

Museums, Oral History, Reminiscence & Wellbeing:

Establishing Collaboration and Outcomes

Executive summary



“Memory Lane is history ‘brought to life’- it’s living history of people from various areas of the city. They take you beyond what you think of as history from school – kings and queens and all that – to the local level”.

Introduction: This Executive Summary provides brief overview of the findings of a research project funded by the John Fell OUP Research Fund. The project was the result of a collaboration between the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, and the Oxford University Museums Partnership (a consortium of the Oxford University Museums, Oxfordshire County Museums Service, Banbury Museum and Oxford City Council).

Aims and Objectives

- To examine the impact of the Memory Lane reminiscence scheme and the sharing of oral history on its existing members’ wellbeing.
- To build on and refine a ‘research toolkit’ for exploring the impact of participating in a reminiscence programme on participants’ wellbeing.
- To develop a research proposal.



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Memory Lane was established at the Museum of Oxford in 2010. The sessions are facilitated by the Reminiscence Officer who introduces a particular topic for discussion, provides structure and inspiration using Powerpoint presentations and objects, and is supported by volunteers who provide refreshments and welcome the participants. The sessions are also recorded to preserve the oral history of the participants and Oxfordshire. The group has fed into exhibitions at the Museum of Oxford and recordings have also been included in listening posts in temporary exhibitions and permanent galleries, quotes for exhibition panels, photos and documents for reproduction in exhibition panels for display, objects for exhibition display or accession to the collection and oral history content for radio documentaries.

In 2014, 'Memory Lane Movers and Shakers' was introduced to complement the Memory Lane reminiscence sessions. A professional dance practitioner guides the group through a series of movements and dance which can be performed whilst seated. The Movers and Shakers themes tie-in with the Memory Lane sessions and provide gentle movement and exercise.

Methods: A range of methods were used to create a profile of those attending Memory Lane and Movers and Shakers and to examine how they felt about the sessions. We conducted:

- Surveys to get a picture of who attends the sessions.
- Focus groups to provide feedback immediately after the sessions.
- Observations of Memory Lane and Movers and Shakers sessions.
- In-depth interviews to examine how participants felt about reminiscence and oral history.

The Participants: A total of 39 Memory Lane participants were surveyed.

- Of the 31 who responded to the question regarding their age, 1 was in their 50s; 6 were in their 60s; 13 were in their 70s; 7 were in their 80s and 3 were in their 90s.
- Most had been attending Memory Lane for between 2-3 years or more. A smaller proportion had been attending for between one and two years (n=3) or less than a year (n=3), and only one person was attending for the first time.
- There was a mix between those who attended Memory Lane when the topic is of interest (n=15) and those who attended every month (n=11) and a small minority who attended when they were able (n=2).
- The vast majority (28 out of 31 responding) attended another group or club aside

from Memory Lane.

- We collected data on the groups' general wellbeing and found their scores to be generally good, in particular in relation to 'not feeling left out' though for some a lack of energy or money meant they felt less able to do the things they liked to do.

Findings: The **focus groups and observations** provided immediate feedback on the sessions. In the focus groups, participants were enthusiastic about the session they had just attended, and about Memory Lane and Movers and Shakers more generally. The observations also revealed the participants' enjoyment and engagement.

The **interviews** provided the opportunity to delve deeper into the participants' feelings about the Memory Lane/ Movers and Shakers programme- what had drawn them to first attend Memory Lane, their reflections on the sessions and what they felt the impact was upon their lives. It was important to examine what participants felt about the reminiscence and oral history aspect of Memory Lane, otherwise it could be argued that any positive outcomes could be achieved by any activity that brought the participants together. For example, the participants reported that they made **new friends and connections**, or sometimes reconnected with people they had known in the past, which arguably could have occurred at, for example, a local coffee morning. However, the sharing of past experiences and local knowledge was key as it provided a common connection that crossed age groups, as one participant explained: *"I think that it's lovely getting to talk to different people and we're all in different ages, there's people there in the their 90s, some in their 80s, I'm in my 70s, there's 60 year olds so there is quite a big age range. People have got different memories of different periods"*.





