

IT'S GOOD TO TALK

Jane Rae explores the value of oral history, especially when it comes to capturing the stories of today's quilt makers.

Sheena Norquay's Sea Pinks at Sandwick

"Whenever I go to the beach my head is bent down looking at the patterns in the sand or the colours in the stones and whatever. My mother always used to get on to me for walking with my head down but what she didn't realise was that I was observing things."

It's almost five years since Dr Pauline Macaulay brought together a group of passionate quilters to brainstorm the idea of an oral history project to record the stories of people who quilt. Here, our Features Editor, Jane Rae, who has been involved with the project since those early days, shares some reflections on the value of oral history and discovers that Project Manager, Vicky Martin, has been doing more than just talking about quilts.

Batches, biscuits and blungers

There isn't a lot about the Staffordshire Potteries that Vicky Martin doesn't know. Before joining Talking Quilts as the Project Manager, she immersed herself in the world of batches, biscuits and blungers, while recording over 300 pottery workers stories, from small family-run firms to large well-known factories. I have always enjoyed listening to Vicky's experiences

of being out on the road, recording these personal testimonies, as it brings to life an entire community, which in the past I had little access to. Her own oral history is peppered with stories of Belfast sinks, Spode's blue and white ware and accounts of the transfer of skills passed from one generation to another, so that these expert roles would stay in the family. It's both compelling and fascinating.

Why oral history?

It's so important to capture the voices of ordinary people as their experiences fill and personalise the space that surrounds the facts, figures and statistics that are recorded in history books. If we think about how we communicate today, much of this is done by fleeting bursts via email or social media. Gone are the days of printed correspondence and diaries that were a joy for social historians as source material. The window into our digital lives vanishes into the ether as



Clockwise from left, Vicky Martin, Project Manager for Talking Quilts; Vicky at the Gladstone Pottery Museum in Stoke-on-Trent with interviewees, in 2002; Behind the scenes, the editing process is a really important role for oral historians; Vicky interviewing mouldmaker Dennis Jones at his home in Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent.

fast as it appears and it was never more important than now, to capture the stories of today's quilt makers.

Authenticity

There is something very intimate about listening to someone's voice and hearing their emotions – joy, surprise, grief and so much more. That authenticity even comes through in written transcripts, which are, of course, very different from written prose. As Vicky points out, “We perceive what we say to be clear and concise, but often the resulting transcription is quite different to this as it includes repetitions, pauses and unfinished sentences.” If we put aside our expectations of the written word and imagine the interview taking place as we read, then the “voice” of the interviewee is always present.

At the recent Festival of Quilts, visitors to the Talking Quilts Gallery themed under “Family Connections” could hear extracts from interviews

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while at the same time viewing the quilts, to create a wrap-around experience of sound and vision. For readers who were unable to make this event, the website is the virtual gallery – www.talkingquilts.org.uk – and Vicky aims to have a short sound extract from many of the interviews online as well as the full transcript and images of the touchstone object (the quilt). As I write this article, all of the interviews for Cleveland and Yorkshire (Region 14 of The Quilters’ Guild) and Mid and South Wales (Region 12) are available online and by April 2017, when the project officially ends, all of the interviews will be accessible.

Under the theme of Family Connections, Vicky was able to bring together a fascinating selection of quilts with connections to Bletchley Park, the Orkney Islands, Pakistan, Jamaica and even the Jurassic age. “The quilts on display all demonstrate the link to family, whether it is relations passing on their skills or quilts made with a special person in mind,” says Vicky. When the project comes to the end of its three-year life cycle in 2017, its legacy will be a collection of over 150 interviews from eight different Regions, involving over 80 volunteers capturing our rich and diverse quilting heritage for all of us to explore and share. It’s good to talk and it’s definitely good to talk about something that plays such an important role in our lives.



David's Quilt by Vanessa Sherston-Baker Vanessa chose the quilt she made for her son David when he was nine years old. It's appliquéed with a great variety of shapes that David helped to choose including his handprint. "That's one of the many things I like about quilting. It's a very, very personal gift. It can be. Heart and soul goes into it."

