

WORCESTER LIFE STORIES

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Audio visual projections onto *The Commandery* as part of a Worcester Life Stories event once restrictions lifted. Credit: Worcester City Council

Worcester Life Stories began in 2020 as a collaboration between Worcester City Council's Historic Environment Record and Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care Trust, funded by National Lottery and Historic England. It grew from a desire to connect the HER's vast collection of 20th-century photographs with the audiences to whom they were most relevant and with a recognition from the Older Adult Mental Health Service of the power of reminiscence and Life Story work. This key partnership was forged to enable co-creation of two online platforms providing wide access to the collection and supporting local people, carers and professionals in improving health and wellbeing.

We aimed to bring people together through shared stories of Worcester, recognising that local people are the experts through their own lived experience. Bringing together archived heritage, digital technology and community events to promote wellbeing, it was clear from the outset that there was an enormous appetite for this, one only amplified as the country went into the Covid lockdown. We were forced to focus engagement through digital means, and after a live-streamed launch with cream teas delivered to participating care homes, found a successful formula providing weekly 'lockdown quizzes'. More than 120,000 participations were recorded during those long months of isolation, and the power of a photograph to ignite memory and bring people together

through their shared stories was hugely apparent.

Two platforms were developed through an iterative programme of workshoping, via online meeting platforms, together with support from stakeholders including Age UK and Platform Housing. **Know Your Place** (developed by Bristol City Council) has an established format using data (including photographs, oral histories and HER records) overlaid on searchable maps, and a crowd-sourcing function enabling people to share their own material. Discussions therefore focused around the heritage content people wanted to access, while the **Life Story** platform was built from scratch through public co-production. This innovative tool promotes wellbeing, communication and connection through



A visualisation of how the project was to be delivered. Credit: Worcester City Council

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sharing stories and what's important to individuals, enabling upload of images, text, video and audio to their own 'book'. By developing this tool digitally, users also benefit from access to **Know Your Place**, filling gaps in their story with images of the street where they grew up, or even searching thematically for the model of their first car!

An evaluation was carried out by the Association for Dementia Studies, University of Worcester, funded by Historic England. Using surveys and interviews, it explored how people were using the platforms and their impact. The evaluation found that the platforms were being used successfully by and with people of all ages, from school pupils through to older adults, including those living with dementia.

By using **Know Your Place**, pupils were able to connect to their local area and wider community, as they could see how old photos and maps related to the modern landscape that they were familiar with. Both platforms were used in intergenerational sessions where pupils worked with older people in the community. They provided a basis for conversations and discussion, with pupils asking older people about their lives and assisting with technology.

A series of heritage-related sessions with adults in a semi-independent living scheme used **Life Stories** in combination with object-handling as a framework for starting conversations around different topics. The platform itself wasn't actually used until the end, bringing everything together in a coherent whole, with individuals capturing thoughts in other formats, including audio recordings, in the meantime. This flexible approach worked well as it was felt that introducing the technology at the start may have been overwhelming for participants. The ability to capture people's thoughts and stories in their own words, either written or in audio, is a powerful way of giving people a voice.

For older adults, including those with dementia, both platforms provide a basis and relevant prompts for conversation and reminiscence activities. By being heritage-based and promoting the cultural importance of sharing stories, the platforms



Intergenerational event at a local independent-living scheme. Credit: Worcester City Council

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take the focus off dementia. This moves the traditional narrative around life story work away from capturing memories before they're lost, making it a more positive experience.

Know Your Place can be used to support people 'in the moment' by looking at maps and images in response to their comments, showing people that their views are valued and others are interested in what they have to say. This puts people at the heart of a conversation as they can influence the direction it takes. By providing such opportunities and giving people time and space to share their stories, the platforms enable people to be heard and say what's important to them as individuals. Being involved in conversations as part of the life story process can also help carers learn more about individuals and understand how previous experiences can impact behaviour.

More widely, people enjoyed sharing their own knowledge for the benefit of others, contributing to their own sense of wellbeing. Some **Know Your Place** users were keen to see whether there were 'gaps in information I may be able to fill', and to upload 'loads of old photos to share with others'. This helps build a sense of community, as it's not just professionals providing information but also everyday

members of the public. Using the platforms encouraged people to explore and connect with their communities, with some people reporting that they had visited places after using it.

Overall, the evaluation identified that these versatile platforms can be used in a variety of ways by and with different audiences, offering opportunities for the heritage sector to share digital resources. They're suitable for use by individuals, one-to-one and as part of larger groups, as the main focus or as a supporting resource. The platforms support use in bitesize chunks when appropriate, acting as an ongoing resource that users can access at any point, or for longer periods depending on audience and user preferences, enabling them to be tailored to different situations. Users can also engage in diverse ways as the platforms are part of an overall engagement process rather than solely an end product.

Consequently, the platforms are important and relevant resources to a range of sectors including heritage, care and education, as well as for individuals and families. They have impacted people on a personal level, but have also enabled them to be part of something bigger and feel socially connected as part of a wider community.



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Life Story work at a local residential care home. Credit: Worcester City Council



School children learning to use the Know Your Place platform. Credit: Worcester City Council



Life Stories Herefordshire & Worcestershire is hosted by the local trust at <https://life-stories.hacw.nhs.uk/>. Know Your Place Worcester can be found at www.kypworchester.org.uk. Credit: Worcester City Council

Jennifer Bray

Jennifer joined the Association for Dementia Studies as a research assistant in 2010 and has worked across a variety of research projects since then. The diverse nature of her role has enabled Jennifer to explore dementia in different care settings and in relation to various topic areas. This has enabled her to develop expertise in dementia and sight loss, intergenerational aspects of dementia awareness, and the use of technology with people living with dementia.



Sheena Payne-Lunn

Sheena has worked for Worcester City Council since 2003 as Historic Environment Record Officer. Over the last 20 years she has developed and led a wide variety of public engagement projects, with a particular interest in widening access to heritage resources, especially via digital technology and social media.

