years, and I desperately wanted to add her voice to the archive, this unique writer who never read a novel before the age of twenty-three.

For Andrea, the arrival of my letter was ‘kismet’. ‘It was like I imagined you into being’, she told me later, after revealing that she was living with terminal cancer: ‘you wrote to me and said would you let your life flash before you? You’re dying, would you come and tell me about the life you’ve lived?’ Luckily for me, she ‘didn’t hesitate for a second’: ‘Yes’.

NLS interviews have always been omnivorous, expansive and alive to the telling detail, and Andrea’s recording was no exception. As her novels suggest, she was a wonderful raconteur. For me the pleasure of listening to her unfurling life story was enhanced by the light she was able to shed on that strange process by which an author’s experiences, emotions, and intellect are corralled into the service of their work. Heroes in her early novels like Angela, Vivien and Faith were shaped by Andrea’s own experiences, their lives borrowing from hers. Throughout her work, there was a symmetry between the life she lived and the stories she committed to the page.

I knew that Andrea wanted to be remembered after her death, and I knew that her recording, fantastic though it was, would, without intervention, remain waiting for listeners in the archive. So I approached the Head of Radio at Blakey Productions, on the hunch that, having produced Radio 4’s Publishing Lives series, she might be interested in working together on a programme about a writer’s life. After one meeting and a telephone call, and a looming deadline, our pitch winged its way to the relevant commissioning editor at BBC Radio 4, twelve minutes before the noon deadline.

After receiving the commission (a four-month process from beginning to end), my first task was to listen again to Andrea’s recording and edit it down to a more manageable length (in this case, cutting fifteen hours of material to an hour and a half of clips). If we want to get NLS material out of the archive, using podcasts can be key. In a time-poor age of shrinking budgets, a radio producer won’t always have time to listen to a fifteen-hour interview in the hope that there might be a possible programme hidden within it: interviewers can help find the gems they know are there in the recordings. Whilst life story recordings might pose challenges to programme makers, using them can be revelatory.

We made a decision to keep other voices to a minimum, allowing excerpts from Andrea’s interview to carry the listener. After weeks of intense listening and editing, talking to Andrea’s friends, worrying about structure and making painful cuts, we had a programme which aired in early February in the ‘Archive on 4’ slot on BBC Radio 4. Before transmission, it was previewed as an ‘audio pick’ in The Guardian, Telegraph and Radio Times, and afterwards received a five star review in The FT Culture. The view from my co-producer is that response on social media has been unusual in quantity and quality – ‘worth the licence fee alone’, ‘BBC at its best’, ‘beautiful and important’ and ‘a tribute to the power of Authors’ Lives’ and ‘compulsory listening for anyone interested in the contemporary social history of Britain’.

An NLS life story interview is intimate and informal – a place where speakers can hesitate, forget things, circle back, and, most importantly, can reflect rather than talk down to listeners; it has the same personal feel that has worked so successfully for podcasts. Andrea put it in a different, but not contradictory way, when she said that the recording was a place where she could be honest, ‘and I really value that because I value honesty and the sort of complexity that honesty throws up.’ There is a great opportunity for NLS to find these moments, and bring them to a wider public, which, primed by podcasts, is looking for honest stories, reflections on lives well lived, and the more private face of public figures.

The possibilities and pitfalls of podcasting

Hester R Westley, Artists’ Lives Project Interviewer, National Life Stories

The concept of the podcast is alluring: in its simplest form, the podcast is an economical means of broadcasting specialist knowledge to a worldwide audience. This economy of means (podcasts were conceived for and by people to create on their own technology in their own living rooms at little or no expense) is democratising. Moreover, they offer a previously unenjoyed freedom for an audio archive of boundless material such as National Life Stories, which brims with histories and stories that may, perhaps, be considered too ‘niche’ or specialist in subject matter for the mainstream media. Podcasts, it seems, offer us the opportunity to disseminate our audio archive to a new audience, offering a tantalising glimpse of what is available and encouraging new researchers to find out more for themselves.

This was certainly the appeal when journalist Isabel Sutton and I teamed up to craft our research outputs as NLS Goodison Fellows 2016. We wanted a way to emphasise the aurality of the NLS archive; rather than producing a written article, we turned our efforts to crafting a 35-minute podcast about the founding in 1946 of an art school like none other: ‘An Art Education for the Many: The Founding of Corsham, Bath Academy of Art’.

Our podcast includes a selection of contributions from an array of important modern British artists. Our interviewees include former tutors – Kenneth Armitage, Terry Frost, Jack Smith, Michael Kidner, Howard Hodgkin, Michael Craig-Martin – as well as former students Rosemary Devonald, Anna Teasdale, Jane Kasmin, and Sue Hunt among others. We also include the voice of the inimitable Principal of Corsham, Clifford Ellis, taken from a little-known recording that was unearthed in the Imperial War Museum archive.

Our intention was to create a multi-layered listening experience with this rich variety of voices. We sought to make this historical retelling almost atemporal, in the way that the narrative knitting together excerpted recordings spanning a quarter of a century, including testimonies from many ‘witnesses’ who are now dead.

The excerpts from the NLS recordings are complemented by critical commentary from Arts Council Director and former Head of Tate, Sir Nicholas Serota and historian, writer and curator Henry Meyric Hughes. Fragments of archival BBC broadcast footage from 1946 set the tone for the contemporary terms of the debate, and an original piano score from Roland Johnson frames the programme with ‘period’ sound. The podcast reconstructs an unacknowledged history about the founding of Bath Academy of Art at Corsham and the international ambitions of its founding Principal Clifford Ellis, who describes his achievements at this sometimes exemplary, sometimes eccentric institution.

Particularly poignant in the current climate of Brexit, our podcast reveals the transnational cultural idealism that underpinned Ellis’s project for art education in the post-war period. In terms of art history, the research also coincides neatly with the centenary of the Bauhaus; there are many claims in the archive that what Ellis was trying to achieve at Corsham was based broadly on his understanding of progressive continental art instruction.

