

Oral History at the National Trust

There has been a steady increase in heritage sites running oral history projects with many recognising **RECORDING** oral history as an excellent tool for community engagement. What is less recognised is the value of **REUSING** archived oral history recordings. My Collaborative Doctoral Award is (in part) looking at how we can improve the reuse of oral history recordings on heritage sites by creating a better understanding of the *value* oral history recordings offer.

To understand the value of oral history recordings I recorded oral histories with people who have a connection with the National Trust property Seaton Delaval Hall in Northumberland.

I then analysed the contents of the recordings...

...and discussed with other National Trust staff members and experts what they might look for in an oral history recording.

From this analysis and discussion I created a list of value labels to assign to oral history recordings.

National Trust Value Labels

Geographic

The National Trust labels a collection item with either national, regional, local, or site value. All four could be found in a single oral history interview, however a collection of oral history recordings will give a more well rounded picture.

Collection

The collection value labels are meant to indicate how the item is valued in a historical collection sense. The four labels are:

- Communal - The item represents a particular community.
- Aesthetic importance - The item is deemed 'aesthetically' important or is from a famous artist.
- Illustrative / historic - The item is illustrative of some historic moment.
- Evidential - The item works as evidence to see how something was.

Oral history recordings are unlikely to give any aesthetic importance but it could work as evidence of certain events, or processes, which had either communal or wider historical value.

Curation

There are four curatorial value labels:

- Supports Learning - The item is helpful in supporting learning found in the national curriculum.
- Popular appeal - The item has mainstream appeal.
- Cultural heritage significance - The item is significant to a specific culture.
- Contextual Significance - The item gives important contextual information to a site, or a historical event.

Oral history recordings are able to capture all of the above in different ways. Considering the subjective nature of the first three value labels, the value of archived oral history recordings might change over time as social attitudes change.

My Value Labels

Stories

The main reason to record oral histories is to capture stories. Humans love telling and listening to stories, making them great for exhibitions and other interpretations.

Institutional knowledge

Oral history recordings, especially with past staff members who worked on the site before or after acquisition, are an excellent source of information on previous maintenance work done on the site. These recordings can also reveal the logistics of the past day-to-day running of the site and the planning of any previous one-off events.

Historiography

The content of a recording captures a specific framing of heritage or history. For example, people's changing attitudes towards Britain's colonial past. This is helpful in understanding the subjectivity of heritage, how a site's history is presented to the public, and how this may change or be challenged over time.

Surrogate

An oral history recording can capture the description of an object not in the tangible collection, like a chair or a painting and functions as a type of surrogate to these tangible objects.

In addition to creating my own value labels I also investigated how some of the National Trust's current value labels would apply to oral history recordings. Although it is important to note these are currently only ever applied to the tangible collections.

These two lists of value labels show how oral history recordings can offer a wide range of valuable content to the National Trust. However, because the National Trust does not currently have an intangible heritage collection policy, these oral history recordings are not labelled in the same way as paintings or furniture, which means they are unlikely to get reused. This is, however, a small part of why heritage sites struggle to reuse oral history, there are many other factors to consider, but how we value something is a good starting point.