MAKE 'EM LAUGH, MAKE 'EM CRY!
COLLECTING FOR LIFETIMES,
– THE INTERACTIVE MUSEUM
ABOUT CROYDON PEOPLE

Angela Fussell

For most of its history, Croydon was a bustling market town to the south of London, a stop on the coach journey between the capital and Brighton. But when the first railways were built in the 1830s, Croydon started to turn into a London suburb and with that change came a loss of identity.

Local groups began to campaign for a museum of Croydon in the late 19th century. Their voices grew louder when the centre of Croydon was redeveloped in the 1960s. Much of the character of the old town was lost when theatres, cinemas and schools were replaced by multi-story car parks, shopping precincts and office blocks.

It was partly in response to this public demand that the local councillors decided to include a museum in the redevelopment of Croydon’s central library. They were also moved by a need to improve Croydon’s image. By the 1980s, the name Croydon had become a byword for boring, bland and mediocre. The councillors were convinced that a dynamic image had an important part to play in economic success. They saw a museum as playing a key part in establishing that image.

Sally MacDonald was appointed as Museum Development Officer in 1989 and I arrived a year later as Community Researcher. I had previously managed a project in north London which had responded to historical requests from local people, everything from booklets on crime to exhibitions on welfare provision, reminiscence therapy to archiving. I had become convinced that a great many «ordinary» people really wanted to find out about the past of the place they lived in and that their interest often centred around the lives of people like themselves, rather than the histories of great men and institutions. Fortunately, Sally thought along the same lines.
"He fell in love with this attractive young girl 12 years younger than him. His own family considered a marriage below him, so he eloped with her. They had a nice house in Turkey, they must have lived there at least 10 years, and then the first troubles between the Greeks and the Turks was in the air, so my grandfather took his family across the water to the island of Kos. Then one of the boats he owned sank, so he was going to see about getting it back. People said to him 'You haven't got enough ballast in your boat and you must wait for more ballast because it's dangerous'. Apparently he was the great hero of the seas in those parts because once, when he sailed to Egypt all the crew had decided to jump ship and he took the boat back from Egypt to Greece single handed. So when people said to him about ballast he said 'I have done this great achievement and you think I cannot manage to go from Kos to the next island!'. And he left. It was just before Christmas and the boat overturned because there was not enough ballast. The waves took him into the mouth of a rock under the sea and he suffocated. He was washed ashore on a very small island where there were just a couple of shepherds. And they would say to their wives 'That is Captain Demetrios, because he was buried without a church service and he didn't have holy communion before he died, he sits on his grave'. This story was said to me throughout my childhood."
FINDING PEOPLE TO INTERVIEW

I began by collecting for a temporary exhibition that would test public response to people-centred history. The Living Memories Show was to display the belongings of local people and the memories associated with them. First we had to find people willing to be involved.

We began by holding what we grandly called Roadshows in six local libraries selected to give a good geographical coverage of Croydon. Small displays on the recent history of each neighbourhood were mounted in advance. These displays, together with flyers, banners and newspaper appeals, asked people to bring in any photographs and belongings that they were willing to lend for the exhibition.

The Roadshows were held on Saturdays, when the libraries were busiest. We sat behind desks next to the displays and waited. And waited. But very few people turned up with anything for the exhibition. Those that did mostly brought us reproductions of old postcards and books on local history. They thought that we wanted them to tell us the history of Croydon the place, not their own stories. When we asked them if they had anything more personal to lend they often replied that they had no antiques, that they had nothing of value. They did not consider themselves to be part of local history, a history they believed to belong to the rich and famous.

We soon resorted to pouncing on anyone who showed interest in our displays. We noted their names and addresses and a few details about their lives. Nearly all of these people had just come in to use the library. They were surprised that we were interested in their memories and belongings.