Having secured a commission from the BBC Arts Online website at an early stage in our research, we were confident about the dissemination possibilities for our podcast. When this commission was retracted, our podcast struggled to find an online platform, since most forums prefer series over ‘one-off’ studies. Ours is a cautionary tale, perhaps, about the limitations of an online format ostensibly infinite in possibility, but still regimented in structure. To create a space for our podcast, we have composed an article to be published later this year with British Art Studies Online; this publication will offer a digital link to our podcast through the National Life Stories webpage on the British Library website. We are pleased that this unique history, told in the voices of its protagonists, will increase exposure among and connection across a host of audiences.
Drawing Matter – Take One: Architects’ Lives clips online

Niamh Dillon, Architects’ Lives Project Interviewer, National Life Stories

‘Take One’ is a collaboration between Architects’ Lives and Drawing Matter which brings excerpts from Architects’ Lives to an audience of architecture students, historians, curators, academics and practitioners, offering new perspectives on the various ways architects use drawing. Each episode pairs a drawing or visual element with a short audio extract. Drawing Matter is a private collection of architectural drawings, sketchbooks, models and other objects, based in Somerset, UK. Drawings in the collection date from the sixteenth century to the present, and feature a range of work, including Charles Barry and I K Brunel, Alvar Aalto and Gunnar Asplund. In addition to the physical collection, Drawing Matter explores the role of drawing in architectural thought and practice through its publications, exhibitions and an online magazine, drawingmatter.org.

In the first instalment, Colin St John (Sandy) Wilson discusses Architects’ Lives clips online

For one awful moment we thought the whole had dropped out of the middle of the design. And then we had the thought of turning the Kings Library into an object, it was George IV’s gift to the nation that those books should be seen by the general public and it suddenly came the right way up for us for a change. It was an absolute gift, a major visual, monumental, jewel to the crown. And so we replaced the catalogue hall with the Kings Library ... a six floor high glass fronted bookcase, with the beautiful bindings, leather and vellum, as near as possible to the glass, so they could be seen ... right in the centre of the entrance hall so wherever you are, you are walking past these beautiful books. Also, they are some manifestation that the treasures are below ground, but have emerged, burst out, from the enormous basements.”

Sandy Wilson’s recording is accompanied by comments from the architects M J Long (his partner in work and in life) and Eric Parry, who used the British Library as a case study for his Cambridge students. Further episodes will appear throughout the year on the Drawing Matter website.

Oral history on Twitter: the British Society for the History of Science Twitter conference

Emmeline Ledgerwood, Collaborative Doctoral Student, British Library/National Life Stories/University of Leicester

On 12 February 2020 the British Society for the History of Science (BSHS) held a digital conference during which thirty-three researchers from around the world presented their work on the social media platform Twitter. I contributed a paper based on my PhD research titled ‘Privatisation of government science: scientists and the effects of organisational change on their working lives’. An important element of my contribution was the inclusion of audio clips from the oral history interviews I have conducted for National Life Stories as part of my collaborative doctoral studentship between the British Library and the University of Leicester.

Twitter users send and receive short posts called tweets which have a maximum length of 280 characters, with the option to attach up to four images or one video. While Twitter is renowned for generating some extreme online behaviour, it can also be used productively as a quick way of sharing archival material. Having checked that all the necessary permissions were in place to use the audio and visual content online, I then used Auphonic software to combine the audio clips with the images to generate mp4 files that enable sound clips to be played on Twitter. For each tweet that contained audio material from the oral history collection I included a link to the interview’s British Library catalogue entry. During the delivery of the thread, questions and support from other conference participants came through in the form of replies, retweets and likes, while the attached audio-visual files displayed the number of views they were getting. What is interesting is the ability to look at the analytics provided by Twitter which give a breakdown of the engagement with each tweet such as the number of times people saw it or how many times the media was viewed.

Taking part in this conference allowed me to demonstrate that oral history can be adapted to innovative formats which expand the opportunities to promote the NLS collections to new audiences.

For me, participating in this initiative was an opportunity to share my ongoing PhD research with a different and wider audience to those with whom I have previously engaged by presenting at academic conferences or publishing online blogposts. It was also a chance to showcase how oral history material can be used on Twitter and to publicise the British Library’s broader collection of interviews with scientists, An Oral History of British Science.

The first challenge was condensing some of the research themes into twelve tweets when each tweet averaged only two sentences in length. Communicating the essence of the project in this way while making the thread accessible and appealing demanded careful selection of content and creative use of language and emojis within the character restraints.

At the same time I needed to select audio clips that complemented the text and find images that illustrated both the written and the audio material. These were chosen from photographs I have collected from interviewees and scans of archival material. Having checked that all the necessary permissions were in place to use the audio and visual content online, I then used Auphonic software to combine the audio clips with the images to generate mp4 files that enable sound clips to be played on Twitter. For each tweet that contained audio material from the oral history collection I included a link to the interview’s British Library catalogue entry.

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To see the full thread, visit: https://twitter.com/BSHSNews/status/1227584766842679296. For more information on using Twitter, visit: https://twitter.com/en/about/twitter-threads


‘Hearing the voice…so much more informative’: listening to oral history interviews

Charlie Morgan, Archivist, National Life Stories

We still receive many onsite researchers at St Pancras and Boston Spa, however the majority of the British Library oral history collections are accessed online and we are proud that we continue to provide one of the largest offerings of online life story interviews in the world. In 2019 there were 106,706 page views of National Life Stories content at BL Sounds, an increase of over 10,000 from 2018. Oral history content as a whole on BL Sounds received 202,934 page views and on the BL’s website an overall total of 1,217,224 views. Our most used online package of interviews remains Living Memory of the Jewish Community which relates directly to the UK school curriculum, with 26,508 page views, followed by Artists’ Lives with 17,410 page views, Architects’ Lives with 15,076 page views and An Oral History of British Science with 9,536 page views. Listener numbers increased despite a moratorium on feedback and often receive comments that help us prioritise the interviews to which we provide greater access.

For those who listen to oral histories, responses usually take one of two forms; either interest in the content of the interviews, or enthusiasm for their orality. In the first instance one researcher who had been listening to interviews from Architects’ Lives and An Oral History of British Photography commented:

“… additional information, beyond what is covered in published/text-based interviews comes to the fore. Perspectives of details that might not seem directly related to the project or question (and therefore are not generally delved into by journalists) have added depth and richness to my understanding of my subjects, not generally delved into by journalists) have added depth and richness to my understanding of my subjects, …”

The same researcher also acknowledged that “the experience of hearing the voice, tone and turn of phrase of my subjects adds depth to my research”, echoing another listener who had been recommended the collection at a conference they had attended. Not only did they note that the interviews would shift the focus of their study but they described the experience of listening to them as “immersive, private, relaxing. Absolutely one of the most open-minded ways to acquire new knowledge”. It’s comments like this that remind us of the importance of National Life Stories and the oral history collections at the British Library, but even more exciting was the next line they wrote: “I’ll be back to listen to the rest”. We look forward to it.

The number of listeners that NLS and other oral history interviews receive is impressive, but more important are the ways in which researchers experience the interviews and the impact they have on their work. We are always looking for feedback and often receive comments that help us prioritise the interviews to which we provide greater access.

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“… additional information, beyond what is covered in published/text-based interviews comes to the fore. Perspectives of details that might not seem directly related to the project or question (and therefore are not generally delved into by journalists) have added depth and richness to my understanding of my subjects, processes and the thinking behind their projects.”

