Oral History at Seaton Delaval Hall

Project Report

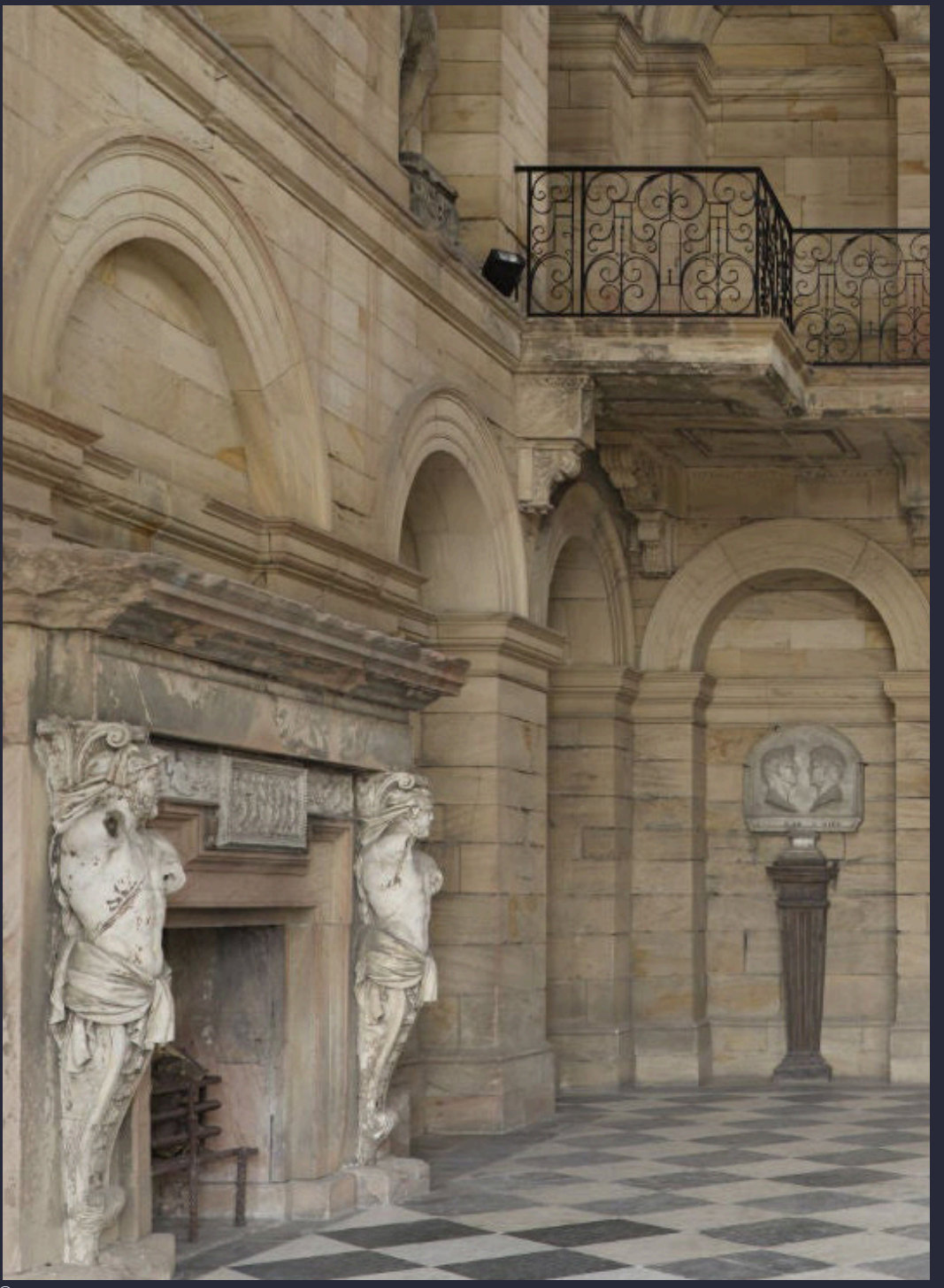
Contents

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of our project, which explored different ways Seaton Delaval Hall could utilise their oral history collection and encourage visitors to react, intrepret and remix the recordings.