We made contact with 120 people through the Roadshows, more than enough for our purposes. Unfortunately they were far from representative of Croydon's population as a whole. Their average age was 59, at a time when less than 80% of local residents were under 60. Younger people found it difficult to understand why we should want them to be involved. Clearly they were too young to be part of history, weren't they? In retrospect, this should not have been surprising. There is a general feeling in Britain that history ended with World War Two. Indeed some history museums have only recently extended their displays to cover the post-war period.

Only 3% of the people contacted belonged to minority ethnic groups, compared to at least 20% of local residents. Members of these groups clearly felt excluded from not only local history but British history in general. Again you can guess why. It has long been a mainstay of racist rhetoric that «they» came over here and took «our» houses and jobs after World War Two in which only «we» made sacrifices. Until recently, few history lessons pointed out that minority ethnic groups have had a presence in Britain for centuries, if not millennia. People of colour rarely appear in costume dramas on television or in our nostalgic adverts for brown bread and beer.

LIFE STORY INTERVIEWING

I began by recording interviews with those people who had offered to lend us most belongings for the exhibition. To begin with, I asked about what they knew about
the lives of their parents and grandparents, trying to extend the reach of living memory to its limits. Few people knew more than age and occupation, but when I tried the same approach with a Greek Cypriot lady at a later date I was richly rewarded. Evangelia Card told me family stories that began in late-19th century Turkey with her grandfather (Figure 1).

Then I asked the interviewees about their own lives, beginning with their birth and trying to maintain a rough chronological order. At each stage I asked them about what belongings they would have used in different activities and if they still had them. For example, when I asked Enid Sturgeon about her 1948 wedding, she told me that she had nothing left of her wedding outfit because «the wedding dress was borrowed, everything was borrowed, except my shoes. My feet were so big, nobody could lend me any shoes». But remembering her wedding brought her wedding presents to mind (Figure 2).

The act of recollection brought more and more presents to mind, until she had a fine selection of butter dishes, glass bowls and salad servers to offer for display. This often happened; someone who thought that they had nothing to lend us would suddenly remember just what they had tucked away when recalling an incident in which it was used.

All these recordings took place in the homes of the interviewees. Naturally they felt more at ease than they would have in an office. But this also meant that they could more readily pull things out that had relevance to their story. Before I left I would ask to see any photographs that related to their story. I borrowed these for copying and took snapshots of their belongings. Between interviews, I annotated the recordings, processed the photographs and indexed everything. Between one and two days were needed to do the paperwork for a single visit!

Some people summarised their lives in under an hour, either because they didn’t really want to be involved in the project or because they genuinely felt that nothing of interest had happened in their lives. Most people were interviewed for three or four hours, before interview fatigue set in and I began to get hints that they felt that they had done their bit. They may have been retired, but they were busy people with voluntary work to do, tea dances to attend and courses to prepare for the University of the Third Age.

Sidney Sterling was an exception. I interviewed him for eight hours and only got up to his mid-twenties. Although he would describe himself as an ordinary chap, having spent much of his life as a hospital porter, he is an amazing storyteller with almost total recall (Figure 3). However, all he had to lend me was three

Figure 2: Arthur and Enid Sturgeon after their wedding, Hackbridge, 1948
Enid had nothing left of her wedding outfit, but remembering the day made her think of her wedding presents. «That damask table cloth was a wedding present. That was given to us by my husband’s uncle. At that time everything was rationed and if you were given a tablecloth you thought ‘Gosh! this is something special’ because people couldn’t afford the coupons. And we got a blanket, an electric iron, a clock, two or three toast racks, salt cellars. What else did we get? Can’t remember. Oh Pyrex, a set of Pyrex dishes, a canteen of cutlery. Can’t remember anything else, I’m sorry. Yes I can, yes I can. We had a set of lovely glass dishes and a tea set…..»
«When dad was out of work, mother used to do all sorts of jobs. She would do people's washing, she would go and scrub people's floors. And on several occasions, and it wasn't until later on that I realised what happened, there would be a tap, tap, tap at the door. And you would go and a lady would say 'Is your mother there?' Mum, there's someone to see you.' You would retreat a certain distance and you would hear 'Pss, pss, pss' and mother would say 'Yes certainly, I will go and get my friend'. And she would go round and get Mrs Money and together they would go off. But not before they had picked up a bar of soap, a towel and a flannel, and a couple of coppers (coins) and some bandages. And we found out ultimately that when people died locally, mother and Mrs Money would go and wash and lay out the bodies for perhaps half a crown shared between two of them.»

