

ORAL HISTORY SOCIETY AGM 2026

ANNUAL MEETING OF THE ORAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 24 June 2026, 5.30pm – 7pm, online via Zoom, with 24 members present.

1. Apologies for absence

Cai Parry-Jones, Pip Oldham, Polly Owen, Lucy Szablewska and Amy Tooth-Murphy.

2. Minutes of the last AGM in 2025

The minutes were agreed as a correct record. They are available to read on the OHS website: <https://www.ohs.org.uk/who-we-are/society-documents/>.

3. Matters arising

None

4. The Annual Report was introduced by Chair John Gabriel

Another year in the life of the Oral History Society and, as ever, there has been no shortage of activities, achievements, challenges, creativity and enormous commitment and effort.

The Society also remains in a stable financial position. At year end, reserves stood at approximately £123k following a planned investment of around £16k in a major website and membership system upgrade. This work addressed one of the key risks identified in our reviewed risk register: the potential loss of members caused by an overly cumbersome joining and renewal process. We decided, following advice from our auditors, to depreciate this extraordinary expenditure over four years, so our year-end is showing a surplus of £10.7k: this was also thanks in part to the success of the Strathclyde conference, and reflects deliberate investment in the Society's long-term sustainability, accessibility and member experience. Our Future Fund now stands at £8.2k, and I'd like to thank those who donated over the past year.

Looking back over the reports from across the Society, it is striking just how much has been accomplished by a relatively small number of people giving extraordinary amounts of time, energy and care.

This report cannot possibly do justice to every project, event, meeting, course, publication, conversation or volunteer contribution that has taken place over the last twelve months, but it does attempt to draw together some of the highlights and themes that emerge from the excellent sub-reports which follow.

One thing becomes immediately clear when reading through them all: oral history in 2025–26 continues to matter deeply. It matters, in archives, in universities, in communities, in museums, in schools, in policy settings, including health care and in creative practice. It also critically matters to those whose voices have historically gone unheard and to those trying to make sense of the present by listening carefully to the past.

This has also been a year of major organisational transition for the Society itself. Much of the work behind the scenes has not necessarily been glamorous, but it has been hugely important. The migration from the old Webscribe membership system to our new in-house platform was probably one of the largest operational tasks the Society has undertaken for many years. Reading the Website and Membership reports, one gets some sense of the sheer complexity involved: databases, payment systems, direct debit transfers, testing, troubleshooting, missing email addresses from 2009, and what I imagine was a collective national sigh of relief when people finally managed to log in successfully.

The fact that the transition was completed successfully is a remarkable achievement and enormous thanks are due to everyone involved in the Membership Review Group and website development process. Beth Thomas, Rob Perks, Polly Owen and Camille Johnston have all invested extraordinary amounts of time into making the new system work. What is especially encouraging is that this is not simply a technical upgrade for its own sake. Bringing membership management in-house gives the Society much greater flexibility and control over member services, communications and benefits. It also lays the groundwork for future development at a time when many membership organisations are struggling.

Membership itself remains relatively stable, with 935 members and subscribers currently recorded across the various categories. In a difficult financial climate for heritage, higher education, arts and voluntary organisations, maintaining that level of engagement is no small achievement. The website statistics also tell an important story. More than 73,000 sessions over the year demonstrate that the Society continues to act as a major hub for oral history advice, training, networking and opportunities, not just in the UK but internationally. The fact that the “Join Us” page is now among the top ten most visited pages perhaps suggests that the Society is continuing to attract new interest and new practitioners. We were also pleased this year to introduce improved accessibility features to the website, making it more usable for people with different needs and preferences. This may sound like a small addition, but accessibility is not an optional extra: it reflects the inclusive ethos that sits at the heart of oral history practice itself.