The initial brief was board and open, allowing the group of designers, National Trust staff and volunteers to be free in their creative thinking. No idea was a bad idea. Through research, rapid ideation, and prototype testing the group created, developed, and iterated several designs which presented the hall's oral histroy to the visitors in a fun and interactive way.

We are indepted to the wider hall community for letting us test out our prototypes. We could not have done it without them.



Brief

There are many different stories that make up the history of Seaton Delaval Hall. Sadly, not all these stories can be told within the limited space available in the hall. It was therefore decided to utilise the large amount of oral history recordings about the hall to create audio experiences that showcase the diverse and multilayered stories of the hall.

The two main challenges of this project is to present oral history in the hall in an engaging way that allows for the multiple sides of the hall to be shown, and to the encourage visitors to interpret the stories, remix the stories, and add their own stories. Both of these challenges need to be address in one integrated design.

The aims of the project is to: create, develop, and test potential designs for audio experiences at the hall, get a better understanding of the scope and limits of such experiences and visitors' attitudes towards audio experiences.

Research

Within the research section of the project we started by looking at the current situation of oral history at the hall and the examine different ways people have presented audio inside and outside the GLAM sector. We also reviewed the methods some places used to collect reactions and interpretations from their visitors.

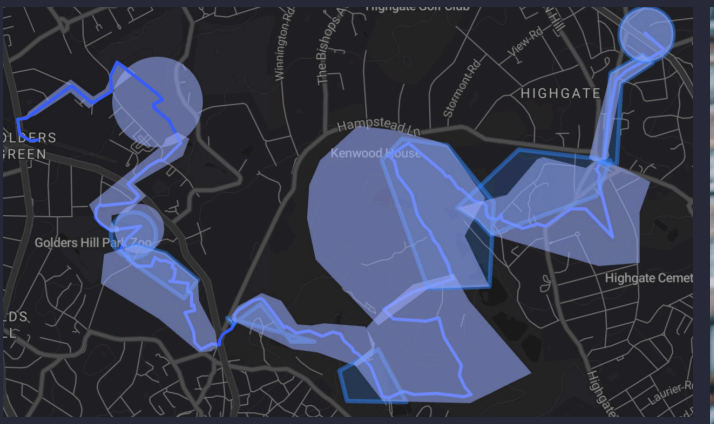
Oral History at the Hall

Although there was one very short interview done around 2012 and there were a handful of interviews done in the area around Seaton Delaval Hall in the 1970s, oral history at the hall started properly in 2021 when the first recordings were made by a PhD student. The student recorded 18 interviews with 16 individuals (two people were interviewed twice). At the end of the collecting period there were listening evenings, where people who were part of the project, National Trust staff and volunteers came together to listen. The recordings were archived at Northumberland Archives and have been reuse a couple of times, with most significant one being for an exhibition on the hall during the two world wars.

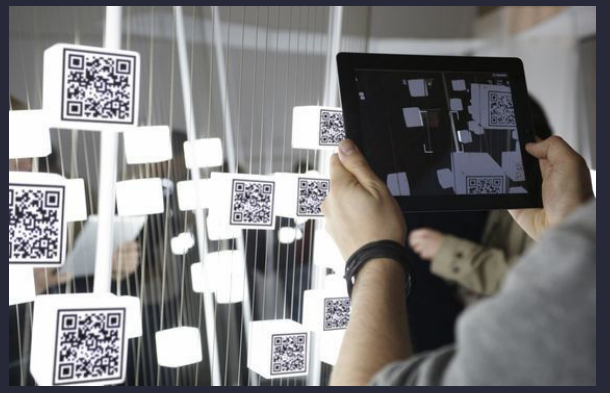
After the end of that particular project in 2025, many more oral histories have been recorded by volunteers, who received training from Oral History Society or Northumberland Archives. The majority of interviewees have been volunteers, who were retiring from volunteering, and visitors, who remembered the hall before its acquisition. There was a bumper year of recording in 2029 when there was a large celebration for 20 years since acquisition and fundraising. Currently there are plans to use oral history for a future project based around the hall's connection to industry and how the industrial landscape around the hall has changed over the years.

