# Oral history at the National Trust

## Status report and recommendations

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**Contents**

**0 Executive Summary**

This report is a summary of a research project into Oral history at the National Trust and what obstacles there are with the collecting, archiving, and maintaining of Oral history recordings. It considers how different elements of the Trust's system affect the archiving and reuse of Oral history recordings, and how these can be altered to encourage better reuse and create a wider Oral history culture within the Trust.

**1 The Research Project**

In the field of Oral history, recordings are rarely used once they have been archived, or they are not archived at all. This project was set up in 2020 to explore the obstacles and opportunities of archiving and reusing Oral history recordings, using the Trust as a case study. The Collaborative Doctoral Award project brought together the Oral history Unit and Collective at Newcastle University with the Design School at Northumbria University and the National Trust property Seaton Delaval Hall in Northumberland.

The research was done by collaborating with local, regional, and national stakeholders from inside and outside of the Trust. The various stakeholders were brought together to explore the relationship between the Trust, heritage, and Oral history through different design methods, including workshops. The researcher also audited the National Trust sound collection at the British Library and recorded several Oral history interviews with people who have a connection to Seaton Delaval Hall.

The central finding of the research is how a lack of understanding and investment in the maintenance of Oral history results in the recordings' deterioration and eventual loss. This report identifies those areas where maintenance is necessary, and offers opportunities to foster a culture of Oral history at the National Trust which encourages a sustainable use of Oral history and delivers a high-quality product.

**2 Status Report**

The report focusses on the barriers within the Trust which hinder the safe and secure archiving, maintaining, and reusing Oral history.

**2.1 Collection Policy**

The Trust is and always has been oriented around the collection of the physical heritage. This is evident in the National Collections Development Policy, which exclusively discusses the collecting of 'objects', both in terms of accessioned and non-accessioned or 'sacrificial' material. Intangible and digital heritage not being included in the collection policy means Trust staff do not have a standard process for managing the accessioning of Oral history material. The collection of Oral history therefore does not have to fulfil certain requirements for the Trust to accept or collect it, and the Trust does not require to keep it in perpetuity.

**2.2 Staff**

On a national and regional level there are members of Trust staff who have Oral history in their job description. On a site level this is however not the case. The job descriptions for site collection managers do not include the collection and management of intangible heritage, including Oral history. The management of Oral history is often assigned on a case-by-case basis whenever a particular project emerges.

**2.3 Access**

There is no standard system within the Trust to access information on its archived Oral history recordings. Currently information on collection objects can be accessed through CMS, but this system does not accommodate digital material, including Oral history recordings. The British Library holds the recordings and has the only catalogue of the material. However, as of August 2024 the Library's Sound and Moving Image catalogue was not available due to a cyberattack on the British Library in October 2023.

**2.4 Storage**

There is limited organisation-wide advice on which technology to use when recording and managing Oral history to ensure data protection laws are followed and the material is accessible

to both Trust staff and volunteers during the period between the recording of Oral history and the archiving of Oral history.

## 2.5 Ethics

The ethics forms the Trust uses for recording Oral history have not been updated since the implementation of data protection laws and regulation in 2018. The some of the ethical advice given in *the guide to Setting up a National Trust Oral history Project* is no longer consider good practice within the Oral history field. For example, the interviewee does not sign their copyright over straight after the recording, instead they sign the Copyright Agreement after they have had a chance to relisten to the recording or read through the transcript/summary. In addition to the forms and advice being out of date, there is also inadequate information on how staff and volunteers should handle sensitive content in both newly recorded and archived oral histories.

## 2.6 The Collection

The National Trust's sound collection at the British Library is one of their largest and it displays the immense diversity of the Trust's and this country's history. However, only a limited number of recordings in the Trust's sound collection can be used publicly as just 482 of the nearly 1700 recordings have the correct copyright permissions.

## 3 Recommendations

The overall aim of these recommendations is to create a wider culture of Oral history at the Trust.

### 3.1 Introduce an Intangible and/or Digital Heritage policy

There is distinct need to include the collection of Oral history and other forms of intangible and digital heritage to the National Collections Development Policy. This addition will develop the Trust's collection strategy into a more holistic approach to preserving our heritage and gives a different dimension to the collections. For example, Oral history recordings could be done alongside or instead of accessioning objects. It could make room for the collection and preservation of institutional memory, such as documenting restoration and preservation methods which could be especially valuable to the Trust.

### 3.2 Improve Access

A recurring request by many Trust staff and volunteers was the development of a central system where people can search the contents of the Trust's archived oral histories outside of the British Library catalogue. The exact implementation depends on the capacity the Trust has to develop such a system, whether it is integrated into CMS or is simply a spreadsheet for each site.

### 3.3 Commit Staff Time

If specific Oral history tasks are included in certain job descriptions, it will be easier for sites to create an ongoing Oral history strategy. The various Oral history tasks can be tactically distributed between staff, so no individual has to carry the sole responsibility over the care of the site's entire Oral history. For example, the volunteer co-ordinator could help with the training and supporting of volunteers who are recording, transcribing, or researching Oral history, while the collection manager and general manager decide on whether an oral history should be added to the collection In addition, having multiple staff connected to the Oral history process makes it easy to form an ethics review board who can then collectively make decisions on how to handle sensitive content in the recordings.

### 3.4 Recommend Storage Policy

The advice on what technology should be used between the moment of recording and the moment of archiving Oral history should be developed and regularly reviewed as technology and data regulations evolve. The development of this advice will require input from the IT department, the data protection team, as well as site staff and volunteers who have to follow this advice.

### 3.5 Review Ethics Forms and Advice

The ethics forms and advice need to be regularly reviewed and updated as laws change, and best practices evolve over time. The person or people who are responsible for this ethics review will depend on the Trust's resources, however it is beneficial to seek advice from people within the wider Oral history field. Frequently reviewing the Trust's Oral history ethics guidance is especially critical with sensitivity checks, as what society deems sensitive content rapidly changes. It might be helpful to develop or seek sensitivity training for certain staff and volunteers.

### 3.6 Manage Copyright Permissions

Many of the recordings in the National Trust sound collection at the British Library do not have the right copyright permissions. A workflow should be made with a step-by-step guide on how to obtain copyright from the interviewee or their next of kin or register the recording as an orphaned work.

### 3.7 Create a Support Network

Alongside the other recommendations, this report encourages the creation of an organisation-wide Oral history support network. This network will help people share ideas and experiences, and support discussions around various Oral history topics.

### 4 Conclusion

The National Trust already has such a rich legacy of Oral history as proven by the extensive collection of recordings in the British Library. Now is a good a time as any to solidify Oral history as part of the National Trust's offering by integrating it more into its policies and process both on a national and local level.