

2.11 Using oral sources in your place studies

In this section you will learn:

- how to carry out an interview and what to do with the data
- more about economic and demographic change since 1939

'Tell me about...'

There are a range of oral sources that you could use to inform a place study that, when transcribed, become rich texts to analyse and reflect on. These include interviews (Figures 3, 5 and 6), reminiscences and songs (Source D, 2.10). This section discusses the advantages and disadvantages of collecting qualitative data as part of a place study by interviewing, and gives some hints about how to go about, what can be not only a very informative process but also a privilege.

'There's nothing quite like finding yourself meeting – and connecting with – someone from a very different background and set of experiences ... Interviewing is a recipe for some highly memorable fieldwork experiences!' (Richard Philips and Jennifer Johns, 2013)

Why interview?

One-to-one interviews have a number of advantages when undertaking a place study. Interviews can be used to collect primary data that gives an in-depth understanding of people's lives and their lived experience of a place, both in the past and present. In contrast, with their limited number of tick boxes, questionnaires push respondents into answers, which may not fit their actual experience. They give little opportunity for explanation, or space for you to record any extra information, if offered.

An interview allows respondents to raise issues that the interviewer may not have anticipated. In the example of the place study of Great Missenden, the author undertook a series of interviews with people who had lived and/or worked in Great Missenden for more than fifty years. The issue of immigration came up, in particular the movement of Polish people into the area following the Second World War. This was raised as a significant place-shaping event, despite not featuring in any other texts gathered during the author's research. Similarly, the author's understanding of the changing pattern of employment in the area was reshaped by comments about light industries that played an important role in the local economy after the Second World War (Figures 5 and 6). There is little physical evidence remaining today.

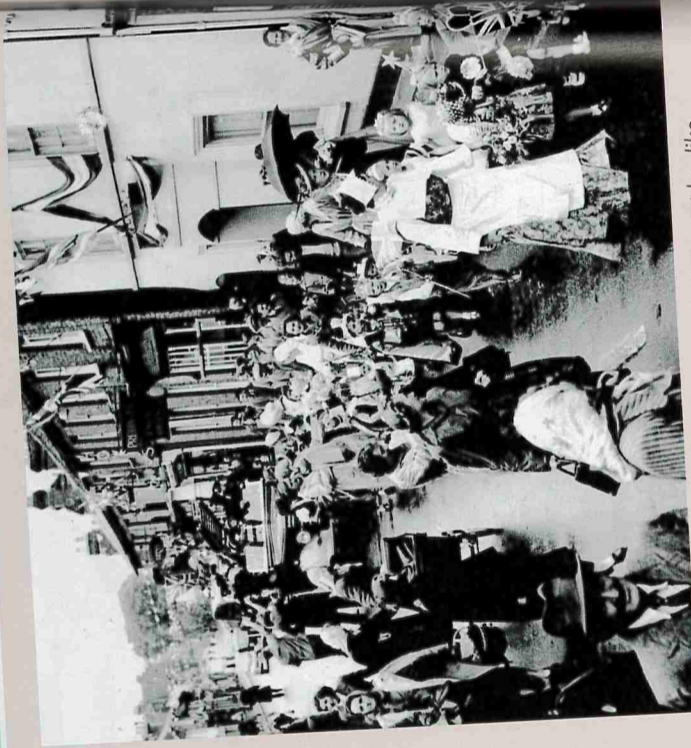


Figure 1 Some interviewees produce photographs, like this one of Great Missenden High Street in 1953, on the occasion of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II

Disadvantages of interviewing

Interviewing can be a time-consuming business. As a technique for data collection it may be further criticised on two counts. Firstly, in terms of its lack of objectivity compared with other approaches used by human geographers, and secondly with regard to sample design.

Objectivity and subjectivity

As previously noted in 2.7 and 2.9, we are all human and our understanding of the world around us is partial and situated. So, perhaps a discussion of whether questionnaires generate more objective data than interviews is really missing the point! The data produced by these two techniques may be as similar as chalk and cheese. What is true is that bad question design is not limited to either technique. For example, the following question might be used in either an interview or a questionnaire but the way the question is phrased is important. Should we ask:

What impact will the construction of HS2 have on the area?

What impact will the disruption caused by HS2 have?

Is it possible to draw wider conclusions from interview data? An interview is a chance to get a deeper insight into one person's view of a place and how their experience of living, shopping, playing and working there may have changed over time. The data it generates is rich but very personal, so the conclusions you can draw from their observations are, perhaps, more limited.

We should also consider that your understanding, as the interviewer, of what is said will be subjective. You should reflect on how your own upbringing, social and economic status may colour your analysis of their words – be aware of how you are situated.

Remember that your primary role is to listen. You will need to build a rapport with the interviewee – putting them at their ease will help the conversation flow. However, declaring your own opinions on a subject upon which the interviewee doesn't then feel able to speak freely, will obviously hamper your research.

A representative sample?

'The aim in recruiting informants for interview is not to choose a representative sample, rather to select an illustrative one'. (Gill Valentine, 2005)

A small sample of three, five or even ten interviews won't be representative of the population of a place the size of Great Missenden, home to more than 10000 people. Instead, the sample you select should be informed by the theories you want to explore.

The author chose to investigate economic change in Great Missenden, specifically employment, and so selected a range of people (male and female) to interview who had different careers – some were 'white collar' professionals, some 'blue-collar' skilled tradesmen. Both business-owners and employees featured in the sample.

Part of the picture

Remember that interviewing need not be used in isolation – it can form part of a multi-method approach to a research question. Valentine (2013) uses the analogy of 'triangulation', the use of different bearings to give a correction position, in her discussion of using oral sources alongside quantitative data to draw wider conclusions about phenomena in human geography.

Getting started

Look at Figure 2. Once you have an idea of who you'd like to interview and what you'd like to ask, you should begin the process of finding people to talk to. A local councillor, faith leader, chair of the Women's Institute may be good starting points when seeking out interviewees. In social science these people are known as **gatekeepers** because, once they understand and endorse your research project, they may be able to recommend other interviewees and could encourage others to take part.

Do	Don't
... dress up, a bit. Wear clothing that meets your interviewee's expectations of the meeting. You want them to take you and your research seriously.	... presume everyone you approach will want to be interviewed. People are busy and may not feel confident or competent to answer your questions.
... reassure them that you won't be using real names in your report. You're more likely to get their honest opinion.	... forget to be polite, avoid leading questions and avoid being judgemental. Your role is to listen and collect data for analysis.
... find somewhere quiet, where your interviewee is at ease. Have a few visual aids – photographs (Figure 1), a map – that might to provide a focal point for the conversation.	... conduct the interview somewhere uncomfortable, noisy or where you may be interrupted. A group interview or focus group may be harder to steer and keep to the point.
... prepare and practise your interview technique. Try out your questions in advance on family and friends.	... just ask the first thing that comes to mind or allow the conversation to move away from the topic in question.
... be flexible in your approach: topics may come up that you want to investigate further; interviewees may suggest other contacts for you to meet ('snowballing') – go with it!	... stick rigidly to your list of questions; interviewees will be more interested in talking about some topics than others.
... use eye contact and body language to show you are interested in what your interviewee has to say.	... treat your interviewee as an object; build a rapport by sharing your own relevant experiences. Write a thank you letter with a brief summary of your findings.
... record the interview if they are happy to be recorded – you won't be able to write fast enough. But do take some notes as a backup.	... turn up unprepared. Take spare pens/pencils and check equipment for charge and memory capacity beforehand.

Figure 2 Dos and Don'ts of interviewing