Presenting Audio

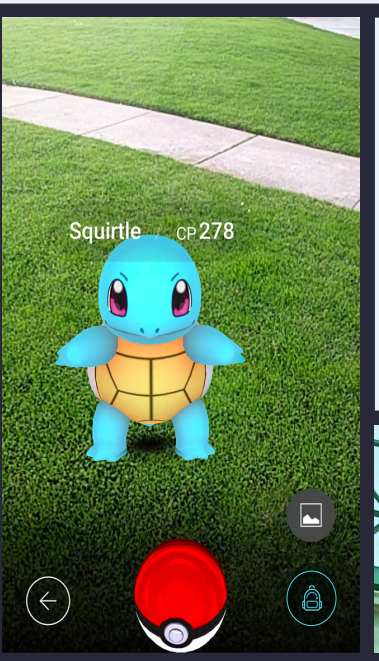
Many museum and galleries will have audio guides for at least some of their exhibitions. It is not uncommon it see people wander around with headphones on their head. These are often devices owned by the museum, where the visitor inputs codes assigned to certain installations.



Sound walks have sky rocketed in popularity in the last few years. Especially with the development of apps like Echoes, which supports geo-location audio tours. It has never been easier to create and listen to sound walks, if you have a smartphone that runs a compatible operating system.

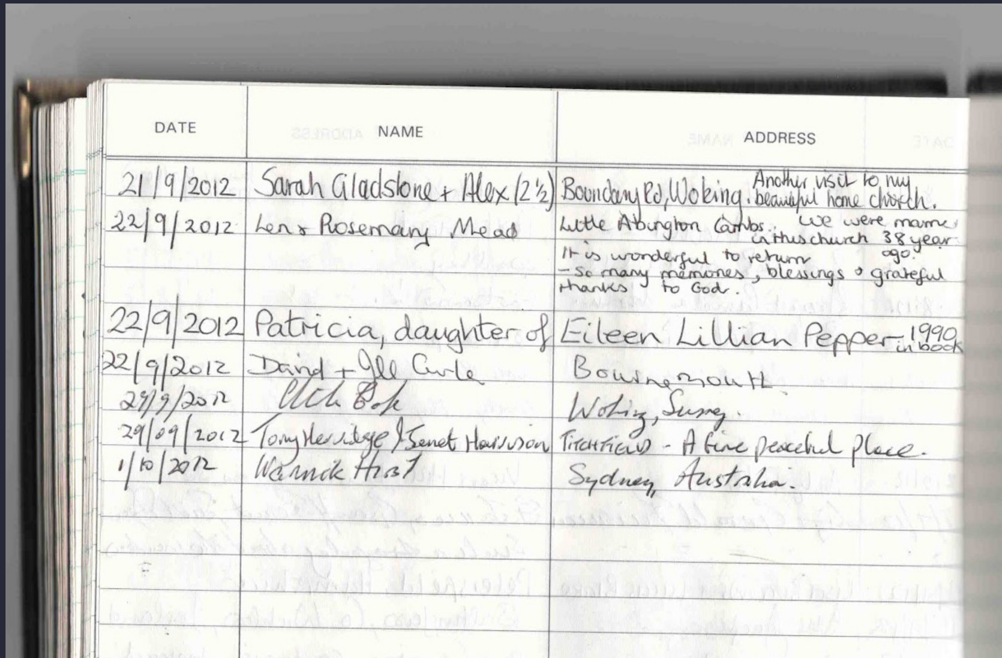


QR codes seem to have avoided digital extinction and have never been easier to use. With many smartphones the user only needs to hold camera up to the QR code and they will swiftly been shown to a webpage (hopefully the correct one). They have been used in many places to encourage further interaction, including museums and galleries.

