

## Audio file

[TFH - EP 3 - Building the Archive.mp3](#)

## Transcript

### **INTRO:**

You are listening to Their Finest Hour, a podcast from the University of Oxford.

### **Main transcript:**

My name is Catherine Conisbee, and I work one day a week as the Technical Support Officer for the Their Finest Hour project at the University of Oxford.

In terms of my professional background, I read history at university, with a particular focus on women's history and the stories and experiences of ordinary people. Then, after graduating, I spent around six years working in communications roles, mostly doing PR work, managing websites, social media, as well as databases and running different types of events.

In more recent years, I've been working in research support at the University of Oxford, and continuing to do that alongside my work with Their Finest Hour. So four days a week, I work as Project Officer with the Sustainable Digital Scholarship Service, which is one of the research data management services providing support to academic colleagues across the University of Oxford.

I have to say though, in many ways, it's probably my communications experience that attracted me to Their Finest Hour. While working for the National Trust at Waddesdon Manor, I was really lucky to have the privilege of working closely with some inspiring curators, as well as Waddesdon's archivist and conservation team, while looking to find ways of communicating the stories surrounding Waddesdon's collections and archives. It was while doing that that I was probably first struck by the profound impact that sharing previously untold stories can have. And when I first read about Their Finest Hour, I could immediately see that the work that the project was doing in creating this online archive aimed at being a really inclusive and diverse record of experiences was going to be important and I knew that this was something I wanted to play a part in helping to make happen, if I could.

So the focus of my role as Technical Support Officer for Their Finest Hour has and will necessarily change and evolve throughout the life cycle of this two-year project, meaning that my To-Do List this month looks quite different than it did when I first joined the team. And it's no doubt very different to what it will look like in six months' time. That said, up until very recently, my primary focus has been working with our PI, Dr Lee, and with the Co-PI and Project Manager, Dr Kidd, to devise and develop and implement the digital systems and processes which will enable this crowdsourcing project to work.

Essentially, on the technical side, we had to design and then construct a digital home for this Online Archive with a door to let people's stories in, the walls to keep them safe and then, of course, like any good physical archive or library, some really solid shelves to put these stories on.

Well, at least that's how I tend to try and explain it to people.

But now that that digital construction phase is complete and the Online Archive's doors have been well and truly thrown open, as it were, my focus at the moment has shifted more towards the day-to-day maintenance management of back end systems and managing the submissions we're receiving from members of the public and keeping everything organised. And answering queries and and then, in the coming months, as the archive hopefully continues to grow, I'll begin the work needed to steadily prepare the archive, ready for publication in its entirety online in June 2024.

I guess, really in my mind, Digital Humanities kind of does what it says on the tin. I've heard colleagues talking about working in this area as being at the intersection between computing or digital and humanities disciplines like English and History. But to be honest, I think I see digital humanities as more of a marriage of those things. And, in terms of what this looks like in practice, it can be anything from using digital tools to create interactive maps and visualisations to show, for instance, the rise and fall of the Roman Empire using social network analysis to explore the relationships between certain individuals or groups of individuals like the interesting work they've been doing at the University of Cambridge on the Darwin Letters.

Or, for instance, it could be using texting, coding to mark up historic correspondence or works of literature so as to be able to better analyse them, essentially. I mean, I have to say I think we're really lucky at Oxford to have such a thriving digital humanities community and my experience to date, both at Oxford, and also externally to Oxford, the digital humanists are always really helpful and keen to learn from each other, which makes it a really exciting and enjoyable space to work in.

Crowdsourcing is often talked about in terms of people-powered research, and I think that's a really useful way to think about it. It's essentially when a project or organisation reaches outside of itself to engage with a large group, often the general public for a common purpose or to achieve a particular goal. Often utilising to some sort of digital tool or platform in order to this.

In a research context, crowdsourcing happens more often than not because the researchers couldn't be feasibly undertaken by a single individual team or organisation in isolation, or when it wouldn't be it you know it, it would be impractical to do so, take too larger resource and, on the flip side, if there are benefits to having lots of different voices. For instance, the RSPB's annual Big Garden Bird Watch is an example of a citizen science project that listeners might be familiar with.

