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Transcript

Presenter: Dr. Joseph Quinn:

[Intro tune: “White Cliffs of Dover” by Vera Lynn]

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

Presenter: Dr. Joseph Quinn:

Thank you for tuning in. This is the *Their Finest Hour* Podcast, which is the official brand podcast for *Their Finest Hour* project, which we are running at the University of Oxford.

Now, you're probably wondering what *Their Finest Hour* is? Well, we'll get to that shortly.

This is the first episode of our podcast series, and in this episode, and for the first few episodes to come, I guess, we are going to explain to you what this project is about, how it works, and how we intend to coordinate it throughout the UK over the coming. Important to note that the podcast series you will hopefully be listening to over the course of the next year and a half, or longer, is going to document this journey and bring you lots of amazing stories and content concerning the events of the Second World War – content and stories that we think you're going to absolutely love.

But to start at the very beginning, I'm going to introduce you to our Team, beginning with the head of our project, our Principal Investigator, Dr. Stuart Lee, and the Co investigator and Project Manager Dr Matthew Kidd. In this 20-minute episode, they will explain the origins of this project and how we intend to pull it off over the course of 2023.

I hope you enjoy the show.

Dr. Stuart Lee:

So my name is Dr Stuart Lee and I am the ‘PI’ on *Their Finest Hour*.

My role at the university is I am a senior member of the Faculty of English, Language and Literature, where I teach poetry of the First World War, and a bit about the poetry Second World War. But I've also lectured on digital humanities and fantasy literature, and other things.

Dr. Matthew Kidd:

My name is Dr Matthew Kidd. I am the Project Manager for *Their Finest Hour*.

Now I was involved in the precursor project, *Lest We Forget*, most recently. That was between 2017 and 2019. So, I worked closely with Doctor Stuart Lee on that.

I'm passionate about the study of ordinary people during the 20th century, and so you can see why, perhaps, I'm interested in the project of this nature - this bottom-up project where we're not just looking at Admirals and high officials and executives - we're looking at what you might call the "people's history" and stories of the war.

And so, I obviously have my own research interests in that area, and so I'm delighted to be working on a project of this.

Dr. Stuart Lee:

So the background to *Their Finest Hour* probably goes back about 20 odd years. Although you could say that the University of Oxford has been involved in crowdsourcing for even longer than that.

In fact, the first way of operating the Oxford English Dictionary was to send out requests to the public to write back on slips of paper words that they would like to see in the dictionary and some sources for them. So, you know, we're going back 120-130 years there, at least, to some early forms of crowdsourcing.

But, obviously, with the advent of the new technologies in the 90s and so on, this concept of user-generated content, or citizen science or crowdsourcing, became quite popular. And the first time we really dabbled in this was with something called the Great War Archive.

I'd actually been working on IT projects to do with First World War, and particularly First World War poetry, going back to 1991 when I did my first teaching package based around the poet Eisen Rosenberg's poem, 'Break of Day in the Trenches'. And I moved that to the web in about '93'. So, it's still. It's still there, and it's probably one of the longest standing web-based tutorials, certainly, to teach literature, I think.

And then in 1996 to 1998, we received a small amount of money and we started to play around with digitisation of manuscripts. So we digitised the main collection of manuscripts held here, and in the British Library, of the poet Wilfred Owen. And rather than just put them up and say people can look at the manuscripts of his poetry, we put some tutorials around them. These are all simple web-based tutorials.

And then ten years later we received some more money - this was in 2006 to 2008 - to expand that to other poets. So Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and so on - and we built what's called the First World War Poetry Digital Archive. But, at the time, there was interest growing in crowdsourcing, and the technology had allowed this. Particularly, there were there were a few projects around where people could submit things online, and we thought, as a very small exercise, we would create a crowdsourcing spin-off to the First World War Poetry Digital Archive and ask people from around the country to send us anything they might have to do about poetry from the First World War.

We also said, well, it could just be about anything to do with the First World War. So we created an upload site which attracted quite a few contributions. But we also came up with this idea of running a Collection Day - the very first one we ran in the Public Library in in Oxford City Centre - and the idea was that people would actually bring in the item that they held and we would take pictures of it and we might make a few notes about the item and about them. And that would go into the archive.

