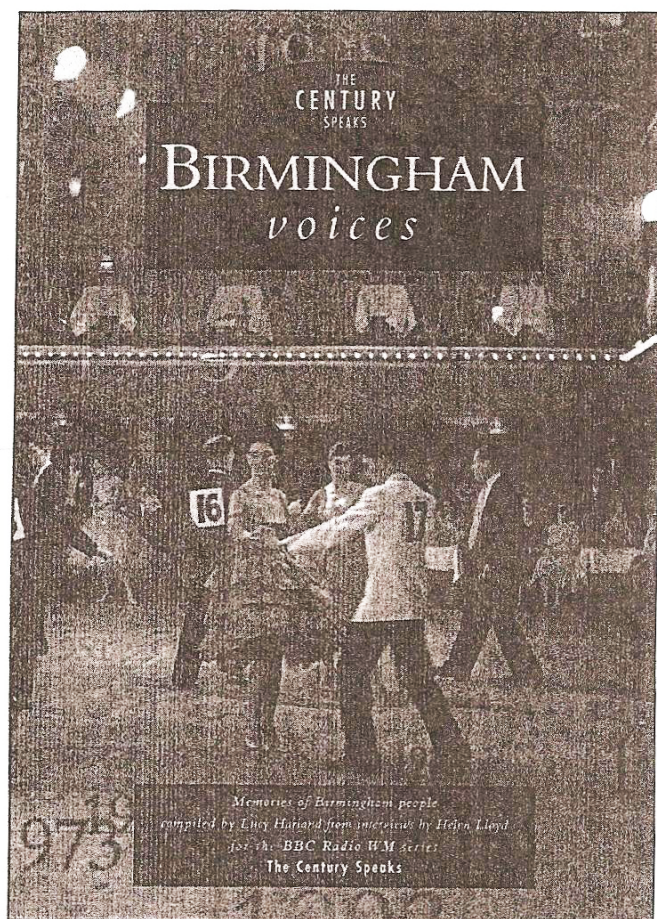


Birmingham Speaks: Introduction to the Millennibrum Oral History Collection

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From Autumn 2001, any member of the public will be able to go to the sixth floor of the Central Library and listen to recordings of 150 Birmingham citizens, relating their memories and opinions of the city's post-war history. Each recording lasts around 1.5 hours - a daunting total of 225 hours - but a database that accompanies the collection should make it easy for present and future historians to locate whatever interests them most. The name, date and place of birth, occupation and other basic information are given for each interviewee. Sixteen tick-boxes indicate whether or not the interviews cover the following subjects: childhood, housing, education, work, relationships, community, health, religion, politics, transport, topography, entertainment, the arts, sport, immigration, and changes in the lives of women

At the click of a mouse, you can flick through the database to find within seconds all interviewees born before 1950 or all whose parents came from the Punjab,

or whose mothers worked in factories. After a page of basic information, comes a three to four page summary of each interview, numbered to relate to track-marks on the mini-disc recordings. Thus, if you are researching the history of Rookery Road School in Handsworth, you can easily spot any mention of the school in the database and then just listen (on headphones) to the tracks that relate to the school. There is also a transcript of each interview, but it is advisable to check the transcript against the sound recording, since parts that were unclear to the audio-typist may be easily comprehensible to someone familiar with the subject.

The oldest interviewee is a woman aged 104, who has attended the same church for 100 years. The youngest is a boy of 14 from Winson Green, whose parents were born in this country, but whose grandparents all came from Jamaica. Like many interviewees older than him, he laments the fact that his neighbourhood is not as friendly as it used to be. His friends no longer play with him on the streets or in the park, but all sit at home in front of their computers. More than a third of the interviewees come from ethnic minority or mixed-race families. The emphasis is on post-war history, but where older interviewees had earlier memories, these were also recorded.