The same researcher also acknowledged that “the experience of hearing the voice, tone and turn of phrase of my subjects adds depth to my research”, echoing another listener who had been making use of the British Council Oral History Project and said “it was good to access the archives in an oral way. There is more to be read into ways of saying things and silences”. A researcher who had been using interviews from Labour Party Recordings and the History of Parliament collection commented that “listening is always so much more informative than reading transcripts or logs”. A perfect bit of advocacy for why we are so dedicated to archiving oral history interviews.

Of course researchers don’t always agree with each other. While one commented it was “great to use cassettes again”, another noted that “some of the recordings are still on cassette tapes and badly need digitising before they disintegrate”. With apologies to the first researcher, it’s the second with whom we agree and that’s why we are currently digitising the last of the analogue NLS collections as part of Unlocking our Sound Heritage. The largest NLS collection digitised so far by UOSH has been Book Trade Lives which comprises a mammoth 1,651 cassette tapes. We have already seen an increase in the number of people making use of this collection, including one researcher who had been recommended the collection at a conference they had attended. Not only did they note that the interviews would shift the focus of their study but they described the experience of listening to them as “immersive, private, relaxing. Absolutely one of the most open-minded ways to acquire new knowledge”. It’s comments like this that remind us of the importance of National Life Stories and the oral history collections at the British Library, but even more exciting was the next line they wrote: “I’ll be back to listen to the rest”. We look forward to it.

Land values

Paul Merchant, Oral Historian, National Life Stories

National Life Stories is recording fifty interviews with farmers, landowners, scientists, engineers and policy makers involved in British agriculture since World War Two. The dominant changes in farming over this time – dramatic increases in production afforded by mechanisation, plant breeding and agrochemicals; economies of scale achieved by amalgamation of fields and farms; reduction in human labour – have been described by geographers, historians, sociologists and journalists. But it is very rare to hear at any length from those actually working on the ground – in laboratories, in workshops and especially on the land.

First-hand, biographical narratives reveal ways in which individual farmers and land owners have been exercised by strongly moral questions about what they and their land ought to be doing from one year to the next. In this article, I sketch three different ways in which farmers have valued land in the period: land as productive, land as landscape, and land as habitat, sometimes all at the same time.

Land as productive

Interviewees refer to a generally accepted view – the “background music” as one interview puts it – lasting at least until the 1980s that farmers had a duty to produce more food, more efficiently. Though particular public statements, Ministers of Agriculture, UN Reports, publications and so on are sometimes referred to, what is more often recalled is a general feeling of duty:

“[NAFF [Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food] wanted England properly farmed and productive was the sort of general attitude; they were all for getting organised and getting productive so that we wouldn’t have to depend on imported food because in the war we’d got so bloody hungry. [...] It then sort of became a feeling not so much that we’ve got to absolutely produce all we can but that land should be properly utilised [...] land shouldn’t be just unproductive and sit around doing nothing.” [Pippa Woods Tracks 11 and 12]

The phrase “it was still” is used by several interviewees to acknowledge the endurance of this general scheme of value, just as Christine Hill remembers of the 1960s and 1970s, “It was still – the emphasis was on increasing the yield and really taking on the science behind farming rather than just the traditional old way of doing it. [...] The emphasis was definitely on getting yields up still” [Christine Hill, Track 5]. Those working for the National Agricultural Advisory Service (NAAS, later ADAS) were themselves clear about their task: to help farmers use land more productively through the application
of farm management analysis, advice on animal and crop husbandry, and approval of grants for drainage, road building, new buildings, electrification, field amalgamation (through hedge or ditch removal) and more.

Feelings of being called on to contribute to national production and profitability were often folded up very neatly with other more local feelings of duty, to family and home. John Conant explains why he was very keen to work with the local NAAS advisor, ICI reps, drainage officers and others in order to convert his Rutland farm from permanent pasture to arable crops with planted grasses (‘leys’):

“I was rather anxious to make money because of the prospect of children to feed and educate. […] I wanted to go from grassland to arable and leys […] and that meant I had to do a lot of draining. […] I was an avid searcher after advice, I don’t know, perhaps too much, but I was a very keen farmer, yes, keen to make some money; my father didn’t give me any money, what I had was what I earned, and quite quickly we started making money.” [John Conant, Track 1]

Similarly, Pippa Woods, from whom we heard above on the ‘general attitude’ of MAFF, says that, “we wanted to make a very good living; we wanted the farm to run efficiently so it would allow us an income ‘cause we never had any other income since we came here” [Pippa Woods, Track 12].

Land as landscape

Pippa Woods came to her farm – Osborne Newton Farm in South Devon – in 1954. She remembers choosing it when we got to see it we realised it was much more sensible: it was very well organised because it has this [...] lane (and) the fields roughly all radiate from a line which goes along the contour. […] One reason we were keen to buy it, you could sort of, you can see where you are on this farm.” [Pippa Woods, Tracks 3 and 4]

Other interviewees speak of favourable layouts, well-shaped fields. They also describe tremendous efforts to produce more workable spaces, logical divisions, suitable surfaces, good connections and relatively ‘clean’ crops. Poul Christensen took over Kingston Hill Farm in Oxfordshire in December 1968 and set about developing it as “a reasonable set-up that you would over Kingston Hill Farm in Oxfordshire in December 1968 and connections and relatively ‘clean’ crops. Poul Christensen took all the way round the paddocks […] to replace the habitat that we’d taken out.” [Christine Hill, Track 7]

Land as habitat

In the 1960s and 1970s much less was known about the effects of agriculture on wildlife habitats but even then certain farmers were very concerned with the wildlife habitat afforded by parts of their farms. Poul Christensen speaks of feeling a duty, shared with “a lot of farmers at the time”, to pass on not just a successful farm, but also natural wealth:

“You’ve only got stewardship of the land for your lifetime and when you go and look at a plot of land where there’s nothing […] except the crops you grow (and) contrast that to going to a mixed farm where you’ve got a whole variety of different habitats and you can hear the skylarks singing, you hear the cuckoo, you look at the wild flowers, then you realise, I think, that […] you do have a responsibility here. I mean you’ve got to make money, you’ve got to live, you’ve got to feed your family, but you do have a responsibility because it’s so easy to destroy those habitats.” [Poul Christensen, Track 5]

He therefore developed Kingston Hill Farm alongside conservation, as the first of the Countryside Commission’s ‘Demonstration Farms’. In Lincolnshire, Nicholas Watts was recording song birds on his farms, and revising cropping, layout and land management to encourage their numbers. And at Manydown in Hampshire, Hugh Oliver-Bellasis was engaged in a huge project to reveal the effects of modern farming on wild plants, insects and animals, and to devise field management strategies that have now become part of mainstream nature conservation policy. The project also revealed, as he explains here, the willingness of many farmers to value their land in new ways:

“In many cases they [farmers] had absolutely no idea what that they were doing was in any way harmful, and when they did know – as we proved – they were firstly prepared to do the research and secondly prepared to pay and thirdly prepared to alter their practice.” [Hugh Oliver-Bellasis, Track 7]

What’s next?