And, actually, the Collection Day became more and more prominent in our way of operating, so we ran probably about a dozen around the country. All told, the Great War Archive, which only ran for about six or seven months, collected about 4,000 items.

What we also noticed, when we were doing that project, was, at one point, we started to receive submissions from the Orkneys. And it was quite a bit. We looked it up and we found out that they'd obviously taken our model of the Collection Day and run their own one. And that that got us to thinking that, you know, there might be a way of doing this on scale.

The project generated interest in Europeana, a PAN European Digital Library initiative, and they sought funding and worked with us to run what eventually became Europeana 1914-1918, where we ran a series of 'crowd collecting' and crowdsourcing projects across about 15 to 20 countries in Europe, and that that collected probably about 3 – 400,000 items. So, it's absolutely enormous! And you can go and look at that online if you if you Google Europeana 1914-1918.

And then, as we approach the centenary of 1918, we brought the project back to the UK and we got a small amount of seed funding from the University of Oxford. And then we were approached by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission who were successful in attracting some funding from the Heritage Lottery fund, and we ran what's known as *Lest We Forget*. Now, it was slightly different in that we weren't really setting out to run large collection days ourselves. In Europeana, we ran them in big stats bibliotechs, and so on, big museums! Here, we wanted to sort of democratise the whole process, and train people around the country on how they could run their own collection day in village halls or in schools, and so on, and we would give them the training, the documentation they would go off and run them, and then anything that they captured on the day would be put into our database.

And this really worked very well! We had about 30 to 40 collection days across the country, some of them run by village community centres - faith centres. There were some six former students who picked it up and ran with it with their teachers at a school – it happened about two or three times in schools - and it really showed that actually there was a model here, which we now call the 'Oxford Community Collection' model, which could just branch out and could be used extensively.

Now, right from the beginning, and going back to the Great War Archive, we were asked all the time about are you going to do this for the Second World War? And, I have to say, we were a bit reluctant to do it for all kinds of reasons, but primarily about the scale and also the sensitivities around the Second World War, which we felt were quite raw.

However, again, with a small bit of seed funding from the University of Oxford, we thought we would try this. Jointly, with the National Army Museum (NAM), in December 2019 we ran a pilot of *Their Finest Hour* where, again, we invited people to bring material in, come to the NAM site in Chelsea and, this time, it was to do with the Second World War.

And we also developed it a bit further. We wanted to look at some demographic information about the contributors and also probe a bit deeper into their thoughts about the legacy of the war and how the war is appropriated in modern contemporary discourse. And it ran very well. It proved that we believed we could do this for the Second World War, but, unfortunately, then the pandemic hit. So things went on ice for a couple of years. However, we now have successfully attracted funding, again, through the Heritage Lottery Fund to run *Their Finest Hour* for the next two years, leading up to the launch in June 2024, when we will make the full archive available.

But again, it's on this model of training people to run their own collection days and really spreading this out across the country at a very, very local level.

Dr. Matthew Kidd:

This project offers many things to historians, researchers, and educators.

This is a real interdisciplinary project and, we hope, based on our previous experience of working on Lest We Forget and some other initiatives that, not only historians would benefit from the outputs, but also scholars of memory studies, linguistics, English and sociology.

There are two main ways that, I think, researchers broadly will benefit from the project.

Firstly, if they get involved in the project now and until 2024, they can either attend our events or even, if they want to put themselves forward, run events. Now that would put them into direct contact with the people who are sharing these stories about the Second World War. It will give them direct contact with the subjects that they often write about or research about and coming along to these events they get a real sense of how they feel about the subject under discussion rather than just what they write or what they left to history. So those scholars around things like memory studies and also people looking at the history of emotions, for example, will get a unique insight into these different perspectives.

But I think the main research output that we're hoping to get out of this project and to use, I suppose, for academic circles going forward, is our archive, the online archive, which is live.