army badges, a Christmas card and half a dozen photographs. I could have listened to his stories until the cows came home, but since I was interviewing primarily to find objects for display, this was not a good use of my time. Life story interviewing is time consuming, but not necessarily very productive.

THE LIVING MEMORIES SHOW

The Living Memories Show exhibition was made up of individual displays for each decade from the 1930s to the 1970s. This chronological approach was dictated by the nature of the belongings offered to us. If we had organised the displays by theme,
we would have had large sections devoted to home life, work and leisure but next to nothing on themes such as politics, religion and education. With life story interviewing, you cannot predict themes you will be able to cover until you have completed the process. You cannot plan an interviewing programme that will lead to good coverage of all types of human activity.

The displays started in the 1930s because I was not offered anything which could be remembered before that date. It was the date of the memory rather than the date of manufacture that was important to us. For example, Audrey Doyle lent us a sideboard that she could remember from

«People said, 'You came to England because you think the streets are paved with gold.' No, if it wasn’t England it would have been somewhere else. I was just a person seeking adventure. I have never known hunger, I have never known want until I came to Britain. My parents have acres of cane field, corn field, mango field, orange field, pineapple field, everything. We had a three bedroomed house. The first house I stayed in in London was a little house just beside the railway bridge. Them trains are running every minute, every second, and as they pass the little room shakes. And the landlord had the stove on the stairs, so you cook on the stairs. And everything is kept in your room, one room. There was no bath in the house, so you had to go to the public bath. A very dingy, mean, low class life.»

Figure 4: Gee Bernard with her son Tony in their one-room home, Battersea, 1963
her childhood in the 1930s. The sideboard was probably made at the turn of the century and had belonged to her grandmother in Essex. The date of manufacture is of no relevance to Croydon's history because it was not made in Croydon. This highlights another disadvantage to collecting through life story interviewing; that there is a time limit to living memory. Although we have subsequently managed to collect belongings to go with family memories dating back to the 1880s, such objects are few and far between. I would say that the cut off date is now generally somewhere between 1910 and 1920.

At the other end of the timescale, I found it impossible to get the interviewees to select belongings to represent the 1980s. Since I was interviewing them in 1990, almost everything they owned must have played some part in their lives during that decade. I can only assume that these objects had not been around long enough to undergo that process of selection in which the significant and useful are kept and the irrelevant or useless thrown away.

Each display was introduced by a single panel listing the major events that decade in both Croydon and the rest of the world. All the text on the other panels came from the recorded interviews, illustrated by photographs and ephemera borrowed from the interviewees. I had heavily edited the initial interviews and sent the edited versions to the interviewees for approval. This was a vital part of the process. What appeared to be insignificant changes to me, often totally altered the meaning to the person I was trying to represent. Some interviewees took the opportunity to completely rewrite their contributions, not liking the way their spoken words appeared in print. All changes were accepted, even where I felt that the rewritten version considerably diminished the vitality of the original. It was important that the interviewees had control over their own representation.

Like many a researcher before me, I had become very attached to my findings and the 20 or so panels were crammed with far too much text. But visitors seemed willing to spend a lot of time reading them and I observed several making repeated visits to do so. This is possibly because transcriptions of the spoken word are more accessible than written labels. But it could also be because the visitors were making connections between what they were reading and their own memories and found the subject matter more compelling as a result.