In 2020 farmers are being asked to engage with new ways of valuing land that we might call ‘land as carbon source/sink’. Newspaper articles and radio and television programmes feature discussions on the extent to which land should be regarded as vital surface area in our attempt to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, and to capture carbon. Reduced meat production, rewilding of difficult land (see the bestseller Wilding (2018) by Isabella Tree), afforestation of the uplands, and organic farming are all linked to this new land value. The question is: how does this new land value map onto those already in play, perhaps especially land as productive?
**Interviewee Perspectives**

Dr Peggie Rimmer, christened Elsie Margaret, was born in Lancashire in 1940. Her father was a coal miner and her mother worked in a baker’s shop until Peggie was born. After studying maths and physics at Liverpool and Oxford, in 1967 she joined CERN, the European particle physics laboratory in Geneva, and became a leading campaigner for computing standards. In 1984 Peggie recruited a young Tim Berners-Lee to join her team and was his supervisor during the years when he was developing his concept of a World Wide Web.

In 2019 Peggie recorded her life story interview for An Oral History of British Science, talking about her school days, life as a physicist at University and at CERN, her role in the creation of the Web, and why she stepped aside just as the Web was about to be born. In this follow up, Peggie talks to project interviewer Tom Lean about what it was like being interviewed.

Peggie: “It started for me because this year CERN is celebrating the so-called thirtieth anniversary of the birth of the Web and so over the course of the summer I was obliged to relive a blow by blow account of what went on thirty years ago. The fact is that Tim’s March 1989 proposal didn’t trigger anything. The first time the Lab officially took some notice and allocated a modest amount of resources to his project, by then called the World Wide Web, was in November 1990.

*Given that the story as it has got around is not recorded accurately, I thought this is the time to put things right. So that is what I had in mind. However, it’s turned into a kind of social history of the life of an individual during a period when lots of things were happening.*

My comments were unprepared, spontaneous and as honest as I could be. I wasn’t given a list of topics, we didn’t rehearse anything, and I didn’t listen to the previous interviews between sessions. You can say that’s the best way. On the other hand, I got a few very old points mixed up, but not the Web stuff because I was revisiting that while the interviews were going on.

*Also, my language isn’t always lady-like, but then I’m not really a lady. And remember at CERN we spoke a sort of unversal English. Since I retired over a decade ago I speak more French and I think I’m losing my grip on real English.*

Tom: “During the interviews I was struck by how important it seemed to you that your story was as accurate as possible. Why was precision so important to you?”

*In his 1999 book Weaving the Web, those early days are covered in just a few pages and Tim tightly concentrates on the later success. Mike was dead and, because of our problems, I had disappeared a decade earlier. Also I didn’t feature much in another book published soon afterwards. My contribution, modest though it might have been, was nowhere really acknowledged.*

**In a nutshell, what was your contribution to the Web?**

*CERN was a physics lab, not a computing lab. But the ground theons were fertile because of the need for global interworking and I was a champion of computing standardisation, perhaps the strongest one at CERN, so it was a good plate for Tim to be. That’s what the Web is, a standard way of sharing information all around the world. Mike and I together somehow made it possible for Tim to do his work. Not technically, but actually. We kept it quiet and got him what he needed. Mike, in charge of the fuse strings, got Tim the NeXT computer that he used for the Web stuff, encouraged him, and I gave Tim suitable jobs, sent him off to relevant meetings and so on. Somebody had to do that.*

*You were Tim Berners-Lee’s supervisor when he first proposed the idea of the Web, how did you come to take a step back from it?*

*“You were Tim Berners-Lee’s supervisor when he first proposed the idea of the Web, how did you come to take a step back from it?”*  
*In April 1989 Mike told me that he thought he was gay – though we didn’t use that word then – homosexual. Well, we’d been working together with colleagues and friends for twenty-odd years and in the ’80s it was not the sort of thing that you easily discussed or admitted, not in Europe. It was tough. We considered what Mike should do and thought he could try to get a sabbatical in California, where we had colleagues and he would be able to be open about it and find out if it was true or not. After a week or two had passed in turmoil, I said to Mike, ‘Would you please go through Tim’s proposal [the first draft of his proposal for the Web, though it wasn’t called that yet] because he’s waiting for your answer.’ Mike did that and on the cover page he wrote what has become a worldwide slogan ‘Vague but exciting…’ We looked at it together and I said, ‘Right now, how am I going to put a phrase like that to some guy? I cannot discuss it with Tim.’ So Mike agreed to change it.

*But a short while later he was diagnosed with a form of bone cancer and given 18 months to 2 years to live. So that rather changed things. And once again – don’t tell anybody because when you’re dying your career is finished. So now we have two things we are not supposed to be talking about and it was unbearable. I didn’t know quite what to do, all I knew was that I couldn’t carry on working in the group, pretending that everything was the same. I’m afraid our interest in Tim’s work went on the back burner for a while, though Mike did order a NeXT computer for him, fervently.*

**How did you find talking about these events in your interview?**

*How did you find talking about these events in your interview?*  
*It depends on the listener. When you read a book or listen to a radio programme, what you take away is very coloured by yourself. I hope everyone will take something from it. I thought, listening to it all again, it’s quite fascinating, not because it’s me but because of how many things changed throughout that time. I found myself listening to it as though it was someone else speaking and it was very interesting. And some of the things she said were very intelligent! I was quite impressed, but in a social history sort of way, not in a science way.*

**Not easy. It’s been a long time since Mike died and so that’s been a long time for me to think about everything. Listening to myself talk about what we did and what we had to do, it was just so natural somehow. If Mike hadn’t got cancer I’m not sure we would have stayed together. But I was very, very fond of him. I don’t like to use the word love but if that’s not love I don’t know what is, and it consolidated my feeling about ‘did I get that right?’ After being so close to someone for so long I couldn’t just cut him out of my life. I cared too much. I don’t regret what I did, but I do regret that it needed to be done.**

**The reason that Tim’s first proposal was not shown to him, Mike’s troubles, was immensely important to me. And also it left me looking rather peculiar as I walked away from everything. Almost no one, and most people still, have no idea why that happened, and I don’t wish to go into it as history as someone who chucked out because she wasn’t up to it!**