Now this, when it's launched on the 6th of June 2024, will include all of the written testimonies of people who participated in the project in some way, either through one of our collection events, or someone who submitted stories directly through the archive. That we hope is in the hundreds, if not thousands, and we really hope and expect, again based on our experience of previous projects, that there's going to be a real diversity of testimony.

We use a blend of data gathering methods. So again, educators and researchers will really benefit from that. We're not just sticking to set questions, we're also allowing free form kind of interviews as well. There will also be audio recordings of the testimonies. There will be transcriptions of those audio recordings. So again, historians and others working in a diverse range of areas will be able to look at the different methods we've used not only to gather this data, but to present it.

We're also going to be including visualisations of data in lots of new exciting ways, using new cutting-edge technology developed here at Oxford and elsewhere. And overall we really just hope that this archive serves as a kind of bottom up history of the Second World War that can be used in lots of different ways.

The model that Dr. Stuart Lee has talked about, and which we are using again for this project, is called the 'Oxford Community Collection' model. Now the main core of that model is what we call a 'Digital Collection Day'.

Now, this is usually a one-day event where members of the public bring along their Second World War-related stories or objects to be digitised, i.e., photographed or scanned or recorded digitally in some way, and then uploaded to the *Their Finest Hour* Online Archive by volunteers.

So that, in a nutshell, is what this collection day is about.

In terms of how that works in practice, we've tried to simplify things by saying that there are four steps, or 4 stages to the collection day process:

Firstly, we have the Welcome Stage. This, as you can imagine, if you go into a large museum, there will be a reception area. It serves the same purpose. We have a Welcome Desk. This is where visitors are welcomed, where they're introduced to the project and the event. This is the first thing the

visitors will see when they arrive, and this is where they will have to sign and read some forms focusing on things like consent, data protection and other familiar forms.

The second stage is what we call the Interview Stage. Now, even though that sounds very formal, this is intended to be a fairly informal interview. This is where volunteers talk to visitors about their Second World War story and/or objects, and this is where all that information about the objects and stories is jotted down, either on paper or on a laptop. There will also be, in a novel departure from previous events, there's going to be 5 set questions.

Once the interview stage is complete, and all that information has been logged, we move to the Digitization Stage. This is the third stage of the process.

As it suggests, this is where objects are digitised. Now, by digitised we mean photographed digitally, recorded in some way that it can be stored on computers.

Which then leads us into the fourth final stage - the Upload Stage. Once we've collected all that information on various different forms and in various different formats, it's then the task of the volunteers, with our assistance, to get everything into the archive, and that is usually done after the event.

So there's four stages; Welcome, Interview, Digitization and Upload.

The project engages with local communities and groups in various different ways. It's one of the core themes and the core ambitions of the project to capture the real diversity of wartime experience. The social diversity of that experience, the geographical diversity, cultural and religious, and so.

And the bottom up nature of this project really encourages this, we feel. It allows communities to lead on the project. It's not just five Oxford-based people running these events and dictating how these events go. We are putting the model out there, encouraging people to take that model and really run with it and adapt it in whichever way suits the local peculiarities or circumstances.

So the main initiative of the project, even though this is, obviously, centrally-funded and run from Oxford, the main initiative will come from ordinary people, from all sections of UK society, to run events in their communities and, at present the number of Volunteer-run events far exceeds the number of Centrally-Coordinated events, and that was always the design of the project.

We already have interest from the Gurkha Museum, the Burma Star Memorial Fund, the Sikh Pioneers and Light Infantry Association, South Asian Heritage Month, the Jewish Museum, just to name a few. And so we're already well on course to ensure that the diversity of the wartime experiences is really reflected in our Online Archive.

Their Finest Hour, we feel, differs from previous crowdsourcing projects in several ways. We feel the main way is the Volunteer-run nature of the project. Even though this is a centrally-run project and it's been funded and there's five of us based in Oxford, the initiative really is coming from local volunteers, which really encourages diversity. That's something that we haven't seen so much in previous crowdsourcing projects where many of the materials and many of the, I suppose, the formats of these events are centrally dictated. That's not the case here.