There was a lively atmosphere during peak periods, with visitors talking to both their companions and complete strangers. They made comments like «I had a handbag like that in the 50s» and compared their lives with those on display. In general, visitors seemed to comment on similarities rather than differences. One woman told me how moved she was by the story of Gee Bernard bringing up her children in one room in the 1960s and that she had undergone a similar ordeal herself (Figure 4). She did not remark on the fact that she was White and Gee was Black. Gee herself was particularly fond of the 1930s display because she could remember washing in a tin bath as a child in Jamaica and the sewing machine was just like her granny's.

Over 9000 people came to see The Living Memories Show in the three weeks
it was open. The vast majority of those who made comments were enthusiastic. Many said that it brought back memories and some offered belongings for the new museum. Sally and I felt that we were on the right track with our people-centred approach to history.

**PLANNING THE NEW MUSEUM**

Before either Sally or I were appointed, six rooms had been allocated to the new museum. Two were to be used for temporary exhibitions, one to house a collection of Chinese porcelain, one as an activity room, leaving two for the history exhibition. This exhibition was to be called *Lifetimes*.

Sally and the designers had already decided to divide these two rooms into eight display areas. One was for temporary displays by local groups and individuals, another was to be devoted to the future, leaving six for the historical displays. And because there were only six, we chose to divide them between time periods rather than themes. We thought it important to try to cover all types of human activity because we wanted every visitor to see something of their lives, or their family’s lives in the exhibition. And no six themes could possibly encompass all aspects of human activity.

We chose to begin the displays in 1830s because that is when the railways arrived in Croydon, changing the nature of the town irrevocably. We also thought it highly unlikely that we would be able to find many well provenanced exhibits from before that date. As I continued with the research, I was occasionally offered pre-1830 objects but their owners could rarely tell me anything that could connect them to a Croydon person. Indeed most had been bought at antique fairs.

I am excluding here material from archaeological excavations. Excavations can turn up copious quantities of artifacts, but these are mostly potsherds, flints and other items more of interest to the expert as evidence than to the general public as exhibits. Even including displayable archaeological material, such as reasonably complete pots and metalwork that is more than the sum of its corrosion products, I doubt whether I could have put together a single interesting display covering the preceding millennium of Croydon’s history.

Over time we managed to divide human activity into 25 themes, everything from shopping to politics, sex to death (Figure 5). We also made a rough guess that we would be able to fit about 50 exhibits into each display. This meant that I was looking for 2 objects per theme per display period, and I was able to go about collecting in a very methodical way.

**ASSESSING OUR OWN COLLECTION**

Before I continued with further research, I divided the belongings I had located through The Living Memories Show by theme and display period. Then I did the same with the objects in our own small collection, with a great deal of assistance from one of our collection managers, Alison Pattison.

This collection had accumulated over the years in a cupboard next to the local studies library. Of the 647 items, over half had come from an earlier local museum that had closed on the outbreak of World War Two. Although some of these artifacts
were local in origin, the vast majority came from outside Croydon including obsidian arrow heads from South America and Egyptian figurines. We include a small case of these objects laid out in the style of that museum in our interwar display, but nothing else could be used in Lifetimes (Figure 6).

Of the rest, over half were clearly from outside Croydon, of unclear provenance or date, dated from before 1830 (mostly trade tokens) or had deteriorated to such an extent that they had to be thrown away. Many of the remainder were council-related items of limited interest, such as committee signs and janitor’s buttons, that had no doubt been put in the cupboard because no one knew what else to do with them. Others had been given to the council for safekeeping in the hope that there would be a museum one day. Alison Pattison wrote to as many of the donors as she could. Few replied, most had either died or moved away.

