# ORAL HISTORY AS COMMUNITY HISTORY:

# THE WELCOME STORIES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

*Marie-Clare Balaam & Sharon Lambert*

*Dr Sharon Lambert gained her PhD from the History Department at Lancaster University. Her doctoral work used oral history to explore the experiences of Irish women in Lancashire in the 20th century. She has published a number of books and articles on oral and social history. She has been involved in a range of community-based oral history projects and has taught history in further and higher education.*

*Marie-Clare Balaam studied at Lancaster and Nottingham Universities and currently works as a researcher at the University of Central Lancashire. She has taught history and women's studies in higher education and has been involved in a range of community-based projects. Her research interests include oral history, women's history, medical history and women's health.*

The Welcome Stories Oral History Project is a collection of 80 interviews undertaken with over a hundred people in the Lancaster and Morecambe area. The collection, now deposited in the North West Oral History Archive in Clitheroe, was the product of a Heritage Lottery Fund project undertaken by the National Coalition Building Institute, Lancashire (NCBI Lancashire)[1] during 2007 and 2008.

This article will reflect upon the inception, development and significance of the project. The project is a significant piece of community history, not just because of the material produced but because of the philosophical and ethical underpinning of the work. The project sought to authentically engage local people in a collaborative process by which their stories could be recorded and shared. In this way the project created a dialogue between local people, allowing them to bear witness to each other's experiences and to create a valuable record of the varied stories of people living in the Lancaster and Morecambe Bay area.

---

[1] NCBI Lancashire website - http://www.ncbilancashire.org.uk/

**Background to the project**

The background to the Welcome Stories Oral History Project is in the work of NCBI Lancashire. This organisation is a not-for-profit organisation working in the Lancaster and Morecambe area. NCBI Lancashire works within the local community providing training in issues relating to diversity, conflict resolution and community leadership. It is committed to eliminating discrimination, promoting community cohesion and facilitating understanding and constructive relationships between people within the local community. It works in a range of settings with people from all backgrounds and ages. Recent projects have included: 'I'm me and I'm special' – an anti-bullying project in schools; Territorial Tensions – a project with groups of young men from different areas of the city; and Pomonca Dlon (Helping Hand) – a project to welcome and support Polish migrants in the area.

The Welcome Stories Oral History Project had its genesis in 2003 when Lancaster resident Paul Speight organised the production of a photograph and poster to reflect the diversity of Lancaster (see Figure 1). This 'welcome poster' was the catalyst for a range of further work by the NCBI gathering stories and seeking to explore and celebrate the diverse heritage and life experience of people who lived in the Lancaster and Morecambe Bay area.

In 2007 NCBI Lancashire were successful in securing a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund to develop the Welcome Stories Project further. The initial aim of this part of the project was to gather up to 80 stories of welcome and belonging in the Lancaster and Morecambe Bay area.
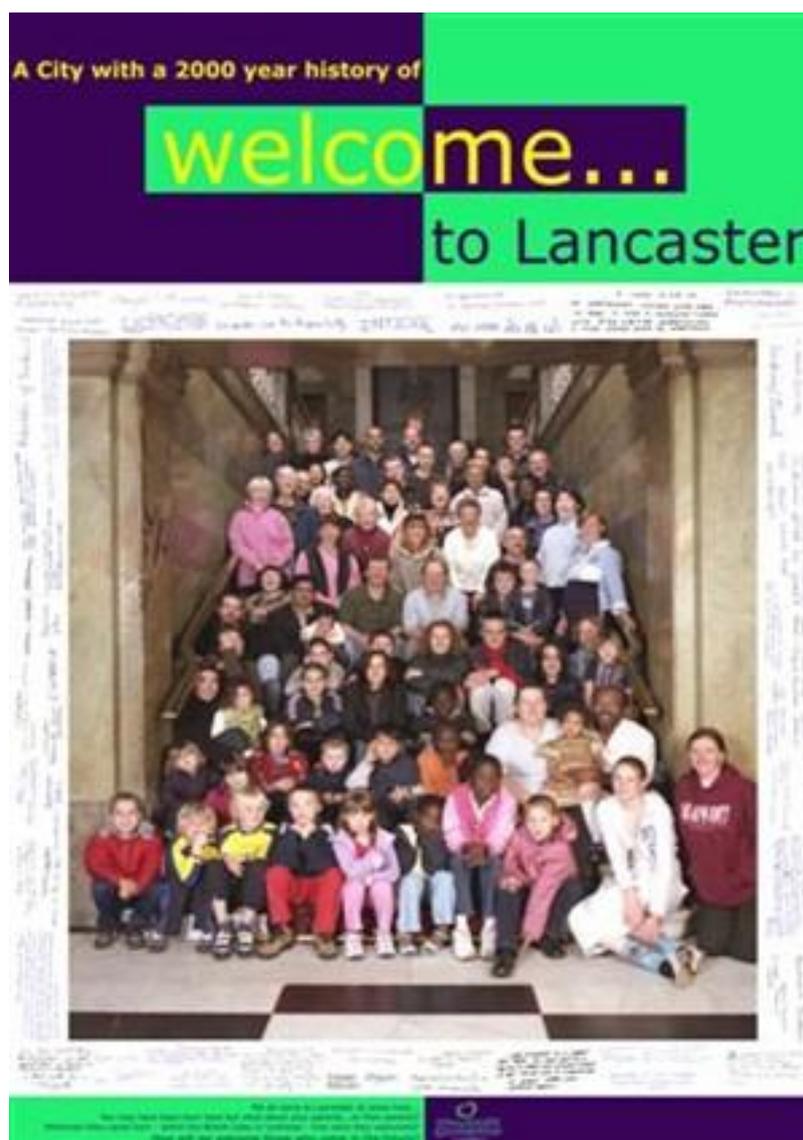
**Figure 1:  Welcome Stories Poster
(Christopher Holmes Photography, Kendal, 2003)**


