

THE ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX, ENGLAND

by Mavis Waters

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At the University of Essex in England, oral history has become a regular part of the Social History programme under Paul Thompson, within the Sociology Department. Here a graduate course of instruction in oral history techniques is an optional part of the M.A. in Social History, the journal "Oral History" is edited as a medium for exchanging news and discussion of oral history projects throughout the country and overseas, as well as for the publication of articles, and an extensive archive of tapes and transcripts is being built up as a by-product of work in the field by practising historians and research students.

A major feature of the work engaged in to date has been the family history project--a survey of practices of child-rearing, family and household organization and sibling interaction in the period just before 1914, constructed on a nationwide basis by interviews with a sample of informants who were children at that time. In constructing the project Paul and Thea Thompson have based their sample on the categories of the census of 1911, and have worked with a lengthy questionnaire, which however is only the basis for the in-depth interviews in which the informants are led to talk freely along the line of their own perception of what is important about the question raised. Some of the findings of this survey have been used by Paul Thompson for his book, "The Edwardians".

Another area which is being pioneered is the study of occupational groups through the oral history method--especially such groups as agricultural labourers and small-boat fishermen whose traditional way of life will have passed out of living memory within another generation. Projects which graduate students currently have in hand, for instance, include one on Norfolk farm labourers, one on Essex farm women, on fishermen in Scotland and East coast ports, on ship-building workers, on the Kentish hop-fields, and on the needle trades. Concentration upon one occupation helps to delimit the field of study and provides links with both labour history and the sociology of work.

Essex historians are generous in the sharing of their technical know-how and welcoming to scholarly visitors who wish to know about their archive.

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