One of these letters was sent to Muriel and Gwenyth Farr, who had given us a parasol amongst several other Edwardian items. All they said in their letter was that «Unlike today, ladies did not like to get brown or sunburnt». Alison did not receive a reply for nearly two years and when she did it was from a lady called Dorothy Bailey. Her sister Muriel had died and Gwenyth was very elderly and confused. Dorothy had found the letter when clearing out a drawer and she was happy to be interviewed. When I asked Dorothy about the parasol she launched a tirade about how strict her mother was and how she much preferred her father. The parasol no longer represented the theme of fashion, it now represented parenthood (Figure 7).
Dorothy, the youngest of the sisters, recalled «Mother never sat out in the garden without a sunshade, never. We all had sunshades in the garden. And on holiday. She liked us to be little bits of her really. You always had to do exactly as she said, you were never allowed to use your brains at all, not for anything. Another thing which used to annoy me, and it was really very unkind, when we went down to the seaside, and you got into the water as far as your knees, mother said ‘Come along child’ and she would take our heads, and my elder sister was told to take the feet, and they dunked you, you see. It was a quick way, but really it was a horrible thing. Father would always put himself out on holiday. We’d go for long walks together and fly kites. I used to love flying kites. We used to play cricket and look for shells. He was very nice when we were on holiday.»

<table>
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<th>From Grangewood Museum</th>
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<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrown Away</td>
<td>36 objects</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being researched (unclear provenance or date)</td>
<td>54 objects</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre 1830</td>
<td>25 objects</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post 1830</td>
<td>130 objects</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>647 objects</td>
<td>100%</td>
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Figure 6: Breakdown of the original Croydon collection
When we could not contact the donors, we were sometimes able to find someone who had relevant memories. Quite a few of our usable items were crests and badges, not the most inspiring objects to my way of thinking. One of them represented RAF Kenley, a local air force base during World War Two. Accompanied by the memories of a fighter pilot it certainly came to life (Figure 8).

**RESEARCHING OTHER MUSEUM COLLECTIONS**

But although our own collection was small, it provided 41% of the exhibits for the earliest display and 25% of those on the second display. Most of the rest were either models, reproductions or came from other museum collections (Figure 9).

At the time, few museums had their information on computer databases and I often spent days scanning accession registers for the word «Croydon». Most of the times I found it, it was part of the donor's address. But when I looked in the object's
history file, I rarely found any connection between the object and Croydon people other than the act of donation. To begin with, many earlier museum workers seemed far more concerned with a detailed description of the physical condition of the object than finding out about its past. There was rarely any evidence that they had tried to do so. Where the donor's letters did provide such information it was usually to say that the objects had been used by the family before they moved to Croydon.

Some museums, such as the National Railway Museum, had excellent databases, but could not provenance most of their material down to local level. They had traditionally organised their collection by railway company and even the earliest, smallest railway companies covered an area larger than a single town.

The Science Museum also had computerised collection records. Their search for the word Croydon turned up literally hundreds of items. However, most of them were in the electrical department, what a non-specialist can only describe as «black boxes with knobs on» made by Croydon companies. These were of limited interest since work is only one of our 25 themes and manufacturing has never been the mainstay of local people's employment.

When I eventually realised that other museums organised their collections to suit their own and not my needs, I began to be more specific in my requests. For example, I knew that the Captain Fitzroy of The Beagle had lived in Croydon. (The Beagle was the ship that took Darwin to the Galapagos Islands, where he gathered the information that led to the theory of

<table>
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<th>SOURCE OF LIFETIMES OBJECTS</th>
<th>Set 1</th>
<th>Set 2</th>
<th>Set 3</th>
<th>Set 4</th>
<th>Set 5</th>
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<td>57%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>52%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Figure 9: Source of Lifetimes Objects.
RELIGION QUESTIONNAIRE

Please note that we are interested in things used during all parts of Croydon’s history, right up to the present day.

We are also interested in things used in all parts of the London Borough of Croydon, from Norwood to Whyteleafe, Kenley to Sanderstead.

