

## Turning out to make history

# OurStory Scotland

**James Valentine** introduces OurStory Scotland, a unique archive which aims to portray the lives of those people often regarded as marginal by mainstream society



Above right: Display of badges for Open Museum exhibition at Gallery of Modern Art

### Part 1: Turning the tables

It was about time. Three things were necessary for the archive to be conceived: national absence, community interest and personal frustration. Scotland had no archive that brought together the life stories of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, there was manifest interest in telling stories of our lives and I had studied with growing dissatisfaction the representations of our lives by others. How OurStory Scotland came into being and turned out to make history is inevitably a story that involves Scotland, our community and a number of individuals who happened to be in an amenable place at an appropriate time.

At the beginning of the new millennium I had been researching marginality for fifteen years. People regarded as marginal by the mainstream tend to lack the resources to shape the wider societal representation of their lives, especially in societies where there is an emphasis on unambiguous

belonging. Having looked at the way marginalised characters were portrayed in media representations and discriminatory discourse in Japan and other societies, I was eager to see how we could turn the tables and tell our own stories in our own words. This was a matter of urgency. Older LGBT people in Scotland had seen momentous changes in their lifetime, and this first-hand experience would be lost for all time unless recorded soon. A further reason to ask about their lives, needs and aspirations, was the growing awareness amongst researchers at Stirling University and elsewhere that older people might find their LGBT support networks disrupted by residential care, and that assumptions made by social services could amount to (re)enforced heterosexuality.

Meanwhile in Glasgow, Diverse Artists were portraying LGBT lives and loves through art, poetry and music. At a meeting of Diverse Artists at the end of 2001, I suggested that we should archive

the life stories and memorabilia of the LGBT community, and there was a positive response. This gave the impetus to find out whether similar archives already existed in Scotland and elsewhere in Britain, whether provision could be made for LGBT archives in local museums or libraries and what advice and support could be obtained from existing projects.

Progress was reported at each meeting of Diverse Artists, but it was clear that the archive group, as it came to be called, was a project in its own right. We had an inaugural meeting of this group in August 2002 and decided to constitute ourselves separately as a voluntary association. The Steering Committee was appointed in October, and in December 2002 OurStory Scotland was formally established and the constitution was approved. Within another eighteen months we were recognised as a Scottish Charity.

From the outset our aims were to collect, archive and present the life stories and experiences of the

LGBT community in Scotland in their own words and images, since representations of our community have tended to be stereotyped and discriminatory, constructed about us rather than by and for ourselves. Our lives have often been hidden, maligned or silenced, our stories neglected, distorted or suppressed. To tell OurStory rather than a traduced version, we aimed to establish a history from within our community. We could never have done this without the advice and support of those who had already been involved in archiving neglected narratives and were willing to reflect on their experience and turn it over to us.

**Turning over experience**

Even before we were formally constituted, we sought advice from organisations in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Brighton and London. We did not want to reinvent the wheel, and we knew that we should seek the best guidance before we embarked on collecting and archiving stories. The obvious place to start was our own city, Glasgow, and one of the most important archives: the Lesbian Archive and Information Centre (LAIC). LAIC is at Glasgow Women’s Library and contains the UK’s largest and most significant collection of materials about lesbian lives, histories and achievements. We arranged to meet Sue John and Adele Patrick at Glasgow Women’s Library, where they showed us round the archive and gave us tea, advice and support. Their generosity was extraordinary. They might have resisted another archiving venture, or could have suggested removing at least the L from LGBT, but instead there was a sense of full cooperation, that we were involved in valuable work in the same community, and that you could never envisage there being too many people collecting narratives of our lives as there would always be untold stories to tell. This was crucial backing, as we would have abandoned the project if there had been the sense that we were encroaching or that we should somehow divide up the

LGBT community. Their experience and enthusiasm encouraged us to continue, while the sight of the labour-intensive work of archiving news reports and publications, and the concomitant space requirements, confirmed us in the direction of oral history and storytelling.

