

The Oral History Society held its first ever conference on business history at Sussex University on 5th and 6th July. The conference, held in conjunction with the Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research at Sussex, was kicked off by OHS secretary Dr Rob Perks, who acknowledged that it might seem strange to devote a conference to business and large organisations when oral history has traditionally given voice to the voiceless.

Perks said: “We should look outside our origins and think how we use oral history in different ambits. Have we been guilty of neglecting whole sectors of British life because we have been concentrating on the marginalised, powerless and oppressed?”

Perks, director of National Life Stories at the British Library, told the conference how interviews with corporations can shed light on areas that would otherwise remain uncovered. Perks said that an oral history of the Post Office highlighted a sense of its public sector ethos among its employees. And interviews with employees in the oil industry have been used in health and safety training.

“Can we overcome our entrenched suspicion of big business?” he asked the conference.

This question did not need to be asked of keynote speaker Bruce Weindruch, chief executive of US company the History Factory (www.historyfactory.com). His company, which grossed \$10m in 2009, provides corporate histories for a host of big name firms, from oil company Saudi Aramco to investment bank Merrill Lynch. The company holds archives and produces books and films for its clients, charging \$10,000 an interview.

Weindruch said that his work is not “manufacturing” or “fabricating” history. He showed a clip from a film of Merrill Lynch employees discussing the bank’s dark days during the 2008 financial crisis when it was sold to Bank of America to illustrate how his oral histories are not simply about good PR. He said that his organisation is often approached by companies who want to engender a sense of continuity but “want to change without losing their character”.

He also showed a clip of employees of tech firm Adobe discussing their work motivations. One software developer spoke of his work with a US organisation that campaigns against the online abuse of children in a clip which has had more than 25,000 hits on You Tube.

Weindruch acknowledged that what he does is not oral history in its purest sense and some oral historians may not want to become involved in the corporate world. However, it certainly showed a different approach.

Later that day questions about independence and autonomy arose again after presentations by archivists for HSBC and Barclays banks. Barclays archivist Maria Sienkiewicz discussed an interview with former chief executive John Varley, part of a series of interviews with senior bank executives. Varley, she said, talked candidly about the 2008 financial crisis but any revelations will remain under wraps as the interview is closed. Her most pressing concern was the “Bob Diamond shaped hole” in her batch of interviews. A hole that is unlikely to be filled as Diamond was forced to resign as Barclays chief executive last year in the wake of the Libor scandal.

HSBC archivist Rachael Porter and Sienkiewicz stressed the importance of oral history interviews in bringing an archive to life. Porter said that interviews with the wives and families of staff sent abroad in the mid 20th century put “flesh on the bones of paper records.” But both acknowledged the constraints of having a history commissioned and owned by a company.

Later in the day, four papers looked at the impact of workplaces closing, all conducted by oral historians independent of corporate pressures. Lu-Ann Jones talked of an oral history project with workers at the DuPont factory in Southern Carolina in the US. The factory brought prosperity to the poor area and its workers were able to buy houses, cars and holidays. However, its closure has meant that these workers' children have had to move elsewhere to find work.

An oral history of the Hawker Siddeley transformer factory in east London also showed how the factory was at the heart of its workers' lives: it provided a social life as well as work, marriages were made and life-long friendships were forged there. These oral histories highlighted the importance of work and workplaces, and how large corporations can evoke a sense of belonging and community. As Rob Perks said earlier in the day: “Which comes first – the organisation or the people within it?”

The second day of the conference began with a keynote speech by Professor Abdel Aziz EzzelArab, founder of the American University in Cairo's Economics and Business History Research Centre. Professor EzzelArab described his shock at arriving in the UK, after a flight from Canada, to find out that President Mohammed Morsi had been ousted.

EzzelArab, who has collected more than 300 hours of interviews with business and political leaders, told the conference of the importance of oral history in the Egyptian context. Written records are not kept comprehensively, they are difficult to access and there is no legislation requiring the disclosure of official documents.

His interviews debunked popular myths surrounding Egypt's privatisation of public companies in the 1980s and 1990s. Many believed that it was a haphazard, poorly planned process, sparked by pressure from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

“When design of public policy occurs outside the public domain, oral narratives become a powerful tool for unravelling the process,” he said.

Donald Ritchie, historian of the US senate, spoke about the oral histories he has undertaken with senate staff since 1976. These oral histories highlight changes to the Senate that are not shown in official documents.

“The culture has changed, the technology has changed, the membership has changed, even the news media that cover the institution have changed,” he said.

Paul Seaward, Priscila Pivatto and Emma Peplow, from the history of Parliament oral history project, spoke about their interviews with former MPs and their attempts to go beyond the public persona and the official written record.

Pivatto said: "Politicians are used to performing narratives and it's a big challenge for us to overcome this."

The evening before the conference Donald Ritchie spoke at the final OHS/IHR research seminar of this academic year and highlighted the flexibility of oral history as a methodology, as it can be used to research any aspect of society. This flexibility is evidenced in next year's conference whose theme is community. To see the call for papers click here: www.ohs.org.uk/conference.php?conf=4&status=0.