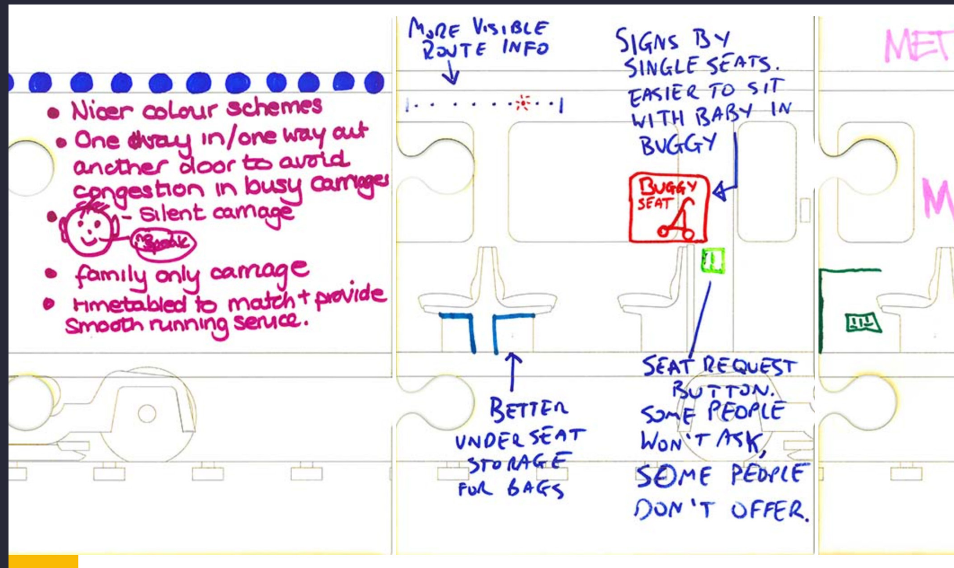


In the more digitally advance category you have Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) of delivering alternative experiences to visitors. The most frequently referenced example of AR is Pokemon Go, which overlays Pokemon over the world around you. VR has already been used in the GLAM sector in places like the British Museum. However, both AR and VR are not very accessible to certain groups.

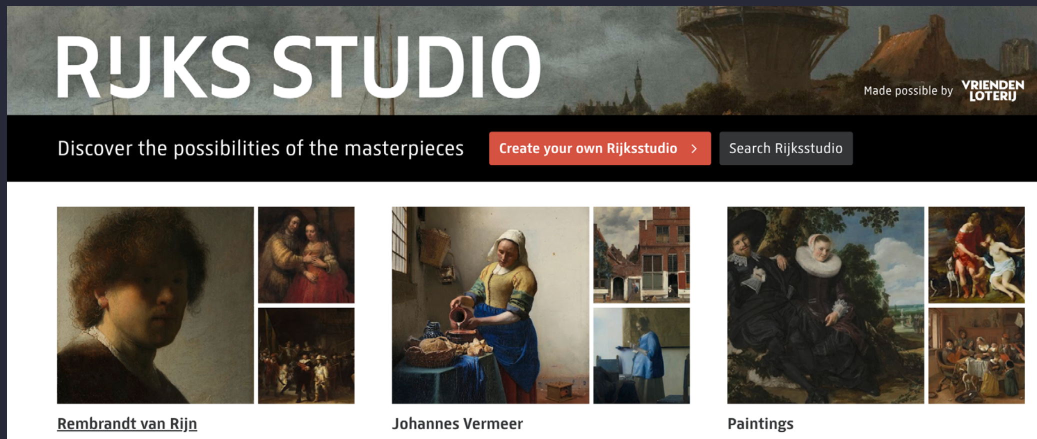
Visitor Interaction



The classic and (possibly) oldest form of visitor interaction is the comment book. Found in everywhere from churches to the Tate Modern, the visitor comment book is one of the more accessible way to allow people to contribute their two cents on exhibitions.