At the same time as we were starting up in Glasgow, with pretensions to cover all of Scotland, a similar project was starting up in Edinburgh that was later to be called Remember When. It was a joint initiative between the City of Edinburgh Council and the Living Memory Association, and it was able to draw on oral history and archiving expertise from the outset. The existence of this project focusing on Edinburgh was both a relief and a resource for us, as it enabled us to do two things: to focus initially on Glasgow and the rest of Scotland, rather than take on the huge task of collecting stories from the capital, and to call upon the expertise of the Living Memory Association in oral history, reminiscence work and archiving. Thus began a fruitful cooperation that included joint interviews in Edinburgh, learning from each other’s exhibitions, and a jointly conceived celebration of Edinburgh’s queer stories through creative writing and drama. By the time our parallel projects were well underway in 2005, we shared the Jackie Forster Award for Culture at Pride Scotia.

Back in our first year, however, we needed to look further afield. By summer 2002 we had local support but wanted to talk to an LGBT archiving project that had several years of experience. This was Brighton Ourstory. We visited them and Linda generously gave us five hours of her valuable time, showing us their publications, exhibition materials and archiving techniques. We were so inspired by their project that we borrowed the ‘ourstory’ name to apply to own enterprise. Later the same year I visited Age Exchange in Blackheath London to meet their innovative Artistic Director, Pam Schweitzer, and witness her direction of theatre

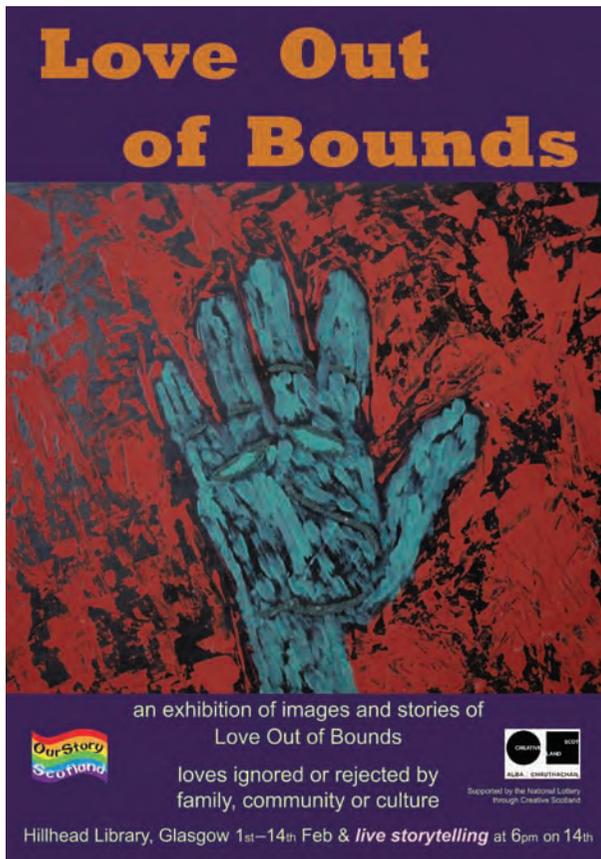
performances of stories generated through reminiscence. This inspired us to include performance and drama in our objectives for the representation of LGBT stories.

On a subsequent visit to London I met with Rob Perks, Curator of Oral History and Director of National Life Stories, British Library Sound Archive, who generously gave hours of his time to help ensure we used valid and reliable oral history recording and archiving techniques, and suggested we use summaries with our digital recordings, rather than full transcriptions: the summaries are searchable and indicate the place on the recording to hear the original words. He also encouraged us to write about our work in Oral History, the Journal of the Oral History Society.