Oral history rarely provides accurate dates or statistics, but it can provide evidence of lives that might otherwise go un-recorded. Some people, whose lack of educational qualifications has deterred them from taking part in any organisation, become amazingly fluent when talking about their own lives, because in this one field there is nobody more expert than they are. People who are too busy to write their memoirs or to be interviewed by the media can sometimes be persuaded to make an oral history recording for the sake of posterity, because they are aware that their lives have not been adequately reflected in public records, in the media, or even in literature. The Millennibrum Oral History Collection includes recordings of homeless young people; mothers trying to combine paid work and childcare; professionals submerged in paperwork; refugees whose English is not fluent enough for a media interview; and elderly people too deaf to engage in conversation, but well able to recount their life-story in absorbing detail. Workers from Rover and Cadburys are well represented, but so are the cleaners and child-minders whose lives have been ignored by other oral history projects.

The advantage of the life-story approach is that people are not categorised as a 'car-worker' or a 'second-generation immigrant'. One retired car-worker turned out to have been a foster-parent for much of his adult life, and recently to have become a magistrate. A young woman

whose parents came from India was more interested in talking about her career, than about racism or belonging to two cultures. As far as possible, we asked people to talk about what *they* felt to be important. Although the letter we sent to confirm the interview date listed the subjects we had been asked by the library to cover, it stressed that they should not feel bound by that list.

Advertising for interviewees is counter-productive, as I learnt when producing the BBC Radio WM series, 'The Century Speaks'. Oral history is now so well-known and so popular that a single letter to a newspaper generated more calls than I could deal with - but only a handful of suitable interviewees. I preferred not to use people whose memories had already been well shaped through the practice of writing their memoirs or doing past oral history interviews. Almost all the suggestions were of people over 70, and the memories were of predictable subjects such as evacuation, back-to-back-housing, or the Locarno ballroom. Recording such memories has been very enjoyable, but I wanted 'The Century Speaks' and the Millennibrum Collection to be more comprehensive.

Some of the best interviewees were suggested by contacts that I have made over 25 years of working in radio and television in Birmingham. It requires trust to let someone into your home for several hours and to tell him or her your whole life-story. It was a good start if the interviewees knew me or knew the assistant on the Project, Lorraine Blakemore, or if a mutual acquaintance could reassure them that we would not exploit or embarrass them. We also contacted a wide range of organisations to ask for recommendations and went out to find the large number of people who do not belong to any organisation. We conducted preliminary telephone interviews of up to half an hour before asking if we could make a recording in the interviewee's own home. Thanks to relying on personal recommendation, we did not have to reject many people - except towards the end, when we were trying to fill very specific gaps. We found that good talkers come from every social background: the only qualification is that they should be interested in their own lives.

I try to avoid revealing my own views and to avoid leading questions. A bland request to 'talk about arriving in England' or 'talk about your first job' prompts much less predictable answers than 'Did you experience any racism?' or 'Did you find the assembly line boring?' My media training suggested that sitting at right angles to the interviewee enables the interviewer to hold the microphone close while constantly encouraging the interviewee with nods and smiles. In an interview of 1.5 hours or more, however, the constant nods and smiles are exhausting for both interviewee and interviewer. I have found it better to sit beside the interviewee on a sofa with a pile of cushions or pillows between us. This serves as a prop for my arm holding the microphone, and avoids embarrassing closeness. The interviewee is free to look out into the room and make personal or controversial statements without worrying about my reactions.

BBC Radio WM gave me permission to make copies for the Central Library of 80 of the interviews I did for 'The Century Speaks'. (The originals are all in the British Library's National Sound Archive.) The copyright remains with the BBC, but those who heard extracts in the radio series will be glad to have the opportunity to hear the full interviews in the Library. Together, 'The Century Speaks' and Millennibrum collections will form what I believe will be the largest collection of professionally recorded life-stories outside London. They will provide an invaluable resource for Birmingham historians, and for all those who are interested in the ways people remember, speak about, and make sense of their lives.