There's quite a long history of crowdsourcing at Oxford, which means we have a lot of experience we can draw on. Particularly ,for instance, Dr Lee, who has been responsible for a number of very successful crowdsourcing projects and helped to devise the Community Collections Model that we'll be adopting for this project.

Crowdsourcing is really fundamental to Their Finest Hour as the project's aim of creating an Online Archive to preserve the memories and experiences of those who lived during the Second World War just simply wouldn't be possible without them being shared with us first, and at Their Finest Hour we're just the custodians of those stories.

I'd really encourage anyone out there listening who might have memories relating to World War Two, or even a short anecdote that's been passed down to them by members of the family to consider sharing it with us and contributing to the project via the Their Finest Hour website.

We'd also love for anyone interested in the project to consider joining the Their Finest Hour team as a volunteer, either to help out at a Digital Collection Day event or run one in their own community and more information about how to do this and the training available can also be found on the website.

OK, so in terms of how the Their Finest Hour Online Archive is going to work, we're reaching out to individuals, their families and their communities up and down the country and beyond to ask that they share their stories and memories with us, as well as photographs, letters that they may have in the attic and objects like jewellery or even toys that that they were given - really anything that might they might have, which is related to the Second World War, so that these can be included in our online archive.

With this project, we're trying to build a really rich picture of the experiences that people had. So even if someone thinks that this might not be that exciting to someone else not in my family that has a huge amount of value, even though it's personal it and has personal importance, it also has historic value, and importance too, and we'd love to see it.

Their Finest Hour Online Archive really hinges on this idea of "if you build it, they will come!" And, actually, I'd say this is doubly so in our case, as we hope to have this kind of virtuous circle of story sharing. So, our hope is that in addition to contributing to the Online Archive and sharing stories that those taking part will also be interested in coming back to see the contributions that have been made by others.

There are two ways people can share their stories and objects with us. Either they can complete the online submission form by clicking on the "Share Your Story" button at the top of theirfinesthour.org website homepage, or by coming along in person to one of our digital collection day events where they can talk to a volunteer who will write down their story and digitise, or, in other words, photograph any of the items that they've brought along with them that they that they're happy to share.

All of the submissions made to the projects will then be made available for anyone to explore for free online from June 2024.

As I think I mentioned before, most crowdsourcing projects use some sort of digital platform or interface in order to collect the information that the project is looking for. In our case, the digital platform that we'll be using to gather the stories, memories and objects being shared with us by members of the public is called Omeka or Omeka. Omeka was chosen by the team following some really positive experiences of using it for another Heritage Lottery-funded project called Lest We Forget, which crowd sourced memories and objects relating to the First World War and that project ran from 2017 to 2019 and was the precursor to Their Finest Hour.

Omeka is geared towards managing collections. It's designed to be really user friendly and lends itself well to crowdsourcing as submissions can be made without people needing to go through the

process of creating an account or needing to navigate through lots of pages. So hopefully people will find it really easy to use and if anyone listening has any queries, they're welcome to get in touch and we'll try and help if we can.

So, as I mentioned before, one of the ways that people can make contributions to the Their Finest Hour online archive is by heading over to our website and clicking on the "Share Your Story" page, which will take you to the online submission form that we have. And, on that form, you'll find just at the top there's some helpful information explaining how to make the submission - the kinds of information that you might need to have with you before you start. And when you scroll down, you'll see that you're being asked for contact details, and this is only so that if there are any issues with your submission, we can get in touch if we need to.

Or, you know, equally if we receive any press interest about someone's submission, we can reach out to them about that as well. But we'll never share someone's contact details. It really is only so that we can help if we need.

Beneath this you'll see space where we ask you to "Share Your Story", and we suggest if this is more than 10,000 characters that it be uploaded as a separate document so that you can include as much or as little as you'd like. But don't worry about that too much.