Other pioneers came to Scotland. Penny Coleman visited Edinburgh at the invitation of Remember When, and we were asked to give a talk about our project. Her pioneering work with ‘gender outlaws whose

**The Story Tree allowed workshop participants to share their tales with others**





lives and loves have challenged convention' ensured that we would never forget the visual side to storytelling. Sharon Chalmers was invited to talk to OurStory Scotland in Glasgow, and spoke of her oral history and exhibition work on queer lives in Western Sydney, shown at Liverpool Regional Museum, New South Wales. This not only passed on to us brilliant ideas and techniques for visual display, but reinforced the interest in exhibition work that had been at the heart of our undertaking from the outset. We have always understood how vital it is for the project to be out in public representations as well as inside in the archives.

### Turning inside out

A classic way of archiving suppressed stories would be to take them from one closet into another: to record stories kept inside oneself and transfer them to be locked up safely in an archive. While it is vital always to respect the wishes of the person telling their story, and to protect their privacy as requested, the majority of participants are happy to have their stories told more

### Poster for Love Out of Bounds exhibition, Hillhead

publicly. For most people there is a contrastive balance between being identified and being open. Where it comes to a choice between disclosure of identity and visibility of narrative, we have favoured the latter, in which an individual adopts a degree of anonymity in designation that enables them to reveal extensively and securely. To reach out to the wider LGBT community and others, it is vital for stories to be readily accessible 'out there'. From the outset we turned the classic view of archiving inside out: we would start with an outer display of narratives kept inside, and archive both the stories presented and the occasion of their presentation. So we started with an exhibition. Our very first event was called, appropriately, *Becoming Visible*. It was an exhibition of stories of LGBT life in Glasgow, and it opened within a year of the initial idea of establishing an archive. The first record of the materials and the occasion was an online archive that took people through the rooms and displays of the physical exhibition, by clicking on web pages designed and photographed by Ian Strang. The exhibition itself was curated by Jim Campbell, who was inspired by the work of Christian Boltanski, renowned for making archival installations that present evidence of our transitory lives and community identities – trajectories of belonging.

As we continued to seek a public library or museum that would permanently house our materials and recordings, we took inspiration from the reminiscence and drama work of Age Exchange to collaborate with 7:84 Theatre Company Scotland, long renowned for radical drama, but later to be a lamentable casualty of funding cuts. Stories were generated through drama workshops that incorporated reminiscence work, individual oral history recordings, written monologues and devised enactments. After more than eighteen months we presented 'sexShunned', a sell-out production at The Arches Theatre Glasgow, as part of Glasgay!, Scotland's annual celebration of queer culture.

The storytelling approach that

involves concurrent collection and representation bears a double benefit of archiving pleasures: it brings immediate gratification that persuades people to turn out and tell their story and/or volunteer for the drier work of administering the collection; and it provides a variety of storytelling methods that stimulate and empower people who lack verbal confidence to narrate.

Our verbal storytelling is not confined to traditional forms. It has ranged from one-liners on luggage labels attached to a story tree, through written episodes that record a significant incident, skeletons that give the bare bones of a life story, and more extensive autobiographical writings, to video diaries and the sustained oral history interviews assumed to be the staple of the traditional archive. Mass Observation, founded in 1937, pioneered the collection of written accounts of everyday life. In 2010, Mass Observation Communities Online enabled a range of community groups such as OurStory Scotland to devise open-ended questionnaires, diary tasks and observations for online submission. OurStory Scotland was the only Scottish group, and the only LGBT group, to take part in this project. The online collection of written submissions established a dynamic for further storytelling.

This is not the place to provide a detailed review of the variety of storytelling methods we have used, but it is worth noting that one of the most effective approaches has been the interaction between the visual and the verbal. Verbal narration may inspire visual storytelling, but the order may be reversed with the visual coming first: some may find it easier to tell of their lives through visual display that may then enable a verbal reflection on its significance. The text in *Text Out*, an especially creative dynamic at Dundee Contemporary Arts, is taken out of episodes and blown up large in visual representations that, in turn, are elaborated verbally in audio recordings. *Love Out of Bounds*, our latest project, generates stories

through the interplay of verbal and visual arts, dance and music, while visual display (launched at Hillhead Library, Glasgow in 2011, curated by Jose de Unamuno) provides the setting and materials for storytelling performance and subsequent archiving.

