

WORKING LIVES – The Warwickshire Experience

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One day a man goes into a bar....and that is how the initial idea for our Working Lives project started. Councillor Barry Longden was in his local listening to local people talking about their time at work and he felt that these important recollections must not be lost. He approached Warwickshire Libraries and we were off.

The aim of the Working Lives Project was to record the memories of people from Nuneaton and Bedworth who had worked in the towns' numerous industries, focussing on brick and tile making, quarrying, textile production and engineering. The project would also acknowledge the unique contribution made to the life of the community by those who worked in these industries and engender a feeling of value and worth to those individuals and their families.

We decided to use an oral history approach as this type of personal and emotional information is often missing from industrial history. However, the project also had a wider importance as it captured local dialects and accents and so would be a fascinating resource for anyone interested in the study of accents and linguistics records which are not otherwise widely available.

The focus was on people who lived and/or worked in the modern borough of Nuneaton and Bedworth. However, people's lives are not restricted by a neat geographical boundary. There was a lot of commuting to and from Nuneaton and Bedworth. Many people travelled to Hinckley to work in the hosiery factories or to Coventry's large engineering works. We interviewed a cross section of people from across the four industries, representing workers at different levels as well as those who had immigrated into the UK from East Africa and were of Indian and Pakistani descent. Many found work in the area's textile and engineering factories. The interviews covered a time period from the 1930s to the start of the 21st century, a period which included a World War and its aftermath, immigration from former British colonies and rapid changes in technology.

Aims and outcomes

We outlined our aims and outcomes as follows:

- To collect, preserve and make accessible to the community the vulnerable oral history of Nuneaton and Bedworth associated with its industrial heritage, focussing on brick and tile making, quarrying, engineering, hosiery and textiles. A target figure of fifty recordings was set. The proposed outcomes for the project were identified as the following:
- An archive of recordings for use for the future which would provide

a resource for the community and for researchers, an accessible user friendly book, a learning pack and a display which would be suitable for moving around to community venues.

- The creation of a sense of community and pride in the history and industry of the area for the interviewees, their families and the community at large.

The process

The project officer prepared for the interviewing process by completing background research on Nuneaton and Bedworth particularly focussing on the industries covered by the project. In order to contact appropriate people to interview, appeals were placed in local newspapers and the main library web pages. Local interest groups such as the Women's Institute and the TGWU were also contacted. Talks were given to local groups, including those with a local history bias, about the project. A Steering Group and a Reference Group were set up to help guide the project team, and web pages were designed to promote, as well as host, information and material collected as part of the project. A newsletter was also produced which was also available on the web.

Equipment

Advice was sought from the Oral History Society regarding the purchase of the equipment used to record the oral histories:

- Acer Aspire 3614 Laptop
- Marantz PMD660 Solid State Digital Recorder using Lexar Professional 80x Speed Compact Flash Cards
- AKG C 417 Condenser Microphone
- iomega LDHD200 External Hard Drive
- Kodak C713 digital camera

The original recordings have been digitised and stored on archive quality DVDs and CDs, while the original digital recordings are now deposited with Warwickshire County Record Office on indefinite loan.

Paperwork

Relevant copyright and consent forms were created after taking advice from the Steering Group, Warwickshire County Record Office and the Oral History Society to ensure that the project followed the correct procedures in the collection and recording of the interviewees' permission to use their data. Before publication of the book, each interviewee was contacted again to ensure that this information was correct. In several cases some of the interviewees wished to remain anonymous and their wishes have been followed. Copyright of all recordings belong to Warwickshire County Council, and all the original paperwork has now been deposited with Warwickshire County Record Office.

Interviews

Following best practice and taking into account the fact that many interviewees were elderly, the recordings took place in the interviewees' homes or at the Edward Street Day Centre in Nuneaton. The project officer conducted the interviews herself with the help of a volunteer who gave his time regularly throughout the project. Where possible, photographs of industrial sites where the interviewees worked were used to help with the interview process and in some cases interviewees themselves found and talked about photographs in their possession as part of the process. (Many of these were subsequently lent to the project, digitised and made accessible on the Working lives web pages) A range of material was collected intending to represent shop floor workers through to management staff.

During the interviews, other subjects were naturally talked about and these have remained unedited in the interviews since they give an insight into what life was like growing up in the area. These include; education, descriptions of homes, food, rationing, living through the Second World War, the role of women, unemployment, and retirement as well as issues such as equal pay and trade unionism. In this respect the material has a much wider appeal to those interested in the general history of the period covered by the project and those particularly interested in the Second World War. Some of the interviewees also talked in length about certain aspects of their job - for example, how the clay was collected and made into a brick.