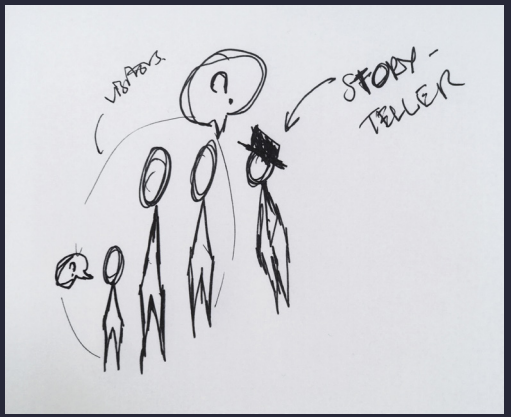
There are now several museums and archives that offer the option to curate your own exhibition using their collection via their website. An example is the Rijks Studio developed by the Rijks Museum in Amsterdam.



JigsAudio was developed at Newcastle University. It encourages participants to express themselves through drawing and spoken word, by getting them to draw on a "jigsaw" piece and then recording sound on to the Jigsaw piece. The technology is rather simple and was designed specifically to be welcoming to all levels of digital knowledge.

Design Ideas

We borrowed our ideation method from the Google Sprint. Only instead of doing it over a week like a classic Google Sprint we extended it over several weeks due to people's diaries being rather busy. For first part we started by having everyone come up with their own ideas separate from the group. In the second part the ideas were then presented to the whole group and eventually whittled down and amalgamated into two final design to be prototyped and tested.



Personal Storyteller

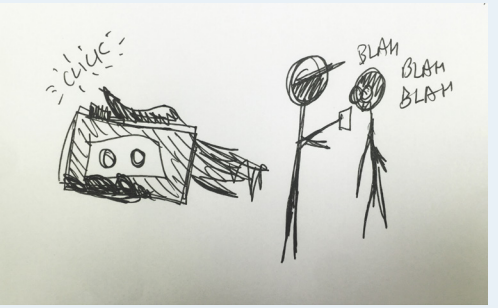
Description:
The visitor is assigned a volunteer to follow them around the site. However, instead of the volunteer giving the visitor a tour, it is the visitor who takes the lead. The visitor is encouraged to ask questions and to start a conversation. This allows the visitor to curate their experience rather than having to listen to a prescribed one.

Pros:
It is a super low tech solution accessible to nearly all groups. It is also very sociable.

Cons:
It is likely going to involve a lot of training to get the volunteers up to scratch. It also feels like it might be a bit intense to constantly have a stranger follow you.

U record

Description
Visitors are given a tape recorder (or something similar) and as they walk through the site they can record stories and sounds. Other visitors are then able to the listen to these tapes later on.



Pros:
The technology could potentially be a source of fun for the visitors and it is a good way to collect more audio.

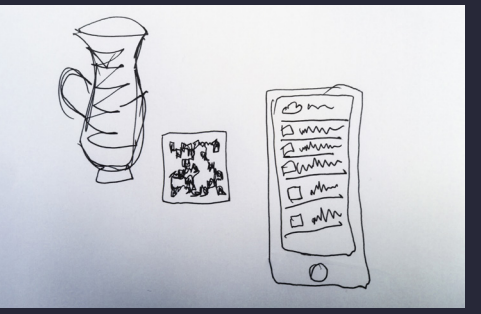
Cons:
We need to hope that people do not steal the technology and know how to use it. There also might be issues around GDPR or recording people without permission.

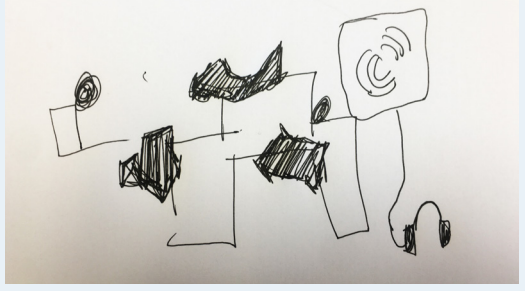
Sound cloud playlist via QR codes

Visitors can scan QR codes in various places on site. The QR codes send the visitor to a sound cloud file which the visitor can then add to a sound cloud playlist if they wish to do so. If the visitor wants to they can make their playlist public and allow other visitors to listen to their hall experience.