**The fact that the document was later published, after Mike was dead and without my knowledge, including ‘Vague but exciting …’ now printed on T-shirts, distressed me no end because Mike had promised me he wouldn’t show that to Tim, and he didn’t. And because it’s history, it’s important. If there is someone still alive who can tell it like it really was and there is no other witness to what happened, then they should tell it. Even Tim didn’t know.”**

*“Listening back to your interview what do you think a listener would make of it and what strikes you?”*  
*“Listening back to your interview what do you think a listener would make of it and what strikes you?”*  
*Weaving the Web*
Looking up
Cathy Courtney, Project Director, National Life Stories

since 1948 been employed as chief Medical Officer by the Government of Kuwait. Parry’s account of his early childhood is stamped with impressions of Kuwait – light and shadow, desert landscapes and the dry climate, encounters with Bedouins and their way of life, the configurations of dhows (a type of sailing vessel), which he witnessed being built as well as sailing on them. In contrast were the shapes of government imported shiny American cars, the propeller planes in which the family flew to Beirut en route to England, and everything he saw on visits to Europe, including the Parthenon in Athens.

Parry’s father was responsible for the development of hospitals and other medical buildings in Kuwait, and he would take his son on site visits. Architects and contractors would visit the family home (one in particular, Piers Hubbard, remembered for his gift of an air rifle) and the young boy was familiar with drawn plans and architectural models. Parry was sent to boarding school in England aged eight (his first encounter with snow was 1960) and although he didn’t live there after 1962, he returned to Kuwait in 1972, writing a dissertation on its urbanization, and was back again during a year studying nomadic settlement in Iran and Ashish al Jahra after 1962, he returned to Kuwait in 1972, writing a dissertation on its urbanization, and was back again during a year studying nomadic settlement in Iran and Ashish al Jahra in Kuwait.

The potency of childhood impressions from Kuwait emerges in Parry’s architecture in many ways, not least because he is so acutely aware of light and interactions with it. This is expressed in large scale – for instance in the configuration of gridded surfaces to deliver shade to windows – and small, in his delight in the sparkle on the surfaces of Eric Parry’s façade of a building on London’s Regent Street. By

Eric Parry’s as a child in Kuwait, seen here with his ayah, Lilly Roi. In the courtyard of his parents’ house in Kuwait.

The opening of Sir Anthony Hospital, Kuwait 1949, attended by the Earl. Parry’s father (second from recently appointed Chief Medical Officer of the state.

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Tiled surfaces, both interior and exterior (see photograph), were a prominent feature of Parry’s growing up, perhaps a subconscious trigger for his later interest in the work of sculptor Richard Deacon. Whilst Deacon has also worked consistently in wood and metal, he is rare as a sculptor in having made significant pieces in ceramic. First he used clay as a schoolboy, and again at a formative period when he accompanied his then wife, the ceramicist Jacqueline Poncelet (recorded by NLS for Crafts Lives), on her fellowship to America in 1979. A gap of about twenty years followed before Deacon began working with ceramic again, at Niels Dietrich’s workshops in Cologne.

In 2014 Deacon and Parry showed together at the British School at Rome in an exhibition entitled ‘3–2 = 1: Bridge, Bangle & Cornice’. The title referenced that only one of their three attempts to work together has come to be built so far. Their first collaboration was what Parry terms ‘a shot-gun marriage’ when, in 1996, they were paired to put forward a proposal for the Millennium Bridge over the Thames, linking the St Paul’s bankside with Tate Modern’s. Their conception was a closer amalgamation of their two disciplines than the winning Norman Foster-Athony Caro combination. The second attempt was when Parry commissioned Deacon to propose a sculpture which would be integrated with the façade of EPAs Finsbury Square building (1999-2001), as a result of which Parry learnt the lesson that if he wanted to incorporate artwork on a commercial building it needed to be firmly integrated at the planning stage.

The lesson was absorbed by the time Parry invited Deacon to design the cornice for the façade of a building near Piccadilly Circus (part of a larger EPA redevelopment of a site, One Eagle Place, stretching to Jermyn Street). This time, Parry suggested to the client (Crown Estates) a competition, which he helped to run, to choose an artist. Deacon (born 1949, in Wales) was unsure that he was the right person and even went as far as to recommend another artist, but was eventually persuaded that it was he with whom Parry wanted to collaborate. The way in which the finished design came about was almost accidental and happened when Deacon was ostensibly making other work. The following extract is edited from Deacon’s recording:

“I’d never really thought about what a cornice was before. I did come up with a plan on the basis of something that I’d done. It was really not very good. At the same time in the ceramic studio (in Cologne) I’d wanted to try working in a different way with the clay, to try making something with bricks.

“I got [the studio] to make a whole set of multicoloured clay beams, solid clay beams, and fire them up, each about seventy five centimetres long by ten by ten centimetres. Then, using a diamond-cutting saw, I cut them so they became polygonal beams. The idea was that I’d put one on the other and gradually build up something by a process of trial and elimination, changing the geometry as it went along. In the summer of 2009 I went to [the Cologne workshop] in August. It was quite a hot day I remember. I was trying to make these structures. I had to glue them together temporarily with hot glue in order to try and configure the geometry. Unfortunately they were so heavy that the glue bond kept breaking. I’d get four pieces together and then the glue bond would break. This seemed to go on all day.

“I was getting very frustrated and angry. Finally I stopped and in order to calm myself down, I began piling up these blocks, starting with one and then finding another which had the same width and putting it on top and tipping it. I was gradually building up a Chad and gluing it together. And then it became interesting to do this. It did calm me down and I did start to get intrigued in what was happening with putting face to face, not really controlling where the shape was going, just doing one after the other. We had four of them. They were standing on the workshop’s table whilst the glue was setting. I looked at them from the side and I realised the curved profile was capable of becoming a cornice.”

Deacon developed the idea so that it could be incorporated into the Regent Street façade:

“Then I began making drawings – I understood the cornice didn’t have to be the same all the way along, it could change. I knew what I was doing. At first I wanted to make them in clay blocks, but that’s a bit heavy, so they’re made differently, they’re cast. It was always an idea that each face would be a different pattern. We looked at training people to paint different patterns on each face (but that didn’t really work). It ended up with me producing 20 different coloured sheets – actually maybe even more than 20 – that would form the basis for the patterns on the different faces, and then working out a sequence of patterns across the whole thing. And finding someone who could produce transfer patterns from my drawings, which was [Jeremy Hague at Tadema Designs] in Stoke who was initially quite suspicious of the project but became very enthusiastic afterwards because it was really clear that we were serious and doing something interesting.”