THE INSIDE TRACK...

Talking quilts and oral history with Vicky Martin.

10 What drew you to oral history as a career?

"When I was at university I first did some interviewing with retired pottery workers. I was interested in finding out what they thought of the history that was portrayed in museums as this was basically their history. I was lucky to get a job as a Research Assistant at Gladstone Pottery Museum in Stoke-on-Trent straight after completing my degree and loved being welcomed into people's homes to hear their stories. Sometimes the stories were shocking or upsetting, but I felt honoured that these people felt they could share their memories with me. However, it also showed me how ordinary people's versions of events are sometimes left out of the 'official' history. I felt it was an important responsibility to make sure that these people's memories were preserved, so future generations could hear them."

10 What are the challenges facing oral historians today?

"A lack of understanding about what an oral historian does has always been a challenge. People have said to me, 'Oh it must be lovely sitting down to drink tea and have a chat with older people.' However, oral history

interviewing is a lot more complex than that. A skilled interviewer is there to support an interviewee to tell their own story. Active listening, unspoken encouragement and planning how to word your next question requires a lot of concentration, but you are also checking the recording equipment and managing other issues, like barking dogs and interrupting husbands or wives. Justifying why oral history is important, tackling ethical issues around interviewing, often vulnerable people, and sourcing funding will always be a challenge too."

10 It's over two years since you became involved with the project. Can you share some of the highlights?

"Wow, where to start? I had a bit of a baptism of fire, within a fortnight of starting the job I'd travelled to York to meet the team at The Quilters' Guild and attended the AGM and Conference in Portsmouth. Since then I've been all over the country training volunteers, telling people about Talking Quilts and managing to squeeze in doing a few interviews myself. I think one of my highlights is the volunteers, especially the volunteers we had back in 2014 who were the Talking Quilts guinea

pigs; they were so supportive and patient while we wrangled with how best to roll out the project. My other highlight is talking to people about the project whether that's at big events like Festival of Quilts, or someone who gives me a quick call to say how much they enjoyed learning how to interview or how much they appreciated the opportunity to share their story."

10 What was your experience of quilting before you joined Talking Quilts and have you succumbed to its addictive appeal?!

"[Vicky whispers] I didn't really know anything about quilting. I was asked at my job interview and explained I'd done a bit of sewing in the past. I made a Victorian costume for myself when I worked at Gladstone [Pottery Museum], but I doubt it was historically accurate or indeed that well-made, it only got worn at Halloween and Christmas for their events. When I've confessed to our volunteers that I don't quilt they'd respond with a knowing smile, saying 'you will', and they were right. By Christmas 2014 I had a second-hand sewing machine and by April 2016 I'd made a quilt top, a superhero one for my son. I'm just working up the courage to layer it up then I plan to hand quilt it with stars. I've been lucky to have plenty of expert advice to hand when I've needed it!" 10



Above, Nurturing by Barbara Janssen
 “We carried on walking around the lake and we came across this statue, there was a plaque on it and it says in memory of all the people who had lived in this place and who’d died. Well, standing there with my daughter, I found it particularly moving, you know, it was a mother and daughter. I knew I had to make a quilt one day to kind of represent my family history.”



Left and right, Heirloom Quilt by Sabi Westoby Sabi chose to share the story of this quilt as it was the one that set her off on her quilting journey and has become a family heirloom over the years.



Left and left below, Kate Smith’s Bletchley Park quilt was inspired by her mother Catherine Mary Moore, pictured below in WRNS uniform when she was stationed at Bletchley Park, the code breaking centre, during the Second World War.

Americana Expanding Star by Jennifer Campbell Kirk was one of the first quilts Jennifer made after spending a month with her mother-in-law in Dallas, Texas learning to quilt.

Memory Quilt by Pindy Pardesi incorporates treasured pieces of embroidery given to her by her mother for her wedding dowry, “I think the whole quilt is lovely. But the maroon embroidery bit is my favourite. Because I think that’s taken my mum a long time to do, you know, I can see the amount of work that’s gone into it. And that was the one that drove me to save my mum’s embroidery pieces.”