**The Welcome Stories Oral History Project: process**

The approach chosen for this part of the Welcome Project was oral history. The commitment to using oral history was based on a belief that applying the methods and theoretical perspectives developed by practitioners of oral history over the last 30 years can provide a powerful theoretical and practical model for creating an ethical, collaborative and inclusive form of historical record. We were influenced by the idea that recording people's histories in their own words could be a powerful political and transformative tool for the individuals and the communities of which they are a part. Indeed Michael Frisch argued, in

a way that was pertinent to the work that we were doing, that oral history can allow us to explore 'how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experiences and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them.'[2] Oral history also can enable us to value and celebrate the lives and experiences of the individuals who tell their stories. It allows us to bear witness to difficult stories, to explore the commonalities and differences in the stories and explore the links and connections between us. This approach was directly relevant to the ideas of the NCBI and their commitment to the power of collective witness and remembering.

In addition to the value of the historical record created, the process of making the historical record was of importance to the project's aims and its underlying philosophies. Using oral history as a method allowed a more democratic approach to recording this history. It allowed individuals to create their own histories and share them with others, whether with the support of members of the project team or independently. This was facilitated via the website created, which allowed members of the public to publish their stories via online submission.

Initially the focus of the project was on migration and the experiences of individuals who had migrated to live in the Lancaster and Morecambe area. Key to this was the exploration of issues of welcome and whether the area was welcoming or unwelcoming to people who had chosen to move to the locality. However this initial focus evolved as the project progressed and the idea of being welcome (or not) in a wider sense came to the fore. The issues of how a range of different individuals and groups of people felt in terms of feeling welcome or unwelcome, not necessarily just those who had recently migrated to the area, became more central and the project included the stories of older citizens, young people and people with disabilities, as well as people with diverse cultural heritages.

Volunteers were recruited through those who had been involved in earlier parts of the work, as well as local publicity and NCBI contacts. Training was offered to all those who had expressed an interest and

---

[2] M. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral History and Public History* (Albany State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 188.

included discussions of the project's nature and aims as well as training on the ethics and practice of oral history. Following this training a number of these volunteers played a crucial role in the development and completion of the work. One volunteer provided crucial technical support to the website development, another transcribed hours of stories, others undertook interviewing and many more offered support in a range of ways.

**Telling our stories**

Storytellers were recruited in a number of ways. The NCBI's existing contacts with a range of community leaders, local community organisations and individuals provided a number of storytellers. In addition other organisations were approached in an attempt to enable the project to include a wide range of potential storytellers and to encourage the participation of a truly diverse range of individuals within the local area. These organisations included the Travellers Education Service, Beaumont College, One Voice, Diversity FM, St Bernadette's Primary School, Lancaster University and HM Young Offender Institution Lancaster Farms. In addition a 'snowballing' effect occurred as initial contacts led to more individuals coming forward.