Name

Address

Telephone number

Do you have anything that was used in religious building and public prayer? e.g. candlesticks, prayer wheels, chauri, incense sticks, shoe racks, cassocks, Torah covers, pulpits and altar cloths

Period during which the objects were used

Do you have anything that was used in private worship or religious festivals? e.g. prayer shawls and caps, Eid cards, firecrackers, nativity scenes and cribs, Divali gifts, rosaries, matzo packets, kirpans and kanga

Period during which the objects were used

Do you have anything that was used in social and cultural activities or organisations associated with your religion? e.g. musical instruments, collecting boxes for charity, religious teaching aids, foundation stones and commemorative plaques

Period during which the objects were used.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP

Figure 10: Religion Questionnaire
evolution.) So I asked the Natural History Museum if they had any specimens collected on that voyage and they lent us a marine iguana stuffed on the orders of Captain Fitzroy himself!

**OBJECT ORIENTATED INTERVIEWING**

With our own collection and The Living Memories Show objects allocated to display periods and themes, I could look for gaps to be filled. And the gaps were massive: we had nothing on themes such as religion and death for any of the displays. To fill them I sent questionnaires to everyone on our mailing list, compiled from those we had contacted through our Roadshows and The Living Memories Show, anyone who had offered us material since and interesting people that I had read about in the local paper. They were also sent to any related institutions and firms. The religion questionnaire was sent to places of worship and scripture bookshops, the death questionnaire to funeral directors, florists and monumental masons.

These questionnaires were very simple, with no more than three or four questions on each, and were sent out with postage paid envelopes to encourage the recipients to reply (Figure 10). On them I gave examples of the types of things we were looking for, to encourage people to think of their belongings as potential museum exhibits. I regularly sent out 500 questionnaires and rarely got more than 30 replies, but that was quite enough.

As time went by and we had filled more and more of the gaps, the questionnaires asked for more specific objects and memories. Objects representing Death were some of the most difficult to find. During The Living Memories Show several visitors had asked why we had not covered a 1961 air crash in Stavanger, Norway in which 34 Croydon schoolboys had died. The school they attended was happy to lend us a memorial plate and a questionnaire turned up a man who had been due to go on the flight as a child and who had been friends with some of the victims.

Once we had a handful of gaps left to fill we tried other means: press releases and letter to the local newspapers, personal contacts and colleagues. The most difficult display to collect for was the most recent because people were reluctant to consider their 70s and 80s belongings as museum pieces. This was also the only display in which we could include the memories of the under 30s, since they were too young to remember before 1970. We had a gap in health and thought that one of the most important contemporary health issues was AIDS. So we approached the local AIDS Outreach worker who lent us a condom demonstrator. We had a gap in parenthood, so when our other collection manager, Ann Carter, had her first baby in a local hospital, she kept her baby tag and naval clamp and told us all about the birth.

By the time I started writing the questionnaires, I was lucky enough to have my assistant, Jon Brown. Jon was able to interview much more productively than I had. He already knew that the person he was going to see had offered us something for display. He could ask the interviewee about the object in particular and then ask them to expand on the theme it represented. He rarely interviewed anyone for longer than two hours and thus spent far
less time on the associated paperwork. Not that everything was always what it seemed. Frances Stewart responded to a questionnaire asking for a souvenir of a Mediterranean holiday in the 1960s. We wanted something to represent leisure, but what we got was sex (Figure 11).

MINORITY GROUP RECORDING

Very few of the people who offered us things belonged to any minority groups. We tried to reach a more representative selection of the Croydon population by sending our questionnaires to all the voluntary groups associated with disabled people, lesbians, gay men and minority ethnic groups. We rarely got a reply.