Richard Deacon’s recording is generously funded by The Henry Moore Foundation

Eric Parry’s façade of a building on London’s Regent Street. By

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“Then I began making drawings – I understood the cornice didn’t have to be the same all the way along, it could change. I knew what I was doing. At first I wanted to make them in clay blocks, but that’s a bit heavy, so they’re made differently, they’re cast. It was always an idea that each face would be a different pattern. We looked at training people to paint different patterns on each face (but that didn’t really work). It ended up with me producing 20 different coloured sheets – actually maybe even more than 20 – that would form the basis for the patterns on the different faces, and then working out a sequence of patterns across the whole thing. And finding someone who could produce transfer patterns from my drawings, which was [Jeremy Hague at Tadema Designs] in Stoke who was initially quite suspicious of the project but became very enthusiastic afterwards because it was really clear that we were serious and doing something interesting.”

Richard Deacon’s recording is generously funded by The Henry Moore Foundation
Mary Warnock lived a 'ferociously busy' life as a philosopher, public intellectual, university teacher, headmistress, musician, supportive wife, member of the House of Lords and member or chair of numerous official committees. These included the Independent Broadcasting Authority (1973–81), Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People (1974–78), Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (1979–84) and the Advisory Committee on Animal Experiments (1979–85). The last two of these led to significant legislative changes, but it is for her work with the Committee of Enquiry on Human Fertilisation and Embryology (1982–84) that she is best known. This led to the 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, which introduced a regulatory framework for assisted conception and permitted experimentation on embryos up to fourteen days old.

Reflecting in her interview with Louise Brodie about how she worked hard to frame the central question as one around the moral status of the embryo:

"I had to try to stop people asking the question, ‘when does human life begin?’ because a lot of us weren’t very good singers. We all had to be able to sight-read but that was the only thing, to sight sing, that was the only criterion for entry. And they were always overlaid with women and undersupplied with tenors. And there were a few wonderful Welsh tenors from the House of Commons, but they weren’t very good at reading the music really. They had lovely voices, so we were a sort of a peculiar choir really."

Raymond Wheeler was an aeronautical engineer who spent most of his career with the Saunders Roe company on the Isle of Wight and its successors, joining as an apprentice in 1945 and eventually becoming chief designer and technical director. Educated at Southampton and then Imperial College, Ray’s early ambition was to, “be the most knowledgeable aircraft structural analyst that there was in England. … It wasn’t very specific, you know, I just wanted to know it all.” This interest led to a long career working on some of the most inventive aircraft projects of the day, including the huge Princess flying boat, the jet powered SRN A1 flying boat fighter, Black Arrow space rocket, SR-53 rocket powered fighter plane and hovercraft.

Part of Ray’s early career was spent as a ‘stress man’, responsible for the structural strength of aircraft, an area of work that left him with fond memories:

“…it’s going to work and we’re going to make it work… you don’t even think about failure. You think what you’re designing not to work, that doesn’t occur to you, it’s going to work and we’re going to make it work… you don’t even think about failure. You think about failure in the sense of if some precaution’s needed for something going wrong, you do that, but you’re not expecting it not to work. You’re expecting it to work, that’s what you designed it for.”

"My stay in the stress office I regard as the happiest time of my life. The guys there were great, the work was interesting, but a lot of responsibility. It was a wonderful office to work in, it really was, nice blokes, and we had our own cricket team… I mean the interdepartmental and all that sort of thing there. And towards the end when a fighter aircraft we were doing was cancelled and half the workforce went… the bottom temporarily fell out of it and I was promoted, but I still look back with pride and pleasure on that time in the stress office and the team, they were super."

In the 1950s Saunders Roe won contracts to develop Christopher Cockerell’s idea for an air cushion vehicle into the first practical full-sized hovercraft, the SRN 1, or as Ray recalled it, a ‘flying saucer’.

“We got a contract to build it in ’58 I suppose, and went ahead like a shot out of a gun and it was only a few months later we had built the thing, and it was christened a flying saucer ‘cause it looked like one…"
Sir Stephen Cleobury died on the evening of – appropriately enough – St Cecilia’s Day (St Cecilia is the patroness of musicians and Church music). It was a great privilege to be a part of the tradition of choosing the solo choirboy who will start the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, broadcast annually on Christmas Eve with a bad sore throat and not being able to sing. So I’ve got to have various of them in the frame. So it gives me that kind of flexibility to choose the best horse for the course on the day. And I think in almost all cases it’s worked fine.

“So, you are standing there, the red light comes on, and then you go, ‘OK, it’s you.’ Yes?

“Yes. And then he comes forward and stands in front of the microphone. We have rehearsed that with, maybe four of them in the morning. By the time we get to midday on the day, I’ve got about four of them in mind who I think could do it. So we hear them. And also, the radio engineer makes their notes. So, number one needs his knob here; number two, he’s got to turn the knob up a bit; number three, he’s got to turn it down a bit. So that they know, whichever one I choose they know where to set their balance. So that’s helpful for them; it means, it gives me an idea, a last-minute check on who is in best voice; and it means that any of the four who are going to do it have in fact done it that day. So it’s not something that I get hugely uplifted about, because that would very quickly communicate itself to the trebles in the wrong way. But I do, underneath that persona I think of calm I hope, actually run it very carefully in my mind in the ways of which I have just tried to describe to you.”

Our interview also encompassed Sir Stephen’s lucid explanations of musical techniques that are potentially in danger of disappearing – species counterpoint and the realisation of a baroque figured bass. We discussed his assessment of the personal qualities required to be a good organist and a sensitive choral conductor; and how to deal – or how not to – with a large group of excitable youngsters on a choir tour. There is much more besides.

As a music student in Cambridge in the 1980s, starting there only a few years after Sir Stephen began his music directorship at King’s College, I was aware of him and his work almost every day, though our paths crossed rarely (I was at a different college and I can’t sing!). The presence of King’s College Chapel at the heart of town and gown, the pervasive influence of the English choral tradition upon which he built so strongly, and my own sense of not quite belonging to this exquisite and rarified world all got under my skin. Telling him was moving and cathartic on the personal level; and I hope that the interview recording will serve as a valuable memorial in perpetuity, and one that will inspire others as it inspired me.

Our profound thanks to Sir Stephen’s wife, Emma, for her help and forbearance during the recording sessions and to King’s College, Cambridge for funding the interview.
Statement of Financial Activities

Year Ended 31 December 2019

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<th>Notes</th>
<th>Restricted</th>
<th>Unrestricted</th>
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Reconciliation of Funds:

Funds brought forward | 341,762 | 587,190 | 928,952 | 1,092,139 |
Total funds carried forward | 337,004 | 713,925 | 1,050,929 | 928,952 |

Balance Sheet at 31 December 2019

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<th>2019</th>
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<td><strong>NET CURRENT ASSETS</strong></td>
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<td><strong>NET ASSETS</strong></td>
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The funds of the Charity:

Founder's donation | 200,000 | 200,000 |
Unrestricted fund | 513,925 | 387,190 |
Restricted fund | 337,004 | 341,762 |
**TOTAL CHARITY FUNDS** | 1,050,929 | 928,952 |

Restricted funds are limited to expenditure on specific projects; unrestricted funds are intended to provide sufficient resources to maintain the general activities of the Charity. The Founder’s donation is the establishing donation given to NLS to contribute to the support of general activities. The balance on restricted funds represents donations received, the expenditure of which has not yet been incurred.