Within the form, we also ask questions about who the story relates to, just to give a bit more detail, and we also ask for the details of what's in the photographs or the files being uploaded, because it's not always obvious looking at a photograph what that photograph is of, particularly when it comes to sort of very personal or very specific objects.

And then just at the bottom of that submission form we do also ask some further more general questions which are completely optional, and that's because we're trying to get a better understanding of how the person that's making the submission first heard the story, or how they came to have the objects. And we also ask about contributors thoughts on discussions that are being had around World War 2 today.

Lastly, on the online submission form, there's a tick box option to indicate whether or not someone making a submission wants that submission to remain anonymous. So, for the most part, will be publishing contributors' name, just their name with submission, but that's again is completely optional. If someone prefers they can click that box and we won't do that it. It means that their name won't appear anywhere on the record.

We do ask that anyone interested in making a submission via the online submission form make sure that they read the Terms of Service first, which there's just a link at the bottom, so you can have a look at those, and we ask that you indicate you've done so and that you're happy to agree to these by just clicking on the tick box. And then you can, once everything's done, have a scan up and have a look that everything that you're expecting to is there and that you've uploaded anything that you want to share with us.

And then you can hit submit, and you'll know your submission has been successful as you'll see a confirmation screen pop up with this black and white photograph of someone giving you the "thumbs up" - so that's a sign that everything works as it should.

If for any reason anyone has any difficulties, you know we always say do reach out to us and let us know and we can help you if you're experiencing any difficulties with that online submission form.

As mentioned previously, we're going to be using Omeka to collect these submissions from members of the public. Both the submissions being made online via the online submission form and also the submissions being made via Digital Collection Days. We're then going to look at releasing the archive in June 2024 online using a digital repository managed by the university, called the SDS platform. And this repository will keep these stories and memories and objects safe and secure, long into the future, and will enable anyone to access them for free online at anytime.

So, in terms of the Terms and Conditions for taking part in Their Finest Hour and contributing to the Online Archive, we asked that anyone making a submission, whether that's online using the submission form or if that's going along to an in-person Digital Collection Day event, we asked that they make sure that they own the story, memories and objects that they're sharing with us that you know that they own the copyright. It's if their sharing or if they're sharing it on behalf of a living relative or family member, that that relative has given their consent and understands the implications of that. So in other words, they understand what they're agreeing to.

And, so, in that sense, what we're asking really is anyone interested in taking part acts responsibly. The online archive is going to be made available for anyone to use and to explore online for free, and so it's important that anyone making a submission is happy for that to happen.

I should also add that if someone agrees to all the Terms and Conditions, makes a submission and then changes their mind, well, you know that's absolutely fine and they can request for that submission to be removed. You know, we'll do this, of course.

And I should say, too, that equally in in our Terms and Conditions, we do say that we also reserve the right to exclude a submission from the Online Archive if we find it breaches the Terms and Conditions, for instance, by including really offensive or inappropriate material and our full Terms and Conditions can be found by just clicking on the link at the bottom of the online submission form.

So, there are lots of different ways to get involved in Their finest Hour. Lots of different volunteering opportunities, doing different jobs, different tasks. And one of those is helping with the upload of stories and objects that have been contributed over the course of a Digital Collection Day event.

And so, volunteers at the end of the event usually, you know – it can also be done during the event – we'll upload material to Omeka so that it can be included in the Online Archive, and this is really straightforward to do. It's really easy, and we'll be providing lots of training sessions – lots of opportunities to find out how to do this, and we can give, you know, ongoing support so that if anyone has any questions, or they find that they want a bit more help, then that's something, you know, all of us in the team are happy to help with.

I think the Their Finest Hour Online Archive is going to prove important to different people for lots of different reasons. For myself, personally, it's about holding on to individual histories so that they're not forgotten, particularly as we move further in time, away from the Second World War. When generations look back at this period in our history, it's important that it's not stripped down to being just a matter of numbers and dates and battles.

Only, you know, so much of our understanding of the past is a reflection of the choices that individuals have made to keep things and care for them. As someone saying, “do you know what,

actually, I might just hang on to that”, and then someone else doing the same - and so on and so forth.