After the interview

On completion of each interview each recording was digitised and a copy of it made and given to the interviewee on a compact disc. This enabled the interviewee to listen to the recording to ensure that they were happy with what they had said and also so that they had a record for themselves to share with family members. 98% of the recordings remain unedited. A photograph of the interviewee at home was also taken and if permission was given this was then added to the website.

The interviews were then summarised in 5 minute tracks and transferred to the web at a later date. In some cases information mentioned in the recordings was checked with other sources since accents made it difficult to ascertain the correct pronunciation or spelling. On these occasions; trade directories and the libraries local studies catalogue were consulted to ensure accuracy in the summaries.

Branding

A professionally designed branding was created for the book design. This has been continued through to the web pages, display, Learning Pack and all publicity.

Sharing with the community

• Working Lives web pages

In order for the material to be as accessible as possible and to ensure sustainability, all the material collected as part of the project was digitised and hosted on the Warwickshire County Council website, the address being www.warwickshire.gov.uk/workinglives. Early on in the project, web pages were designed specifically for Working Lives enabling information on the progress of the project in the form of newsletters to be shared. Public events were also promoted via the site. As the project developed, a flavour of the recordings in the form of quotations and short edited sound files were included.

As the project progressed the site expanded and by the end of the project the site included:

A link to the library catalogue which allows the user to listen to the full recordings;

A link to www.picasaweb.com to view the photographs;

A link to the learning pack which allows teachers and other interested people to view and download the resources,

A link to a page which gives details of the book to buy or borrow from Warwickshire libraries

A link to Google maps which provides a map of the location of the factories.

The site also provides information on the project, conditions of use, contact details for the project and links to other useful sites.

• Recordings on the web

A specially commissioned and designed searchable database which links to the Warwickshire library and Information Service Catalogue (Vubis) hosts the original recordings, summaries, transcripts and photographs of the interviewees. The database appears on the Catalogue front page ensuring that the profile of the project is high. A link from the library catalogue to the project web pages is embedded.

• Book

The book gives an overview of the project, highlighting particular memories and giving a background to the history of the industries mentioned. Edited quotations from the interviews alongside colour and black and white photographs donated or lent by the interviewees and material gathered from Local Studies Collections and the County Record Office are featured. New specially taken photographs have been included to show the present buildings on lost industrial sites: this helps the reader envisage the locations of former factories. The book also contains a list of all participants of the project, is indexed and has a useful glossary that

explains key words or terms used by interviewees. Readers are asked to visit the website for further information. Within the publication there is a specially commissioned compact disc, allowing people to listen to snippets of interviews thereby getting a flavour of the project.

A print run of 1000 was produced. Each of the interviewees or their representatives were presented with a copy and additional copies were given to the Library Service, to residential homes in the area, to members of the Warwickshire CC Nuneaton and Bedworth Local Area Committee which provided the funding, and a number of review copies to the media. Books have been deposited with the Schools Library Service which will be available for any school in Warwickshire to borrow or to use alongside the learning package. The books are also being sold at £7.99 and revenue from this will be used to support work to continue to promote the project.

• **Learning package**

On the website a learning package has been produced for use with Key Stage 2 children. This is available for downloading from the website and contains lesson plans, historical maps, photographs and other resources that can be printed off to use in the classroom. The pack covers the National Curriculum areas of Literacy and History. The learning package is being used in local schools in the area by Heritage Education and will appear on their publicity as a resource that can be delivered by them.

• **The exhibition**

Two sets of A6 exhibition panels have been produced to promote the project; included with these panels are MP3 players which have extracts of the recordings. Interested members of the public listen to highlights whilst looking at the exhibition. The exhibition toured libraries, community centres, churches, schools and other local venues.

Publicity

• **Newspapers**

Articles about the project have appeared in many local newspapers. Features have also appeared in 'In Touch' (local newsletter distributed to every house in the borough of Nuneaton and Bedworth), NBBC Council tenant's participation scheme newsletter and local parish newsletters.

• **Radio**

The project was supported by BBC local radio. Regular interviews on BBC Coventry and Warwickshire Radio promoted Working Lives throughout the project, the latest taking place in January 2009 to mark the launch of the book and website. A live broadcast from Nuneaton library with Bob Brolley, was part of a public event in 2007 which marked a 'thank you' tea with all the interviewees. Many of the interviewees were happy to chat

to Bob live on air and were delighted that their stories were appreciated by the general public and specifically a younger generation. Anker radio also interviewed the project officer, helping to attract interviewees at the beginning of the project.

• Talks

Talks promoting the Working Lives Project and the ethos behind it have been delivered to over 15 local groups and the project has also been represented at various local events including Family History Fairs and Whittleford Park Project celebrations.