Pros:
People can used their own smartphones so the hall does not need to provide the technology. This idea also allows for curation and remixing which is part of the brief.

Cons:
Some people do not have smartphones.





Monthly Echoes

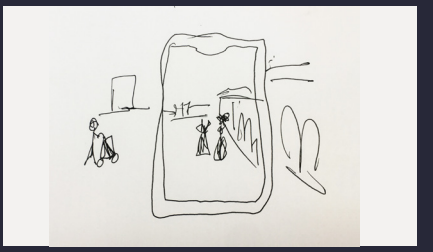
Description:
Use the vast knowledge of the volunteers and staff to design a monthly sound walk to be hosted on the Echoes app.

Pros:
The technology and the knowledge is already there all we need to do is make it.

Cons:
It might be a lot of work to make and making a sound walk it easier said than done.

Seaton Go

Description:
An app similar which uses similar AR to Pokemon Go, but instead of Pokemon the visitor follows a trail of different stories through their smartphone.



Pros:
Is a fun creative way to tell stories.

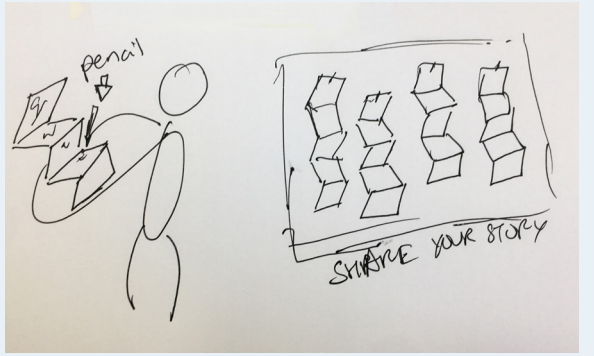
Cons:
It will be a lot of work and the National Trust does not allow for the development of external apps.

Storyline

Description:
The visitor picks up a concertina booklet with ten pages. On the pages they are encouraged to write notes and draw their own stories or stories they like as they walk through the hall. At the end of their visit they are invited to add their Storyline to a big story wall display all the different story journeys people have had on site.

Pros:
This idea is super fun, creative and interactive for children. And captures and displays different people's multilayered experiences of the hall.

Cons:
This is not very oral and it is not necessarily about listening to oral history recordings.

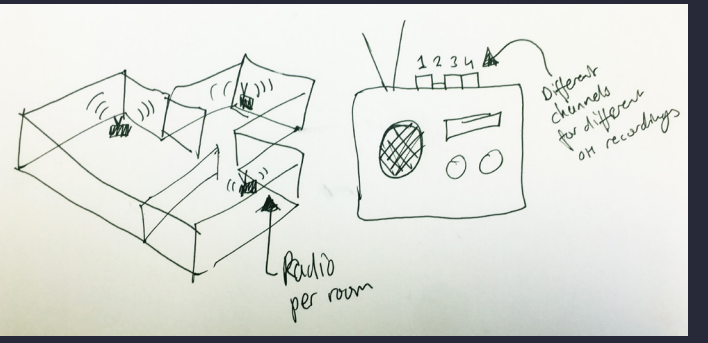


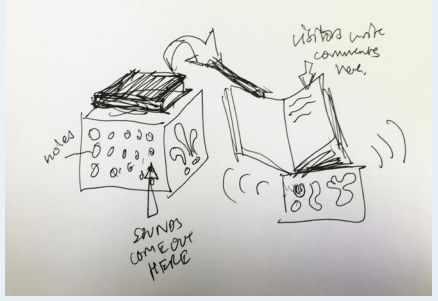
Radio Stories

Description:
In different rooms in the hall you have radios which are playing oral histories over different frequencies. The visitors are allowed to switch between channels, flicking between the different oral histories.

