

Living History NEWSLETTER

No.1 June 2017



This is my first attempt at a newsletter since I took over from Barbara – and I know she'll be a hard act to follow!

I've looked back to the material I used when we started our Life Story group at Bexley (see p2) plus a few current items that I've found useful.

Last March I happened to see a notice about the National Life Stories Annual Lecture at the British Library (yes, I'm lucky enough to be close to London) and I went along. It was the first time I'd heard of National Life Stories though Barbara tells me that she had some contact with them a few years ago. If you want to know more, the website is <https://www.bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories> This has a full recording of the lecture by David Kynaston and the Q&A session.

Have you been listening to the Reith Lectures by Hilary Mantel? She's talking about writing historical fiction but many of the issues she raises are equally applicable to the kind of writing most of us are doing – bringing the past to life in a way that will interest other people. The talks started on 13th June (Radio 4, 9am), for five weeks, but they're on BBC iPlayer and I think the Reith Lectures are available indefinitely – well worth listening to. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00729d9>

The Mantel talks are relevant to us because in the end what we're all doing is story-telling. I do talks on various subjects and at the start I tried to be very neutral and objective but I learnt quickly that the bits the audience really respond to are always the most personal – adults enjoy a good story just as much as children do – and it's often the tiny details that get the most reaction, either because people are of an age to recognise it in their own lives or because they're young enough for it to be surprising and sometimes even shocking

For Life Story inspiration, this is one of my favourite quotations, from Bill Bryson in *A Short History of Everything* – it's a perfect answer to those people who insist they're too 'ordinary' for it to be worth doing –

'To be here now, alive in the 21st century and smart enough to know it, you also had to be the beneficiary of extraordinary good fortune.....consider that for 3.8 billion years, every one of your forebears has been attractive enough to find a mate, healthy enough to reproduce and to live long enough to do so. Not one of your ancestors was devoured, drowned, starved or otherwise deflected from delivering a tiny charge of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations that could result – eventually, astoundingly and all too briefly – in you.'

So now get writing!

INTRODUCTION TO WRITING YOUR LIFE STORY

(originally written for Bexley Life Story group which started in 2005)

REASONS

There are as many reasons for writing a life story as there are people doing it, but some of the most common are...

- Leaving information for grandchildren.
- Remembering parents & grandparents.
- Recording a particular period of your life, eg. wartime, working life.
- Dealing with unresolved issues in your life.

There is no right or wrong way to go about it but whatever your motive or method you need to enjoy the *process* for yourself – otherwise it won't happen.

SOURCES

Although all your memories are in your head you may need a bit of help to get them moving. At a personal level you will almost certainly have photographs. You may have letters or diaries. You will definitely have official records – birth & marriage certificates – and then there are school reports, old driving licences, bills and receipts, invitations (the kind of thing that drops out of old handbags). At this stage don't throw *anything* away – you may want to use it. You'll find that quite trivial things will start a train of thought that would otherwise have been lost. Keep a notebook permanently handy or that chance remark will have gone by the time you get home. A notebook by the bed is a particularly useful idea.

BACKGROUND

If you want to place your life in its historical or social history context, look out for any books or radio and TV programmes that cover the period you are writing about. Again, these can be the starting point for your own memories and they can also provide a background of the period you lived through. Read a lot – biographies, memoirs, reminiscences – apart from the content you'll get ideas on how to approach it. (Charity shops are a good source).

THERAPY

Some people use this type of writing as a form of therapy. This is not an area I have explored but there are a number of books and articles on this aspect.

HOW TO RECORD IT

This is an entirely personal preference. Computer word processing programs are very good for this, but you may hate computers or not have access to one. If you're happy with longhand stay with it (but *do* use a loose-leaf file). You may be comfortable with a tape recorder so you can just natter away to it. It's even been done in pictures and photographs or maps or embroidery. Don't let anyone tell you what you 'should' do – it's your story, not theirs.

U3A LIFE STORY GROUP

Writing one's own story is obviously a very personal project. I would see the group as somewhere to discuss ideas, share anecdotes and refuel the batteries for the next phase of writing – a forum for mutual help and encouragement. Of course, it may develop in ways we don't expect at the beginning but that will depend on the wishes and preferences of those who join it.

**Don't be put off if you think your life is too dull –
it's the little things that your grandchildren will find amazing!**