The Society’s training programme continues to go from strength to strength. Delivering 108 courses to 924 participants across the UK and internationally is an extraordinary achievement. The training programme now reaches participants in twenty countries and continues to balance online accessibility with the value of in-person learning through partnerships with venues including the British Library, Manchester Central Library and the Henry Moore Institute. Particularly encouraging is the continued expansion of specialist and participatory training. The introduction of new half-day workshops in 2026 on documentation and interview analysis reflects how oral history practice itself is evolving. Oral historians are increasingly thinking critically not only about how interviews are recorded, but how they are interpreted, archived, shared, and used. The testimonials included in the training report speak volumes. One participant described the introductory course as “possibly the most inclusive and balanced online course experienced to date”. Another admitted relief at discovering that others were also “reflecting on their oral history practice”. There is something reassuringly oral-historical about that: people discovering that uncertainty, reflection and shared experience are part of the process. The training programme also experienced significant changes within the team this year. Beth Thomas stepped down from the training group after decades of contribution, including delivering training in Welsh and supporting countless learners over the years. Her contribution has been immense. At the same time, the arrival of Natasha Khan-Rowley as Training

Administrative Assistant (supporting Camille Johnston) and the appointment of five new trainers demonstrates healthy renewal and continuity.

The Regional Advisers' Network remains one of the Society's great strengths. Across twelve regions, advisers continue to provide practical support, expertise and encouragement to individuals and organisations undertaking oral history work. The annual report from the Network demonstrates the astonishing breadth of oral history activity taking place across the UK. Projects this year ranged from NHS mental health histories in Sussex to palliative care archives in Sheffield; from documenting the experiences of lone mothers in Easterhouse to preserving the stories of Second World War veterans and LGBTQ+ ex-service personnel. The range of creative outputs was equally impressive. Oral history is no longer confined to transcripts and archive shelves, although those remain important. Advisers and project teams are increasingly using sound installations, podcasts, exhibitions, theatre and digital storytelling to bring interviews to wider audiences. Particularly striking was the Peak Tracks installation in Sheffield, which combined oral history recordings with field recordings and improvised music, attracting hundreds of visitors. Elsewhere, projects such as the Piccadilly Radio Archive demonstrated the public appetite for audio heritage when made accessible and engaging. The annual Regional Network meeting in Nottingham on the theme of Oral History and Health also highlighted an area of growing importance within oral history practice. Increasingly, oral history is being used not simply to document experience but to support wellbeing, recovery, reflection, and connection. The discussions around AI and oral history also reflected a Society willing to engage critically with new technologies rather than simply panic about them — although I suspect some of us still panic a little.

The *Oral History* journal continues to thrive as one of the leading publications in the field internationally. 2025's themed issues, "Aftermaths" and "Hearing Differences" and in 2026 "(Dis)empowerment", demonstrate both the intellectual breadth of oral history and its continuing relevance to contemporary debates. The forthcoming special issue on oral history and climate change promises to be particularly significant, bringing together international perspectives at a moment when environmental crisis increasingly shapes both historical experience and historical practice. The editorial team has also been navigating substantial practical changes connected to the Society's new membership arrangements and publication systems. As anyone who has ever tried to coordinate authors, printers, mailing lists and deadlines will know, journals do not simply appear by magic. The journal also continues to evolve in response to changing academic and publishing environments, including important discussions around open access and copyright. Sincere thanks are due to all on the editorial group for the enormous amount of voluntary labour involved in sustaining the journal.

The Special Interest Groups celebrated their tenth anniversary this year, a reminder of how central they have become to the life of the Society. Two 'in conversation' blogs on our website reflected on the SIGs' origins. The SIG reports reveal a fascinating mix of energy, concern, activism, and mutual support. Across subjects including climate crisis, migration, archives, LGBTQ+ histories, higher education and creative practice, SIGs continue to provide spaces where members can exchange ideas and sustain one another. One theme running through the report is the sense that many of the sectors connected to oral history currently feel "under threat". Whether in higher education, archives, journalism, community activism, or the creative industries, many members are working within increasingly difficult circumstances. The development of the new Council of SIGs feels like an important and positive step forward, helping improve communication and collaboration between groups while strengthening their visibility within the Society.

The Society's communications activity continues to develop steadily. The move towards Bluesky reflects broader shifts taking place across the social media landscape, while LinkedIn growth has been particularly strong over the past year. The communications report also provides a refreshing level of analytical honesty about newsletter engagement. There is something wonderfully oral-historical about discovering that sending newsletters during school holidays may not be ideal. More seriously, however, the report demonstrates a thoughtful approach to accessibility, audience engagement and communication practice.