This type of dynamic archiving forms a virtuous circle of save and show, collection and representation, archive and display, where each inspires the other, and what is inside ourselves is brought out in public storytelling, that in turn is brought securely within archives, that are kept alive through being turned out anew to show to outsiders and inspire the generation of further stories. This practice can be seen as the artistic turn that complements the archival turn.

### The archival turn

Archives have become not just a resource for research but a topic in their own right. This has been called the archival turn, in which the archive is repositioned as a site of contested knowledge that becomes the subject of investigation. 'Focus on the politics of knowledge is a methodological commitment to how history's exclusions are secured and made.' Archivists are made aware of this not just through academic research, but through requirements for access imposed by policy documents, that themselves reflect the demands of increasingly and self-consciously diverse publics.

It is in this fruitfully uncertain period that we were fortunate to find ourselves at the outset of OurStory Scotland. The key was to locate library and museum personnel whose commitment to inclusion was matched by the resources of their institution. This took time and persistence, but one opening would typically bring several others. Most of these were neither members of the LGBT community, nor necessarily even familiar with our experience, but were genuinely receptive to diversity. Networks of cooperation were constructed that brought opportunities that we could not have conceived.

To give a taste of this, it is worth indicating some of the key connections. Helen Clark, Special

Projects Manager and at that time Keeper of Social History for Edinburgh City Museums, not only provided oral history training as we started out, but also, in conjunction with Heather Robertson of the Living Memory Association, furnished us with a copyright agreement that we could adapt for our collection. Helen suggested people who might be interested in our work in other museums in Edinburgh and Glasgow. At Helen's suggestion I telephoned Dorothy Kidd, Curator of the Scottish Life Archive at National Museums Scotland. I had become accustomed to wary and tentative responses, so when Dorothy replied simply 'yes' to the request for a national collection of LGBT lives to be housed in the Archive, I thought there must be some misunderstanding. Yet that reply was a plain and unequivocal affirmation that turned into the reality of the OurStory Scotland Collection in the Scottish Life Archive at National Museums Scotland. Dorothy in turn later suggested the Scottish Screen Archive at National Library of Scotland for our video materials, which were accepted by the Curator, Janet McBain, for archiving there as the OurStory Scotland Collection.

Other suggested contacts were followed up in Glasgow. Irene O'Brien, Chair of the Scottish Council on Archives and Senior Archivist at the Mitchell Library, was highly supportive of our need for a permanent base in Glasgow, with storage and meeting space, and this was agreed at the beginning of 2005. This agreement should not be underestimated: space to meet and to store materials before archiving is essential for a charity that relies on volunteers and has no permanent funding.

Jenny Simmons, who had undertaken oral history for Glasgow Museums and the British Library Sound Archive, was vital to our work from the beginning. She had experience of recording the stories of marginalised communities, and provided us with endless encouragement as well as detailed

practical advice and support, for instance in making summaries of our oral history recordings. Through Jenny's oral history contacts we met Lynn Abrams, Professor of Gender History at Glasgow University, who joined me in a Stirling University research advisory group on Narratives of Marginalised Sexual Identity, together with Sue Tester, a Stirling University expert on ageing and social policy. Sue and Jenny became founder members of the Neglected Narratives research group I set up at Stirling University, which has enabled researchers on the narratives of different marginalised communities to learn from each other. Lynn also introduced us to Sarah Cowie, who was doing heritage and museum work and quickly became indispensable through her skills in archiving, summarising and publicity. We had been approached by the Museum Manager of the People's Palace, Deborah Haase, to hold an exhibition in the very public space of the Winter Gardens. Sarah by chance was appointed to a position in this museum, and helped organise an effective opening event and the subsequent monitoring of feedback and attendance.