And, you know, this is still pertinent today. It's slightly counterintuitive, but although we now have a large number of digital tools at our disposal as individuals to keep a record of the things that matter to us, these digital devices and platforms are really more fragile than people might realise.

And technological obsolescence has already proven to be an issue. This is why archives and projects like Their Finest Hour continue to play an important role and, you know, why this role and the responsibility of preservation is taken so seriously.

And so that's one side of it, and the other more personal reason this project really resonates with me is that my late mother lost her father quite suddenly, when she was 12. So, you know, the only things I know about him, really, other than his name, is that he was supposedly involved in some way in helping to coordinate the construction of the Mulberry harbours. Both because she was so young and because they lived between Sierra Leone and England for lots of things, you know, paper records and ephemera and objects were just left behind.

And so I don't really know anything about his wartime story, or his experiences of living at that time in history.

So, where stories of World War Two - surviving families and these stories being shared, it keeps their family memories alive, but also for people like me who don't have this - its like getting an extra thread in the tapestry that you're trying to weave. So, if someone shares their grandfather's ration card for example, some like me can look at that and say, “Oh, that's what my grandfather would have had - one of those!” He would have held something like that. And you know that that has a lot of value.

So that's a roundabout way of saying that I think that archives like this one are vital in holding on to stories that might otherwise be lost in keeping them safe. They enable those curious enough to engage with them to better understand how we got to where we are, and, particularly, as we move forward and in living in a time of so much misinformation, so much transience, I think the idea of having, you know, people around, you know, or projects saying, “You know what? We'll just hang on to this!” It seems more pertinent than ever, and it's why it's so wonderful to see already how many people are willing to share their stories with us.

All the information submitted by members of the public contributing to the project, with the exception of contact details of course, will be reviewed by a member of the project team before being added to the Their Finest Hour online archive, which, as I've said before, will be made available for anyone to access for free online from June 2024.

Our hope is that the archive, as a whole, will be used by interested members of the public, teachers, students, researchers and so on. And we hope that, for example, the answers to those additional 5 optional questions at the bottom of the submission forms will help our own team, the Their Finest Hour team, better understand the relationships that people have to the Second World War today.

We've received lots of different submissions so far, all of which have been wildly different from one another, which is exactly what we were hoping for. We've had a Christmas pudding recipe just before Christmas, we've had War Diaries, photographs of badges and patches from uniforms and even stories about how peoples' parents met, which has just been so incredible, really!

And you know, the other thing that's been really wonderful to see is that people have been making multiple submissions, which is something, you know, that we welcome and encourage. So someone might submit a submission that's a story relating to their mother's family, their mother, and then we'll come back and do a second submission relating to their father's experience during the war.

We're also seeing a lot of diversity. People who had relatives that saw action or were stationed in different countries and were from different countries, and, you know, that's exactly what we were hoping would happen and we hope to see more of that over the coming months.

**A recollection of the Norwich Blitz:** So, this was a submission someone shared about how, in 1942, when their father was just 16 years old and living outside Norwich, despite the fact that bombs had been falling all around the city the night before, he got up in the morning and he went along anyway into the city to attend a long-awaited dental appointment, picking his way past piles of rubble where buildings had collapsed. And when he reached the dentist surgery, it was still operating and despite having no windows, making the procedure a bit more uncomfortable. And then once the procedure was done, he got the bus and went back home.

And I think it's natural perhaps to assume in times of crisis that all normal activity stops. It's hard to imagine that life kind of carrying on and this submission made me really reflect on how this is, you know, in many cases is a bit of a misconception, maybe. I can now imagine similar stories having played out during much more recent conflicts, and I find this, you know, the ability that people have to carry on and when they know they need to get something done, they they'll go ahead and do it.

And I find that both oddly comforting and disconcerting in equal measure, so that that was one that I think will probably stay with me.

#### **OUTRO:**

You can find Their Finest Hour Podcast wherever you get your podcasts. Please like and subscribe, rate and review the show. You can also follow our project on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Simply Google Their Finest Hour to find out more.