One of the highlights of the year was the annual conference in Glasgow, organised in partnership with the Oral History Centre at Strathclyde University and the Scottish Oral History Group, with the support of Glasgow City Council (who generously welcomed us all with a reception at City Hall, see image left)). The conference brought together members from across the UK and beyond for discussion, debate, friendship and the sharing of work. This year's theme, 'Whose Voices' explored a highly relevant issue around who gets to be represented and preserved in oral histories and there were examples of projects successfully accessing marginalised communities

As always, the conference reminded us that the Society is much more than a set of structures, committees and reports. It is a community of people committed to listening carefully to others and learning from lived experience. The conversations that happen in conference corridors, over coffee, at conference dinners or while trying to work out which breakout room you are supposed to be in are often just as valuable as the formal sessions themselves. A huge thanks are due to everyone involved in organising the conference and making it such a welcoming and stimulating event.

The conference was also an opportunity to express our solidarity with oral history colleagues in the United States, and we presented a [statement of support](#) to Steven Sielaff, Associate Director of the US Oral History Association, who was attending the conference and spoke briefly about the attacks and funding cuts facing US oral historians, archivists and other heritage professionals as a result of the Trump administration.

It is impossible to conclude this report without acknowledging with great sadness the loss of Rob Wilkinson. Rob contributed enormously to the Society through his hard work, commitment, generosity and good humour. As long-serving treasurer, trustee, general fixer (!), colleague and friend, he gave an extraordinary amount of time and care to the organisation and to the wider oral history community. Many of the achievements described throughout this annual report bear Rob's imprint in one way or another, whether through practical problem-solving, encouragement, organising, mentoring or simply quietly making things happen behind the scenes. He was deeply committed to oral history as a democratic and humane practice. He understood that listening matters. He is greatly missed.

Finally, and most importantly, sincere thanks to everyone who has contributed to the Society this year. To our trustees, officers, regional advisers, trainers, editors, SIG facilitators, volunteers and project partners: thank you for the enormous amount of unpaid and often unseen work you do. Thanks also to all our members, whose enthusiasm, curiosity, generosity and willingness to share ideas (and reflected, for example in some wonderful groups.io discussions) continue to sustain the Society. The past year has involved a huge amount of change and an equally huge amount of work. Yet what comes through most strongly from all the reports is not exhaustion, though there may well have been some of that too, but commitment, creativity and resilience. Oral history continues to evolve,

reach new audiences and respond to new challenges. The Society remains in good health because of the people who give their time, knowledge and care to it.

5. Honorary Treasurer's report: presentation of Annual Accounts

The annual accounts for the year ending 31 December 2025 showed incoming resources of £72,983 (2024: £58,596) and outgoing resources of £62,232 (2024: £50,772), making a net overall surplus of £10,751 (2024: surplus £7,824). Free unrestricted reserves amounted to £123,208 (2024: £112,457), of which £8,230 (2024: £4,949) were designated to the Future Fund.

In 2025 there had been a large expenditure for the development of the OHS website as part of the membership streamlining project. The total cost was £16,020. The cost would be spread over four years as the website was considered an intangible asset by the auditors. This would mean an expenditure of £4,005 each year. With the new membership system, memberships were now managed on a rolling basis (rather than an annual basis) and this would be reflected in the accounts.

The full financial report and accounts are available online at <https://www.ohs.org.uk/who-we-are/society-documents/>.

The accounts had been reviewed by the Finance Committee and independently audited by Prestons & Jacksons Partnership LLP.

The annual accounts were agreed.

The reappointment of Prestons & Jacksons Partnership LLP, Cranbrook Road, Ilford, Essex as the Society's auditors was proposed. This was agreed.

Alan Butler and Polly Owen were warmly thanked for their work.

6. Election of officers

The officers were re-elected *en bloc*: John Gabriel as Chair, Beth Thomas as Vice-Chair, Rob Perks as Secretary, Alan Butler as Treasurer.

7. Election of committee members including three new nominations

Attendance records for current committee members and biographies for nominees had been circulated.

Michelle Winslow, Adam Bell and Cathlin Macaulay were nominated by George Severs and seconded by Beth Thomas.