Through the People's Palace we made contact with other Glasgow museums: the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, where Lu McNair, Learning and Access Curator, invited us to put on an exhibition for 2008, and the Open Museum, where Chris Jamieson and Ewan McPherson worked with us to develop a reminiscence box or handling kit reflecting the lives of LGBT people. Chris encouraged us to submit materials for an Open Museum exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) in Glasgow, and Katie Bruce, their Social Inclusion Coordinator, worked with us to develop several projects around the biennial Social Justice exhibition, which for 2009 was devoted to LGBT issues.

GoMA's Social Justice exhibition for 2009 built a mix of muting and declaration into the title sh[OUT], which proved prescient. OurStory Scotland's contributions included



**Winter Gardens 2007, an exhibition in the very public space of the Winter Gardens**

materials from our archives as the foundation for the exhibition's Resource Space, a display of published cartoons entitled *Drawn Out* and *Painted Pink* by Kate Charlesworth and David Shenton, and a major new contribution that originated in the digital turn. The work of Amy Murphy, Eleanor Bradford and Allison Dow with younger LGBT people had opened up new narratives and approaches to narration. This was taken forward as a digital storytelling project *Our Vivid Stories*, devised by filmmaker Dianne Barry with Julie Ballands, forming a sequence of video stories of young LGBT lives shown at the sh[OUT] exhibition and subsequently screened at the Document 7 human rights film festival at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow.

Following the *OurStory Scotland* exhibitions for sh[OUT], that were admired and commended, another group mounted a display that bravely explored LGBT space in religion and attracted hostility, amplified by some newspapers, leading to some exhibits being withdrawn. In contrast, *OurStory Scotland* has been invited by St Mungo Museum, the Glasgow

museum devoted to religious life and art, to present an exhibition of *Love Out of Bounds* during LGBT History Month 2012, working with Lyndsey Mackay, Project Curator for 'Curious'. Religion remains a domain to approach with care, though the recent experience of religious condemnation contrasts with the space afforded by a time of lower visibility, as revealed in a recording in our archive. In the late 1960s, John founded the Bachelor Clan, a contact group which ran for more than a year, and then switched to Scottish Minorities Group, which had a social and political side:

'There were also the meetings, which took place. Here we had an interesting background, because the Church of Scotland through the Iona Community and their hall, Community House in Clyde Street in Glasgow, was happy to offer us a room where we could meet and chat and discuss the business ... It got to the stage of even having booked a hall and having a disco, which is amazing at that time: this was long before the commercial world saw the advantage of having a commercial gay disco. And that took place, not in the Community House, because we met in Edinburgh also, and it was really in

a Chaplaincy Centre that the first gay disco took place I would say.' (John)

The success of the archival turn depends on timing, as revealed by the archived stories themselves. Our project started at an opportune time, when our interest in multi-media forms of storytelling was able to connect to the work of museums that were concerned to promote access in a double sense: to make diverse stories accessible through participation and display, and to include those who had been excluded from representation. The extraordinary cooperation in Scotland between museums, galleries, libraries and an LGBT charity may well be unique in the history of the social inclusion of LGBT people. This is an issue of place and of time, the turn of events.

Continued in the next issue of *History Scotland*, on sale 20 February, 2012.

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#### Further reading

Penny Coleman, *Village Elders* (University of Illinois Press, 2000).

Ellen Galford and Ken Wilson, *Rainbow City: Stories from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 2006).

Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

James Valentine, 'Naming the Other: Power, Politeness and the Inflation of Euphemisms', in *Sociological Research Online*, 3 (4), (1998), <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/socresonline/3/4/7.html>

James Valentine, 'Narrative Acts: Telling Tales of Life and Love with the Wrong Gender' in *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 9 (2), (2008), <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0802491>