Participants also reported positive impacts on their **wellbeing**, with the Memory Lane/ Movers and Shakers sessions providing an opportunity to stay engaged and active. The sessions were part of some participants' busy schedules which they felt were important to maintain as they aged: *"The way I see it, you've got to join as many events as you can so ... Otherwise you just vegetate"*. Participants felt the sharing of reminiscences was

potentially a way of maintaining memories and keeping their minds active.

An important part of Memory Lane was the **local connection** as though some were interested in history more generally, it was the Oxfordshire focus which really appealed to many participants. Though many had lived in Oxfordshire for more than 40 years, many found they still learnt new things from discussions with other participants and from the facilitator. The connection with local history was felt to be particularly significant and the importance of the oral history as one participant put it, *"is living history, from the 'horse's mouth' so to speak"*. Several participants had gone further than sharing their memories with the group and contributing their oral histories to the museum archives – some had their own possessions included in exhibitions and these participants felt positively about these contributions, and about the Museum of Oxford more generally: *"it was quite thrilling really in a way because obviously it brings the museum closer to you, I mean instead of going and just looking at what other people have done, you've been a participant in it yourself and I think that that makes it feel it belongs to you, or you're a part of it"*. There was also a sense that their oral history was being preserved amongst the participants, that Memory Lane would keep their reminiscences for future generations, as one participant noted: *"All our collective memories cover how Oxford has evolved in the past 75 years. These will be lost if not recorded"*. Linked to participants' feelings regarding the contributions they were making and the history they were preserving was a positive impact on their identity, and was a great source of pride, as one participant said: *"I think it's made me feel... just proud of myself. I just wish my husband was alive and his mum as I think they'd be proud of me... I've got more confidence... both my daughters are very proud of me"*. The sessions also sparked new interest or further investigation amongst some of the participants who followed up on sessions, researching further into particular topics. Some undertook very detailed research into their family histories, or the history of their local areas, prompted by sessions at Memory Lane.

Suggestions for Improvement: Participants also had some ideas about how the sessions could be improved. These includes issues related to being able to hear what was being said: group guidelines or rules to ensure people waited their turn to speak, or a microphone were suggested. Linked to this, some felt the group had become too large, which made it both difficult to hear and contribute.

Conclusions: This project demonstrated some key benefits of participating in Memory Lane and sharing oral history. Participants made it clear that the sharing of history had some specific benefits in terms of forging **social connections** with people of different ages and backgrounds. They found it interesting to hear other perspectives about the same historical events, which in turn provided a common bond. Groups like Memory Lane, which offer not only the opportunity for older adults to make new social networks, but also provide a sense of common connection through memories of their locality could offer a means to combat loneliness and its associated negative effects.



The sessions were also a way of '**stay active**'. Participants were keen to stress that keeping engaged mentally as well as physically was important later in life and reminiscing in a supportive environment was a good way to stimulate memories. Participants felt confident and comfortable sharing information they were 'experts' on, and enjoyed learning new things from others who were perhaps of a different generation or from a different background.

The interviews also highlighted how important the participants felt **preserving history** was, and in turn the pride this made them feel as their memories were recorded and woven into exhibitions. The project also revealed a strong sense of connection with the Museum of Oxford as a result of attending the sessions, and an appreciation of museums more generally amongst the sample. Many visited not only to attend the sessions, bringing family members and friends to show them the exhibitions they had contributed to, widening the Museum's audience.

The research project also developed a research toolkit, including systematic observation sheet for museum and gallery practitioners to capture 'joy in the moment' and to help them refine their practice by providing feedback on specific aspects of their sessions. We are also working on a proposal for further funding with the Oxford University Museums Partnership.