Pros:
Radios are an old school technology that might allow the older generation to teach something to the younger generation. It is also a very simple idea.

Cons:
This one might be difficult to set up and it also does not capture people's interpretations of the oral history recordings.





Storybox

Description:
In the various rooms there are speakers in boxes playing oral history recordings. On top of the boxes are books where visitors are able to make comments on what is being played through the speakers.

Pros:
This is a relatively simple idea and also allows for people to react to oral histories which is part of the brief.

Cons:
Because they are playing out of speakers and not headphones, everyone in the room has to listen to it, which not everyone might want.

Prototyping

After presenting our ideas to each other we had to reduce our design to prototype. We eliminated ideas such as Seaton Go and Monthly Echoes, which we found not worth testing now, and combined aspects of the different ideas. In the end we agree on prototyping two ideas, one digital and one (slightly) more analogue.

Generational Stories

Description:
We wanted to prototype a design which reflected the generational aspect of storytelling. We took the reactive drawing and writing aspects from Storyline and Storybox and combined it with the vintage technology of radios from Radio Stories. The basic set up is children are the interpreters, and are given a concertina booklet, while their parent or grandparent are the storytellers, helping the children navigate the 'old fashion' technology of the radio. The group travels through the site telling and listening to stories, while simultaneously capturing their reactions and interpretations of the stories via their booklet. At the end of their visit they are invited to add their booklet to a wall where other booklets can be viewed.

Prototype Set Up:
We created a prototype by having three radios placed in different parts of the main hall. We made three channels using three FM radio transmitters attached to three MP3 players with there own playlists of oral history recordings. We made concertina booklets from A0 cartridge paper cut in half and then folded. We also purchased several packs of different coloured pencils, not pens, as pens are not allowed inside the building.

Testing results:
We ran the test for four days: Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday, and around 80 groups took part.

Positives:
People really liked the sociable aspect of the design. They enjoyed sharing stories between each other and the children enjoyed drawing and writing. The grandparents and parents enjoyed the radios. The radio seemed to evoke stories of gathering round radio with several stories about radios be captured in the concertina booklets.

Negatives:
Several groups preferred to take their concertina booklet away with them instead of handing them into the hall as part of the project. Many pointed out the because there were only three radio and a limited amount of oral history recordings to listen to, they simply stopped reacting to the recordings. Some participants would instead fill their concertina booklet with drawings and text not directly relevant to the oral history recordings but still connected to the hall. While some found the oral history recording uninteresting

Audio Multiverse

Description:
This design is seen as the more digital of the two as it merges U record with Sound cloud playlist via QR codes. This prototype is about remixing and similar to Generational Stories it as a group activity. One person is in charge of recording and another is in charge of curating the playlist. The role of the recorder is to capture any stories people tell. The person in charge of the playlist uses the QR codes around the property to explore the existing recording, adding the ones they like to their own playlist. Once this playlist is created the recorded stories are added and made accessible to other visitors, who can choose to listen to the other visitor's experience while they are walking round the property.

Testing Results:
We ran the test for three days: Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday, and around 40 groups took part.

Positives:
People really enjoyed recording their own stories and the sounds they heard around the porperty. Many people comment on how the oral history audio clips gave an extra dimension to the hall they had not experienced before.

Negatives:
Several groups found the process a lot of work and in some cases they were not very clear on what they had to do. We also had one recorder go missing, only to be found later in one of the toilets.

There was a lot of work needed to process at the recorded data and mange the recorders. We also came up against a lot of problem with obtaining copyright and issues around GDPR. In many cases we had to destroy the recorded footage because we were unable to contact the participants.

Prototype:
We created the prototype by acquiring a handful of small Zoom recorders and sticking QR code around the property. The sticking of the QR codes was not easy as there were spots where we were not allowed to attach stickers for conservation reasons. We also made a playlist of clips from the oral history recordings on sound cloud which connected up to the QR codes.

