Joanna Bornat, Professor of Oral History

Joanna Bornat was the first and is still the only Professor of Oral History in the UK. Like many other oral historians her academic career has been somewhat unconventional. She graduated in sociology in 1965 from the University of Leeds and began her PhD studies, supervised by Dr Vic Allen, on the effects of the outbreak of the First World War on textile trades unions in the West Riding. In 1967 she left Leeds to become a junior researcher, at Bradford University, working on a very early project in what was then called race- relations research.

After giving birth to two daughters and getting them to nursery age, she restarted her PhD at the University of Essex, where she met Paul Thompson. Paul, who was the pioneer of Oral History in the UK and is still pre-eminent in the field, persuaded her to redirect her research to include recorded interviews with the women, now old, who had been young workers in the Colne Valley in WW1. In 1980 her thesis, ‘An examination of the General Union of Textile Workers’ included twenty recorded interviews with those women.

By this time Joanna had become an oral historian, and was already joint editor of the Journal of the UK Oral History Society, a post she has held ever since. But she didn’t immediately move into academia: instead she took a job in the education department of Help the Aged, where she helped to develop the idea that reminiscence empowers older people. When old people talk about their lives together or tell their stories to others, you can see the effect. People who have been slumped in their chair an hour before have their shoulders erect and a light in their eyes. It’s sometimes called ‘reminiscence therapy’, but Joanna has little time for that title. It’s oral history in practice.

After five years Joanna moved to the Inner London Education Authority, to work in the Education Resource Unit for Older People (EDROP). After a couple of years the writing was on the wall for ILEA and she moved to the Open University. She joined the department which later became the Faculty of Health and Social Care as a Lecturer, and rose through the ranks to become Professor in 2003.

At the OU Joanna continued to work on reminiscence, publishing extensively on the subject. She used life-history interviews to find out how older parents and grandparents relate to younger generations in stepfamilies. She travelled in Armenia for the OU, gathering reminiscence interviews with survivors of the earthquake and the subsequent war with Azerbaijan. At the moment she’s working up a project to look at the history of the South Asian doctors whose work underpinned the National Health Service for decades, working with older people in the most undervalued parts of the service. This has led her to open up a new area of research, re-analysing archived oral histories of the (mostly white) pioneers of geriatric medicine, and theorising on the problems of re-analysis in general.
Oral historians can’t be bound by university walls. Joanna has always been involved, and continues to be involved, in community-based oral history projects. In the early 1980s she was chair of the Greater London Council-funded consortium “Exploring Living Memory”. ELM mounted three successful exhibitions with stands all over the Royal Festival Hall. In the late 1980s she ran the Woodberry Down project, recording the early life of one of the largest housing estates built by the London County Council. She’s given help and advice to mental health service users, community workers, local historians, students, care workers and family historians pursuing all oral history interests. At the moment she is working with King’s Cross Voices, helping to record the history of one of London’s most vibrant, misunderstood and exciting communities.

Oral history is less than forty years old. Its influence is still expanding: every television history programme which deals with events in living memory has an oral history component. More than that, though, oral history is special, different, exceptional. In Paul Thompson’s words: “Oral history has a value which reaches out beyond ordinary people, but where it is unique is that it can give a full place to ordinary people; there is no other method that can do that”. The Open University can be proud that it is the first university formally to recognise those special qualities, and to promote such an important subject.