The financial statements have been prepared in accordance with Accounting and Reporting by Charities: Statement of Recommended Practice applicable to charities preparing their accounts in accordance with the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102) – (charities SORP (FRS 102)), the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102) and the Companies Act 2006.

The Statement of Financial Activities and the Balance Sheet have been extracted from the full financial statements of the charity. The opinion of the auditors on the full financial statements is reproduced below.

OPINION
In our opinion the financial statements:
• give a true and fair view of the state of the charitable company’s affairs as at 31 December 2019 and of its incoming resources and application of resources, including its income and expenditure, for the year then ended;
• have been properly prepared in accordance with United Kingdom Generally Accepted Accounting Practice, including Financial Reporting Standard 102 ‘The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and the Republic of Ireland’ and
• have been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Companies Act 2006.

R Rubenstein (Senior Statutory Auditor)
For and on behalf of Parker Cavendish
Chartered Accountants & Registered Auditors
28 Church Road, Stanmore, Middlesex HA7 4XR

Dame Jenny Abramsky
Chair of Trustees
in the ‘Oral History Curator’s Choice’ collection at British Library Sounds. The ‘Voices of Art’ web resource was launched in 2018 (bl.uk/voices-of-art).

Artists’ Lives Advisory Committee
Sir Alan Bowens, Dr Penelope Curtis, Caroline Cuthbert, Adrian Grew, Professor John Gooding, Cornelia Grass, Professor Lubaina Himid MBE, Lisa Le Feuvre, Richard Morepht CBE, Clive Phillpot, Laurence Sillars and Dr Andrew Wilson.

Architects’ Lives
(C467) [155 interviews]

Architects’ Lives documents architects working in Britain and those in associated professions. In addition to the main collection, the association with the National Trust at Willow Road. NLS made a series of recordings documenting memories of Ernö Goldfinger which resulted in a co-published CD Passionate Rationalism (2004). NLS has also partnered English Heritage to document Eltham Palace and the Courtauld family (C1056).

Architects’ Lives Advisory Committee
Rab Bennett (chair), Catherine Croft, Dr Elain Harwood, Peter Murray, Dr Alan Powers, Barbara Weiss and Eiki Woodman.

Fawcett Collection
(C468) [14 interviews]

In connection with the Women’s Library (formerly known as the Fawcett Society) this collection of interviews recorded between 1990 and 1992 charts the lives of pioneering career women, each of whom made their mark in traditionally male-dominated areas such as: the law and medicine; Woman in a Man’s World by Rebecca Abrams (Methuen, 1993) was based on this collection.

Lives in Steel
(C532) [102 interviews]

Lives in Steel comprises personal histories recorded between 1991 and 1992 with employees from one of Britain’s largest yet least understood industries. Interviewees range from the top managers and trade unionists to technicians, furnacemen, shearers and many more. British Steel General Steels Division sponsored both the project and the Lives in Steel CD (BL, 1993), which is available online at BL Sounds.

Oral History of the British Press
(C468) [21 interviews]

This collection of interviews with key press and newspaper figures was extended with support from the British Library as part of the popular Front Page exhibition in 2006.

National Life Story Awards
(C464) [145 interviews]

This nationwide competition ran in 1993 to promote the value of life story recording and autobiographical writing. The judges, among them Lord Briggs and Dame Penelope Lively, chose winners from 1000 entries in three categories: young interviewee, taped entries and written entries. Melvyn Bragg presented the prizes. The Awards were supported by the Arts Council, the ITV Telethon Trust, and European Year of Older People.

Legal Lives
(C736) [14 interviews]

This collection documents changes in the legal profession in Britain, including interviews with both solicitors and barristers. Since 2012 we have been developing this area of our work in partnership with the Advisory Project in the Law Department at the London School of Economics (LSE), and more recently with the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies at Oxford University. Within Legal Lives, Crown Court Clerks Life Story Interviews (C1674) [20 interviews] resulted from a collaborative doctoral award with LSE, providing an insight into the lives of the law and the pivotal role that Crown Court clerks play in the administration of justice.

Food: From Source to Salepoint
(C821) [218 interviews]

Between 1998 and 2006 Food: From Source to Salepoint charted the revolutionary technical and social changes which occurred within Britain’s food industry in the twentieth century and beyond. Production, distribution and retailing of food are explored through recordings with those working at every level of the sector, including life stories with those in the ready meal, poultry, sugar, meat and fish sectors; a series with employees of Northern Foods, Nestle, Sainsbury’s and Safeway; and a series with key cookey writers and restaurateurs. Within Food: From Source to Salepoint a set of interviews with chefs [12 interviews] explores the working lives of chefs over a period when their role has changed from being in charge of the kitchen, to being more high profile. The food programme of interviews also encompasses Tesco: An Oral History (C1087) [47 interviews recorded 2003–7] and An Oral History of the Wine Trade (C1088) [40 interviews recorded 2003–2004].

Book Trade Lives
(C872) [121 interviews]

Book Trade Lives recorded the experiences of those who worked in publishing and bookselling between the early 1920s and 2007. Interviews covered all levels of the trade, from invoice clerks and warehouse staff to wholesalers, editors, accountants and publishers. The Union, to union officials, sorters, engineers and senior management. A CD, Speeding the mail: an oral history of the post from the 1930s to the 1990s, was co-published by the British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA) and the British Library (2005).

An Oral History of the Post Office
(C1007) [117 interviews]

From 2001–2003 this project, with a partnership with Royal Mail, captured the memories and experiences of individuals from the postal services sector – from machine operators to managers and postmasters. The Union, to union officials, sorters, engineers and senior management. A CD, Speeding the mail: an oral history of the post from the 1930s to the 1990s, was co-published by the British Postal Museum & Archive (BPMA) and the British Library (2005).

An Oral History of Wolff Olins
(C1015) [40 interviews]

This collection documented the development of design and corporate branding through a biographical project based around the growth and development of a single commercial company, Wolff Olins, and was completed 2001–2002.

An Oral History of British Fashion
(C1046) [18 interviews]

This collaborative initiative between London College of Fashion (University of the Arts London) and National Life Stories documents fashion and its related industries within living memory.