Members of these voluntary groups may have been discouraged from responding because they have been traditionally excluded from history. But they also probably have more pressing items on their agendas: campaigning for equal rights, trying to maintain their culture in a hostile environment and so on. Helping their local museum cannot have been high on their list of priorities. We had to try harder, so we hired freelance researchers experienced in the histories of these groups; Niamh Dillon for Irish people, Devika Banerjee for South Asian people, Ayiah Jahan and Nyalah Asantewa for African Caribbean people. Since the museum has opened Rachel Hasted has interviewed lesbians on our behalf and our own Jon Brown has interviewed gay men. Future projects are planned with people with learning diffi-
culties and physically disabled people.

All our specialist researchers found it difficult to persuade people to take part in this project. The people they approached were concerned about being stereotyped, worried about being misrepresented. Niamh’s interviewees felt that Irish people are generally portrayed as terrorists or drunks. Gay men were keen to point out to Jon that they were not paedophiles, although they knew he was gay himself.

The researchers found it easiest to approach people who already had a high public profile such as local councillors, the organisers of voluntary groups or religious leaders. These people suggested other potential interviewees and mentioning their names could often ensure a warmer welcome.

All the researchers felt that it was a great advantage to be of the same ethnicity or sexuality as the people they interviewed. They felt that sharing memories with them broke the ice and that they could ask more pertinent questions because they came from the same perspective. They also felt that the interviewees were more relaxed and confident with them than they would be with a researcher who did not share their minority status.

None of the people that they approached had offered belongings to the museum. So the researchers used life story interviewing to find out what they had to lend. Sometimes we looked to other sources to find an object to represent an important theme. For example, all the gay men over 50 mentioned the impact of the Wolfenden Report on their lives. This government report, published in 1957, recommended that homosexuality be partially decriminalised, though the law was not changed for another 10 years. None of them had a copy of the report, so we bought one. It was a topic we felt we had to cover.

The results we obtained by working with members of minority groups high-
lighted one of the great advantages of collecting through oral history: that we could treat people as individuals rather than stereotypes. John, the gay man whose memories accompany the Wolfenden Report, felt very isolated and depressed in the 50s and 60s (Figure 12). Ray, who is also gay, had a wonderful time in the Royal Navy during the same period.

Neither are members of minority groups represented solely in terms of their minority status. Just because someone belongs to a certain group, it does not follow that their «membership» governs every aspect of their life. Lesbians talk about working as electricians and psychiatric nurses, about coping with disability and moving home, as well as about being thrown out of the army because of their sexuality. Their minority status is not mentioned unless it is pertinent to the story being told.

By taking this approach, there is a danger that the minority groups we want to represent become invisible within the exhibition. Their belongings are exhibited on the same six displays as everyone else and they rarely signal minority status in themselves. The Irish interviewees lent us exhibits that included boxing boots, a serving plate, a navy shirt and a policeman’s whistle. But the only object in Lifetimes that visually indicates the presence of Irish people is a heavily embroidered Irish dancing dress. To make minority groups visible, we distribute free pamphlets summarising their contributions to both Lifetimes and Croydon’s history.

CONCLUSION

Lifetimes opened in March 1995 and it has been very well received by visitors. 97% of those surveyed found it good value for money.

Part of our success has been due to our extensive use of multimedia. Every exhibit has a conventional label on a touchscreen in front of the relevant display. It also has a brief documentary. Most of the documentaries feature the voices and photographs of the donors or other local people whose memories illuminate particular objects. Each display has a simple introductory panel, but otherwise there is no text on view. This has enabled us to make the most of our limited space (275.5 square meters). The effect is that of a well designed junk shop. Visitors notice new objects on subsequent visits although the displays have not been changed.

But another part of our success is that our exhibition is so «real». It contains real objects, used by real people who tell us about their own experiences in their own voices. Some of the stories are sad, some are funny, most are interesting, a few a little dull - just like real life. In the words of one of our visitors, Lifetimes is

Absolutely wonderful. I will come back again so that I can listen to every story and memory. What an enchanting afternoon I’ve just spent!»

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