Interviews were undertaken with a range of individuals and groups; these included people who had always lived in the area as well as people who had more recently moved to the area. Interviews were undertaken with individuals from a range of different ages, social and ethnic backgrounds. Participants included people who find it hard at times to have their voices heard, including young offenders, people with disabilities, members of the Gypsy/Traveller community, homeless people, young people and individuals for whom English is a second language.

The interviews were predominantly open and unstructured, using limited prompts from interviewers asking about experiences of feeling welcome or indeed unwelcome in the local area. While the format and length of interviews varied, the aim was to allow the individuals we interviewed to tell their stories as freely as possible, constructing their narratives as they chose after some limited prompts.

Another key area of the project was group interviews and follow-up work undertaken with young people. The youngest children we worked

with, infants at a local primary school, explored the issue of welcome, what it meant to feel welcome and how they made people welcome in their school and in their local communities. Older primary school children undertook an oral history interview with a member of the local Gypsy/Traveller community and explored issues of welcome and prejudice while producing a recording for the collection. A group of secondary school students interviewed new members of their school community who had recently arrived from overseas. They produced interviews which explored and reflected upon the experiences of their recently arrived classmates. Other projects included work with young men at a local young offenders centre and work with a local group for young Gypsy/Traveller women. These extended projects allowed the stories gathered to have greater depth and allowed a greater involvement for the participants in the telling of their stories and their wider dissemination.[3]

**Promoting dialogue**
A specific website http://www.welcomestories.org.uk/ was developed as an integral part of the project. This provided a way for the project to disseminate the work it was doing in another format, with the hope that it would widen public access to the stories. In addition the website allowed individuals to comment on issues raised by stories and to upload their own stories.

The website included digital sound recordings of the interviews, photographs of the storyteller where appropriate and transcriptions of the recordings. The transcription was undertaken by one of the volunteers, who committed many hours of time to the task, allowing anyone looking at the website an additional way of relating to the material.

---

[3] The young offenders' work was written about within the young offenders institution and the Gypsy/Traveller girls' work was made into booklets and posters for the girls themselves and for use by the Traveller education service.

**Figure 2: Welcome Stories celebration event
(Christopher Holmes Photography, Kendal, 2008)**

As part of ensuring a dialogue between those working on the project, those being interviewed and the wider public a number of events took place which allowed local people to be involved in and give their feedback on the progress of the project. These included sessions in local libraries, pieces in the local press, involvement with the local community radio station, stalls at a community festival and participation in a youth group event. The final event, at the culmination of the project, was a large celebration event to which all those who had been involved were invited to gather together, eat, meet each other, celebrate the project and hear some of the stories (see Figure 2). All those involved were given copies of their interviews and cards thanking them for their participation. At this event the second Welcome Stories photograph was produced, with all those who attended the event and had been involved in the project taking part in a group photo on the steps of Lancaster Town Hall, the location used for the initial photograph (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3:  Welcome Stories Photograph, 18 October 2008,
Lancaster Town Hall
(Photograph NCBI)**

## Publishing the stories

The transcribed interviews generated a wealth of material but, unfortunately, funding was not secured to carry on the project, which limited both the depth of its analysis and the scope of presentation. Given these financial and temporal constraints, the website was produced and was initially organised into five themes: Born and Bred; Moving Here; Putting Down Roots; Young Voices and Welcome or Not?

Throughout the different sections, attempts were made to avoid stereotyping people into simple categories. 'Born and Bred', for example, displayed the story of an elderly couple alongside a young Sikh man – all of whom were born in Lancaster. These participants and others who had been born in the area discussed their experiences and relation to the locality. 'Putting Down Roots' and 'Moving Here' included stories from people who had migrated to and made their homes in the Lancaster and Morecambe area. These sections demonstrated the real diversity of Lancaster, including stories from people who had come from as far

afield as Sudan, Japan, Guatemala and Iran and as near as the south of England, and including people from Romania, Bulgaria, Poland and Northern Ireland. In addition to the geographic diversity, these stories also reflected the different periods of migration into the region. Stories came from those who moved from Poland, Ireland and the Indian subcontinent in the post-World War Two period, in addition to those who had moved to the area in more recent times.

The 'Young Voices' section included stories that demonstrated the wider focus of the project, as it looked at issues of welcome, belonging and diversity in the widest sense. This section included contributions from the group work done with primary and secondary school students, as well as work done with young students with disabilities who discussed issues of welcome and belonging in the light of the access difficulties they faced.