Pioneers in Charity and Social Welfare
(C1159) [30 interviews]

Records the memories and experiences of key figures in social welfare, social policy and charitable endeavour.

An Oral History of Theatre Design
(C1173) [34 interviews]

This collaborative project with Wimbledon College of Art (University of the Arts London) charted developments in post-war British theatre design.

Authors’ Lives
(C1276) [70 interviews]

Authors Lives was launched in 2007 with the aim of recording approximately one hundred novelists, poets, writers and editors. A CD, The Writing Life: Authors’ Speak, featuring extracts from the collection, was published by the British Library (2011) and the audio is available online in the ‘Oral History Curator’s Choice’ collection at British Library Sounds. The authors’ programme of interviews also encompasses Women in Publishing (C1657) [29 interviews recorded 2014–2018).

Authors’ Lives Advisory Committee
Stephen Cleary, Rachel Foss, Dr Maggie Gee OBE, Deborah Moggach, Martin Pick, Lawrence Sal, Nicola Solomon and Jonathan Taylor CBE.
How to support National Life Stories

Introduction

National Life Stories is the trading name of the National Life Stories Patrons,

Our Patrons offer generous support through a personal annual gift commitment, initially for three years at three levels. We offer a bespoke programme of engagement including behind-the-scenes discussions and invitations to events. For full details contact nls@bl.uk.

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King’s College Cambridge
Bill Knight
Sandu Lousada
Eric Parry Architects
Hodson and Luanne Thorner
Keith Williams
Yale Center for British Art

National Life Stories Patrons

The Legacy of the English Stage Company (C1316) [15 interviews]
Sponsored by the John Hodgson Theatre Research Trust, this series of interviews charts the story of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre. This complements other theatre collections and adds the important perspective of the theatre director.

An Oral History of the Water Industry (C1364) [31 interviews]
Between 2009 and 2012 this project recorded life story interviews with staff at all levels within the water industry. Funded by six water companies, these recordings provide valuable insights into one of Britain’s most important and least documented utilities.

An Oral History of Barings (C1367) [34 interviews]
In partnership with The Barings Archive, this project ran between 2009 and 2013 and focused on the history of Barings throughout the twentieth century, providing important insights into life and work within the bank – including stories from the family and those working at all levels within the company. This complements City Lives and documents the bank up to and including its collapse and subsequent acquisition by ING in 1995. In 2012 Katharine Haydon compiled a booklet entitled In the Locker of my Memory: Extracts from An Oral History of Barings.

An Oral History of British Science (C1379) [135 interviews]
This programme was initiated in November 2009 in collaboration with the British Library’s History of Science specialists and is run in association with the Science Museum. The first phase (2009–2013) was generously funded by Arcadia and the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851. It is creating a master archive for the public understanding of contemporary science in Britain through in-depth interviews with British scientists. As well as filling obvious gaps in the archive for the history of major developments and innovations by interviewing the key players in British science, this project aims to account for the character of scientific research since the Second World War. To complement life story interviews, averaging 10–15 hours in length, the project also includes some shorter video recordings reflecting key events or locations. The project website at bl.uk/voices-of-science won the Royal Historical Society’s Public History Prize for Best Web and Digital Project, and the British Society for the History of Science’s Ayton Prize for Digital Engagement. Full interviews are available online via British Library Sounds. Interviews with ethnic minority British scientists conducts a collaborative project with the Royal Society, Inspiring Scientists: Diversity in British Science, are available at royalsociety.org/topics-policy/diversity-in-science/inspiring-scientists.

The Privatisation of Government Science (C1902), an Arts and Humanities Research Council collaborative doctoral project with the British Library and the University of Leicester, looks at how privatisation policies of the 1980s and 1990s affected government research establishments and the scientists who worked in them.

An Oral History of the Electricity Supply Industry in the UK (C1495) [58 interviews]
Contributing to NLS’s documentation of the utilities in the UK, this project collected the memories and experiences of those who worked in the industry at various levels, covering the period from nationalisation in the 1940s to privatisation in the 1980s and 1990s. It includes such themes as changing technology, industrial relations, the miners’ strikes, changing workplaces, corporate cultures, nuclear power, energy marketing, and public service. We are grateful to Hodson and Luanne Thorner for their generous support.

An Oral History of Talking Therapists in the UK (C1553) [13 interviews]
This growing collection explores the development in post-war Britain of those therapies that depend primarily on verbal exchanges between client and therapist to alleviate mental distress. A future project will interview a wide range of professionals in this complex and diverse sector.

Welcome Trust Life Stories (C1665) [5 interviews]
A collection of interviews with key individuals with a long connection to the Welcome Trust, funded by the Trust.

Science and Religion: Exploring the Spectrum (C1672) [33 interviews]
A collaboration between An Oral History of British Science, and York University, Toronto and the Centre for Science, Knowledge and Belief in Society, Newman University, Birmingham, this multidisciplinary research project funded by the Templeton Religion Trust investigated the social and cultural contexts of public perceptions of relations between ‘science’ and ‘religion’ across all faiths and none.

An Oral History of Farming, Land Management and Conservation in Post-war Britain (C1828) [14 interviews]
Funded by Arcadia, this project will focus on the experience of changes in farming practice, patterns of landownership, and approaches to land management bound up with the development and incorporation of various kinds of scientific knowledge and technology. It will record the ways in which environmental knowledge has been developed, promoted, marginalised and revived as part of dramatic changes in British farming and landowning since the Second World War. As many of these changes relate to national and EC/EU policy, the project claims significant timeliness and potential to contribute to debates on agriculture and the future of British farming.

Farming and Science Advisory Committee
Prof Jon Agar (chair), Prof Maggie Gill, Christopher Haskins, Prof John Martin, Andrew Thorman and Prof Michael Winter.

Design Lives (C1842) [1 interview]
This new National Life Stories oral history programme will document the history of design in the United Kingdom.

How to support National Life Stories

NLS’s charitable status means that donations or sponsorship are subject to the relevant tax relief for either individuals or companies. There are four tax efficient and convenient ways to support National Life Stories.

Gift Aid
The Gift Aid scheme allows us to claim back basic rate tax on any donation received from individual taxpayers. This means that for every £100 donated we can claim an additional £25 from the Inland Revenue if a signed Gift Aid form is received. A Gift Aid form can be obtained from the NLS Office. It needs to be completed and returned to NLS together with your donation.

Donation of shares
Donors of shares are not deemed to have made a disposal that makes them liable to capital gains tax. The charity has the option of retaining the shares or selling them. Unlisted shares traded on a recognised exchange are included in this initiative. The individual making such a donation will also be able to reduce their taxable income by the value of the gift. A company donor will obtain full relief against corporation tax.

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