Recording and Transcribing
by Bob Pegg

Until quite recently, going to people in their own homes and communities to record them telling stories, singing, playing music and so on, involved carting around bulky and expensive equipment. In 1982, when Sony introduced the Walkman Professional, a high quality cassette recorder which could easily fit into a biggish pocket (though you did need an external microphone) the game changed for ever. Now companies like Tascam and Zoom make superb all-in-one recorders, microphones built in, recording on inexpensive SD cards, for around £100. They can be set up and placed on a table, and in no time at all are quite forgotten. Gone are the days of the inquisitive microphone in the face.

So, it’s easy enough to make recordings of the folk who have the stories. But do remember, in these digital times, that you should back up, and back up again to keep your recordings safe.
Once you have a machine to record on, you need to know how to use it. Read the manual carefully, and make lots of trial recordings before embarking on your project. You don’t want to get to the end of a session to discover that you failed to press the appropriate button and that all you have to show for your labours is a blank SD card (it’s easily done). Then you have to learn interviewing techniques and all kinds of stuff (which can only be achieved by just getting out there and doing it!). Best of all, find someone who has experience in this kind of work and who will pass on their knowledge; get money to pay them if necessary. The Oral History Society has much good advice here: http://www.ohs.org.uk/practical-advice.php.

Transcribing the stories, or at the least taking notes of their main features, involves listening to your recordings, and pausing frequently to write the words down verbatim, or summarise succinctly. Are you thinking of producing a small book, editing together a CD of stories, or setting up a sound archive? The internet has transformed possibilities for this kind of enterprise. In theory at least, your whole project could now be managed in the Cloud – but remember that no website can supplant the pleasure of holding a physical object which can be leafed through anywhere, without the click of a mouse.

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