We have a model that we're putting out there, and we're hoping that local people and people across the UK are going to adapt that to best suit their local circumstances.

There's also a blend of open form and set questions, so we're testing out different methods within the same collection day, and that's, again, one of the benefits of our project, we feel.

Also, I think one of the things that sets us apart from previous projects is the focus on objects. So, while we are collecting stories and many of these submissions that we will get into the archive, whether that's through a direct upload or through one of the collection events, we will have a lot of focus on objects and the stories attached to objects. Which really allows us to engage with the work of scholars of memory studies, for example, not just in how people remember things, but how people attach emotions, feelings – and feelings like nostalgia, and things like that, to physical objects and how they're used in the remembering process.

There are several reasons why we think it's important to run a project of this nature now. Firstly, we don't want to wait until 2039 to capture these stories. We did that with First World War initiatives, *Lest We Forget*, but also there were several initiatives across the board that waited until 2018 to capture the memories of, unfortunately, not the generation that were involved in the First World War, but those that came after.

We don't want to wait, basically, until 2039. We need to get this done now as soon as possible and there are several reasons for that.

Firstly, unfortunately, as time moves on, many of the stories, the memories and even the artefacts are being forgotten. As we move further into the future, the stories of those who fought and died in the war are going to pass from living memory, and so the stories and objects of all of those who were part of that generation are unfortunately being lost.

Now very few families in Britain and the Commonwealth were untouched by the war. This was a truly global conflict, with over 8 and a half million people from the Empire and Dominions serving. And so, we really feel like this is something that needs to be tapped into and really needs to be captured before it's too late.

Now, many of those sacrifices are remembered, but unfortunately for many these are only half remembered. These are half remembered from tales handed down through different generations, and often when that happens, and there's a transference of memory from generation to generation, facts change, details change, and things are lost. And so we really think it's important to capture that right now.

And this is possibly our last opportunity to galvanise people to find these family artefacts, to learn about them and to share the stories before they're lost forever.

Another reason is that many of the items that we expect to digitally archive are not recorded in any way. Many World War Two artefacts are small. They're personal, they're dispersed. They're kept in lofts, in cupboards, in drawers. These aren't the artefacts you'll see in a museum. They're the artefacts that, maybe, your grandparents keep in the loft somewhere.

Now, unfortunately because they're not recorded, it means that if they are lost, which they are very likely to be lost when there's, I don't know, a house move or when a family member dies, it means that they are lost to history and we really think it's important that these items, that are very valuable, both historically but also sentimentally, are recorded in some way.

Less so with the Second World War, but was definitely the case with the First World War, is a general lack of connection to that generation. As time goes on, I imagine it will be the same for the

Second World War generation. It's likely that most people who live in this country had ancestors that were involved in the conflict in some way.

We get a sense, particularly from the *Lest We Forget* project, that people don't always recognise the value of the objects that they have, and have been passed on to them. Not financial value, of course, but the value maybe for historians and for scholars and researchers across the disciplines.

So, to give you an anecdote, someone brought along some military artefacts that their granddad had passed over, and these were things like war medals, identity cards, and that kind of thing – all very important and really important that we get that in our archive.

But they also brought a carrier bag of papers with them, and when we inquired as to what was in the bag, they said, “Oh, it's just my grandmother's journal and my grandmother's papers that she kept to keep the budget going when she was at home when her husband was off fighting.”

Now, to us, that is extremely valuable, and we know that there are historians working on women's experiences during the war, and how did people manage the household when husbands were away, and that kind of thing.

And so, we really feel that it's important that a project of this kind places value on all those objects, and really encourages people to remember all of the objects that have been passed down and, equally, all of those stories too.

[Outro tune: “White Cliffs of Dover” by Vera Lynn]

Presenter: Dr. Joseph Quinn:

Thanks for reaching the end of our very first episode. We hope you enjoyed it.

You'd be happy to know that we intend to release regular episodes of *Their Finest Hour* Podcast over the coming year.

We will start with fortnightly episodes, and eventually weekly episodes.

And, as I said at the beginning, we will be bringing you lots of content and stories which will be taken directly from our Online Archive.

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.

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