• Promotional material

At the beginning of the project a banner was produced to be used at all Working Lives events, and posters, postcards and business cards were used regularly throughout the project to highlight different aspects of the project. These have been sent to community venues and other libraries and council departments for display.

• Events

The first event took place in May 2006 with Councillor Barry Longden and Cynthia Brown from the Oral History Society as guest speakers. A year later in 2007 the tea party was organised to celebrate meeting the target of gathering 50 recordings (see above). To launch the completed project, two events were held in November 2008. The first was at Nuneaton Library for invited guests; including interviewees, local dignitaries and other interested parties. At this event interviewees were presented with a signed copy of the book and had an opportunity to see the material on the Working Lives web pages with support from members of staff. The second event at Bedworth Library was to promote the project to members of the public. Both events were very successful and staff had many positive verbal comments from people attending the events.

These 2008 events took place during the National Year of Reading. In order to gain extra publicity these events were publicised via the Library National year of Reading web pages as well as the usual publicity channels.

Staffing

The project employed a project officer for the period of December 2005 until March 2009. The Project lead was supplied from Warwickshire Library and Information Service management. A trained and enthusiastic volunteer supported the project, helping with recording the interviews and taking photographs. Additional library staff supported the project by maintaining and creating the website, distributing and selling the books, helping with public events and distributing publicity.

The legacy of the project

A key outcome of the project was to ensure that a lasting ongoing resource would be made available to not only the people of Nuneaton and Bedworth but also to a far wider audience of researchers and people worldwide who are interested in social history and the history of Nuneaton and Bedworth. To support this outcome, the project created a sustainable internet platform which can be used to host further recordings related to this core area of interest.

The interest generated in the project with older people and schools has been developed and the opportunity to develop this interest by using drama and art to widen the audience to this resource has been achieved. Children's activities have included as part of 'Fantastic Fun With Words' at Camp Hill (2009) and Stockingford (2010), a day of creative learning with Campbell Perry who created a song and drama experience based on the recollections. Comments from participants included 'Fantastic day', 'The children achieved so much' and 'My Gran told me about this too'.

The interviewees and their families have developed a real pride in not only their contribution to the project but also to the development of the industrial and community heritage of Nuneaton and Bedworth. This has focussed local interest in the companies which still continue to operate in the area.

The raised profile of the project has resulted in an increase in the number of donations given to the Libraries' Local studies collections includes: a Slingsby ribbon brought in to be photographed after the owner saw the Working Lives Display; a collection of photographs donated by Mr Dean Dewis who worked at Sterling Metals before it closed. This donation was made after viewing the material on the website.

Skills and experience acquired by the project team in developing the project have been kept in-house. This will facilitate the delivery of other projects as well as giving the Library Service the opportunity to further expand the project.

As of December 2010 we have delivered talks to over 150 people, paid for by the revenue generated by the sale of the books: we have distributed nearly 800 copies of which approximately a third have been sold. In addition the audio links have been visited by nearly 2000 people. As part of our outreach we also used the Working Lives resource as a tool to help in reminiscence therapy with the Nuneaton Resource Centre for Mental Health clients.

In 2009 we were the proud recipient of the Alan Ball Award for library publications, which provided another morale boost for the staff involved as

well as an excellent opportunity for the promotion of the project and the Library Service within the County Council.

Please contact me if you would like any further information about this project at lesleykirkwood@warwickshire.gov.uk

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THE DOROTHY MCCULLA AWARD 2011

This Award was established in 1981 in memory of Dorothy McCulla, then Local Studies Librarian of Birmingham, one of the prime movers in the establishment of the Local Studies Group. It is intended to celebrate the achievements of local studies librarians in providing excellent services to their communities, either as a whole, or through development and exploitation, for example, of new techniques or services. The award is for an outstanding contribution to local studies librarianship and the recipient is often referred to as the Local Studies Librarian of the Year. There must be many librarians who have been carrying out work in their own areas in developing their services to a high standard for the benefit of the local community, but receive very little recognition from the profession or outside. There are others who have encouraged their colleagues to develop techniques or services through their teaching or writing. But people must be nominated and this where our membership in general comes in. Many of you must know someone who has helped you or influenced you, or impressed you by the work they are doing. If you do know someone who is worthy of the Award, nominate them – don't wait for someone else to do it. Recipients must be members of LSG. For more information look at the LSG website or contact our Hon Secretary, Helen Pye-Smith, at helen.pye-smith@nationalarchives.gov.uk

Because the closing date is rapidly approaching, if you have any ideas for nominations **please contact Helen urgently.**