

Framing Oxford – discovering local history in lockdown

Project origins

When we first began conversations with our colleagues at Oxfordshire History Centre, about a collaborative project to complement their fantastic local history photographic archives with the wisdom and local knowledge of our Age UK Oxfordshire elders, we had no idea what strange and isolating times lay ahead!

The Framing Oxford project was originally planned as a series of in person group sessions at Oxfordshire History Centre to support local older people to engage with local history archives, share their photography skills and local history knowledge whilst offering the opportunity to form friendships and create community connections. We were just about to launch the project when COVID-19 changed our plans and we all found ourselves on a year-long (plus) journey of social distancing and lockdowns.

Responding to lockdown

It was obvious from the outset that the pandemic and ensuing lockdown would have a negative impact on older people, many of whom are already disproportionately affected by loneliness and isolation. With this in mind, we didn't want to postpone the project and we developed a new, blended approach to project delivery.

Using a mixture of Zoom meet ups, phone conversations and posted information we agreed to focus on the Cowley area of Oxford, as most of the participants lived in the local area and because of its proximity to Oxfordshire History Centre. From July to December 2020 a monthly presentation was delivered, with photos supplied by Oxfordshire History Centre, around a theme connected to Cowley (for example, shopping) and there was a monthly Zoom session which participants could also join by landline telephone.

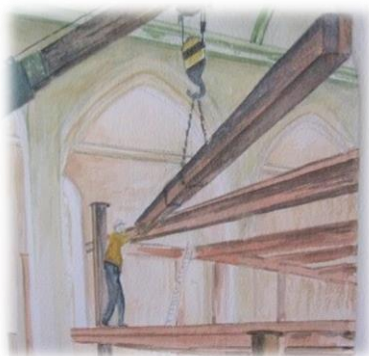
For those who did not feel comfortable with digital technology a monthly day of non-digital engagement by post and phone (non-digital participants received a printed version of the presentation by post) took place. Everyone was encouraged to share stories and material from their own collections.



Project outcomes

The project was a great success with an average of 17 older people participating in the monthly sessions via Zoom, post and phone with ages ranging from mid-60s to mid-90s. Over time some of the participants moved from the postal/phone group to the digital Zoom group as their confidence in the use of technology increased.

A fascinating range of over 21 items are being added to the Oxfordshire History Centre Archives to date. Items include digital photographs, oral history audio recordings, written accounts of individual memories of Cowley, adverts from historic publications, watercolour paintings of the Cowley area, a Bible belonging to Henry Taunt, a copy of a painting and a Henry Taunt glass lantern slide. (Henry Taunt was a Victorian photographer who lived in Cowley for a time and took photos of Oxford and Oxfordshire from the 1860s to 1922. Oxfordshire History Centre is the custodian of the Henry Taunt photographic collection).



One of the participants is a talented artist and has an extensive collection of his own watercolour paintings of the Cowley area which he generously photographed so that they could be shared with the group and included in the Framing Oxford film.

Another participant took a series of photographs of Oxford during the first lockdown which depict the deserted streets of Oxford. A city that is usually so busy looked eerily deserted in the photographs. These were entitled the “Lonely bicycle in Oxford” and created the central theme for the Framing Oxford film, a journey around Cowley by bicycle exploring the memories that were shared by the Framing Oxford sessions’ participants.



Memories shared

During the Framing Oxford project some fantastic memories were shared. We were extremely fortunate that the late Mrs Irma James was able to participate and share the story of her famous customised wire shopping basket, which she had purchased from the much-loved Woolworths store in Cowley Centre (Templar's Square Shopping Centre). Mrs James raised over £26,000 for the Sailors Society with the help of the basket which she used for collecting donations. The Framing Oxford Film is dedicated to the memory of Mrs James who was well known in Cowley; we will all miss her very much.



We had a reunion when one group member who had played the role of Father Christmas at Cowley Shopping Centre, and another group member who could remember visiting him as a child in the 1960s, realised that they knew each other from this encounter many years ago. The project came to a lovely conclusion when we convened a Framing Oxford Film Premiere event via Zoom in the presence of the Lord Mayor of Oxford, Councillor Mark Lygo. We enjoyed an uplifting afternoon together celebrating our success.

It has been fantastic to work on this project with Oxfordshire History Centre and Film Oxford, a partnership which enabled us to deliver so much by working together at a time when the interaction and camaraderie was much needed by all of us; this quote from one of the project participants sums it up:

"I would like to thank you for including me in the project for Cowley history. Having been born and brought up (still living in Cowley) it was wonderful to share photographs and memories with such a lovely group, some of whom I had not seen for years."



Creating a film of the project

The Framing Oxford project was funded by the St Michael's and All Saints Charities, and we were also fortunate in securing funding from Oxford City Council's Culture Fund to enable us to create a Framing Oxford film legacy for the project in partnership with Film Oxford: <https://youtu.be/S2vUJuKajI4>

About the project partners

Oxfordshire Age Friendly Creative Network (OAFCN) is part of the wide range of services offered by Age UK Oxfordshire (AUKO) and forms part of the AUKO Creative Team alongside the Age of Creativity project and Festival.

The OAFCN exists to work in partnership with Cultural and Creative Partners to support and develop Age Friendly Creative opportunities in Oxfordshire. This is achieved by sharing best practice via a newsletter, delivering networking opportunities and delivering bespoke projects with Cultural Partners when opportunities are identified.

Oxfordshire History Centre collects, preserves and makes available historic Archive and Local Studies collections relating to the county of Oxfordshire. Located in St Luke's Church in Cowley, it is one of Oxfordshire County Council's Cultural Services and is open to the public. Some of the History Centre's digitised collections, catalogues, and its Picture Oxon image archive can be consulted online.

Film Oxford is an arts and creative media charity supporting filmmakers, artists and digital creators. Film Oxford run a programme of local and online training as well as supporting productions, networking and exhibitions.

Helen Fountain, Age Friendly Creative Coordinator, Age UK Oxfordshire

Mark Lawrence, History Centre Manager (Local Studies), Oxfordshire History Centre