Iteration

We felt that we had drifted a bit from the oral history aspect of the challenge and were not getting a lot of new oral history material. So we went back to the drawing board and decided to iterate our designs to also make them a recruitment drive for other oral history recordings.

Oral History Hub / Memory Cafe

Description:
We wanted to keep the idea of sharing stories with people in groups from the Generational Stories, but wanted a slightly less restrictive format and allow visitors to opt in or out as they wish. We settled the Oral History Hub or Memory Cafe, which is a event where people are invited to listen to oral histories but also come tell their own stories to other visitors, volunteers and staff. There is the option to record people on the spot if necessary or arrange an oral history interview with them after the event.

Prototype:
We were located in the tapestry room in the main building. In the room we had two radios from the previous prototype quietly playing a playlist of oral history audio clips. Next to the radios we had comment books, which visitors were encouraged to write and draw their reactions in. We had also printed off a couple of transcripts for people to read. We had some of the Zooms to hand in case people wanted to tell their story. We decided that any recording would be done outside of the tapestry room which did not give the best acoustics but was better than inside the room. We also had forms available for people to leave their contact details in case they were interested in doing an oral history interview in the future.

Testing results:
We only ran this for one day on a Saturday after some promotion online and flyers on the property the month before. We received feedback forms from 54 groups of visitors, we recorded 20 individuals on the day (most of which have given copyright clearance) and have follow up oral history interviews with three.

Positives:
People seemed to be drawn to the hustle and bustle of the room. The reactions from visitors varied, some hung around for a long time sharing stories, while others just wanted to listen. Many people asked about what oral history is and were interested the different angle it is able to give the site. We definitely collected more content and reactions relative to our previous prototypes.

Negatives:
This design took a lot preparation and staff to run in comparison to the other designs. There was also a lot of processing that had to be done afterwards, including copyright clearance which was a little confusing for people. Some of the people helping out felt a pressure to record people, which made them uncomfortable.

Story Postcards

Description:
We concluded that the tech from the Audio Multiverse caused a lot more problems then it was worth, so we decided to lessen the amount of digital technology for this prototype. We also wanted to get better reactions on the oral histories and possibly collect potential new recruits. So we came up with Story Postcards which keeps the QR codes from Audio Multiverse and uses the reaction aspect of Generation Stories. With this prototype people scan the QR codes on postcards to listen to an audio recording, then on the back of the postcard they can write notes or their own story and then post it in a box.

Testing results:
We had the postcards out for a whole week, until they were all gone. We were able to get follow up interviews from two people.

Positive:
Overall people enjoyed the postcards and many wanted to buy them. One visitor described the experience as posting to the future. We managed to collect some fun stories.

Negative:
It was expensive to get the postcards made and the post boxes were not the cheapest. We also had a couple of issues around GDPR. From a recruitment side it was not as good as the Oral History Hub because in many cases people only have one tale to tell or they did not write their contact details.

Prototype:
We picked out ten long clips from different oral history recordings and designed ten postcards. If we had photographs that accompanied the oral history we incorporated them into the design. From each design we printed twenty postcards. The boxes, we were informed, had to be sealed in a particular way in order to adhere to GDPR regulation, so we could not simply have a cardboard box. Instead we bought three metal postboxes that we put at the different entrances. We also put a small pot of pencils next to each stack of postcards. The postcards were placed in locations that (somewhat) related to the contents of the oral history recording clip.

Conclusion

There are many different things we can conclude from this venture into presenting oral history recordings. The group's main take away was the amount of processing necessary afterwards. Newly recorded content had to be uploaded to several storage places for digital security alongside all the appropriate paperwork. Managing all these different files in secure way was difficult and require many dedicated hours by the team. This made us wonder how this would work outside of the project.

Our positive takeaways were the social aspect of storytelling and the joy people had capturing their stories through drawing and writing. The need to share stories became clear to us during this project. The group also felt they witness people's desire to contribute something to the hall's history. They wanted to be part of the history.