Perhaps the most potentially useful category for stories was the one entitled 'Welcome or Not?' This section got to the heart of the project and sought to show how socially inclusive, or otherwise, our locality was. The stories in this section were purposefully chosen from people from a diverse range of backgrounds: from those on the margins of society to the Mayor of Lancaster. This section sought to address more directly whether people felt welcome or not and, more significantly, the reasons why people felt welcome or unwelcome. Mr C, a 70-year-old homeless man, had a generally positive view of living in Lancaster:

> People, I find, are more friendly here than anywhere else ...
> many people stop and talk to me, it's a very friendly place
> ... many thousands of people I know here ... as they pass,
> they all know me like … and that's a bit o' happiness in
> your way of life.[4]

Others shared Mr C's very positive view of the area; however for some, their experiences had been less positive, as they spoke of facing discrimination and at times abuse, a lack of welcome or being fearful of other members of the local community who they felt were not welcoming to them. A number of storytellers expressed concerns related to young people: some of these seemed to be a result of negative

---

[4] Mr C's story, http://www.welcomestories.org.uk/page_id__42_path__0p27p29p.aspx (accessed 21/07/11).

experiences, but for others there was a more general fear of younger people, particularly when in groups. For example, Melek, a young Turkish woman, identified gangs of youths from council estates as being particularly of concern to her:

> Teenagers groups very dangerous ... if some teenagers groups are talking to each other I change [cross] the road ... because I am not frightened of all people but I am scared ... they drunk in a group not safely. I think England has family problems ... Council house people are different, definitely ... little, young groups, I think they are very dangerous.[5]

While Melek and other storytellers told of the acts and attitudes that made them feel unwelcome, many storytellers spoke of acts that had or would make them welcome. For some, churches and faith groups had provided a place of welcome and belonging as they consciously extended a welcome to newcomers to the area. Many others, including Kristi and Elspeth below, spoke of the importance of what at times seem to be small acts of kindness, of connection with others that allowed them to feel welcomed and wanted by other people in the local area. Yet these actions were the things that allowed a dialogue to start, that reduced the loneliness that some residents, not just recent migrants, felt in their daily lives. Kristi, a young student at Beaumont College in Lancaster, explained: 'I would like people to shake my hand, and look at me, and talk to me: that would be really friendly.'[6] Elspeth, who works with international students and their families, described the importance of personal contact: 'just a smile ... I think that can make a huge difference, sometimes a smile on the street opens up the opportunity for a little conversation in town ... you know if you meet someone in Sainsbury's or whatever, great conversations can be had over the fruit stall and then who knows ...' [7]

## Conclusion

The Welcome Stories Project produced a wealth of material exploring the lives and histories of a range of individuals from the local area. The stories recorded provide insights into the diversity of the locality, and are a witness to the continued presence of discrimination and its impact

---

[5] Melek's story, http://www.welcomestories.org.uk/page_id__49_path__0p27p29p.aspx (accessed 20/07/11).

[6] Kristi's story, http://www.welcomestories.org.uk/page_id__92_path__0p27p37p.aspx (accessed 20/07/11).

[7] Elspeth's story, http://www.welcomestories.org.uk/page_id__70_path__0p27p29p.aspx (accessed 19/07/11).

on those to whom it is directed. Stories detailed the welcome and kindness afforded by some people and how these actions and attitudes created a sense of belonging. Other stories described the fear and sense of alienation some groups of residents feel from each other in the Lancaster and Morecambe Bay area, for example young and old, new migrants and more established communities.

However, the project was more than the material it produced. The processes by which the stories were recorded and the work done relating to them in different settings were an important part of the project. The ethos of the NCBI, the use of volunteers and the range of organisations and individuals involved in the project allowed new connections to be made between different groups and individuals, some of whom would not normally meet each other.

However, temporal and financial limits meant that the project could not complete all the work it had hoped to do and there are a number of areas related to the project that need to be taken further to realise fully its potential and significance. One key area would be a more systematic analysis of the stories recorded, looking in more depth at the themes and issues that emerged over the 80 interviews. Further publication and dissemination of these findings would allow the project to be part of a wider context of similar or related work being undertaken elsewhere. In addition and linked to the philosophical underpinnings of the project, there is a need to build on the use of these materials in educational and training situations. The work done using these materials as part of the project demonstrated their value in that setting and allowed an appreciation of the potential use of this material to support the work of the NCBI and other organisations in promoting dialogue and understanding between different groups in our communities, allowing groups who currently feel alienated from each other to explore their connections with each other.