Cathlin Macauley would be the new representative for the Scottish Oral History Group on the committee.

All other existing committee members were re-elected *en bloc*.

8. Questions from members

Mary Stewart asked whether members knew enough about how the Society works.

Angeles Reyes-Ridgeley asked whether the website shared information about job opportunities, and whether the Society had applied for funding from Arts Council England or the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) in the past.

At present anybody could advertise paid and voluntary positions on the [Opportunities](#) page of the website by submitting the details via a form. Michelle was responsible for updating the Opportunities page. She also added details of jobs that were advertised by groups.io.

Rob explained that the OHS had never applied for project grants. However, a recent discussion with NLHF might lead to an application for a resilience grant, to fund a series of pre-application project management courses aimed at people in the final stages of their grant applications. Discussions were just beginning so it would be some time before a funding application was made.

Craig suggested that the Special Interest Groups (SIGs) could apply for project grants using the charitable status of the OHS. Mary agreed this was a great idea and noted that it would be important to consider governance relating to a SIG funding application.

Rob added that it was not possible for the OHS to make a funding application with a view to redistributing the funds for project grants. This had been discussed with NLHF previously. The OHS was also unable to write letters of support for NLHF grant applicants.

9. AOB

None

10. 'Behind the wall? Which OHS online resources and benefits might we place behind the membership paywall?' Discussion led by Beth Thomas and the Membership Group

Beth shared a presentation on the OHS resources available to members and non-members. She referred to a general feeling that the Society was giving away too much for free; there were more users of the Society's content than there were members. She introduced the question of what should remain freely available to all, and what should be available to members only.

Members could currently access back issues of the journal via a JSTOR link, enjoy discounts for training and conferences, take part in online discussion groups and SIGs, and advertise their own events.

Everyone could currently access expert advice via guidance pages on the website and the Regional Network of Advisers, blog posts and online articles, opportunities, the events calendar and the e-newsletter.

Beth suggested that introductory guidance could remain accessible to all, to build trust with potential members. Step-by-step guides, training videos and other resources could be available to members only. The public website could display teasers to this additional content to attract new members. The e-newsletter could include links to members-only content. News and announcements could be used to demonstrate the Society's expertise and activities.

Another idea was to occasionally add new special issues of the journal, or single articles, which could be downloaded for free by non-members to attract interest. Advice to non-members by the Regional Network could be 'off the shelf' rather than bespoke, and a time limit could be enforced on advice for non-members. There could be drop-in discussions organised for members, similar to the recent discussion on data protection and privacy.

It would be important to find a way to provide access to recent online journals for members, as this was not currently possible. It was also noted that the Society's audio/visual resources were underdeveloped with no strategic approach to video content. Beth suggested that event recordings and slides could be freely accessible via Vimeo for members, or on a pay-per-view basis for non-members.

Other ideas were to make the Opportunities page visible to members only. There could be a portal for freelancers to list their details, or a networking area where members could share their details with other members. There would be GDPR implications to consider. Craig added that groups.io had a directory function. Beth said that at present groups.io had a small membership in comparison to the overall membership. Current benefits such as groups.io should be made more accessible to members.

Beth asked all those present for their opinions and ideas. The aim was to encourage new members to join the Society. Ideas would need to be sustainable for a volunteer-run organisation, where the workload would be shared.

John thanked Beth for outlining her reasoning, ideas and call to members.

George thanked Beth for her helpful and interesting presentation. He reported that several people had recently joined the Society in order to take part in the LGBTQ SIG. Regarding the journal, he noted that authors of online articles were keen to submit audio and video clips to accompany their texts. The editors had been uploading these clips to YouTube. If there was an OHS Vimeo channel there could be two-tier access to the online journal: the articles could be accessible to everyone but the clips to members only. Beth agreed that this would work well as a teaser to additional content.

Nicola spoke about how the discussion groups could be a lifesaver for anyone in need of support or when working on a challenging project. She outlined a membership feature of the Group for Education in Museums, where each member has a profile and can pitch their freelance services. Membership costs were higher than for the OHS. The OHS could consider how it would benefit freelancers to join as members and whether there was commercial value in doing so.

Mary agreed that it was worth thinking about the reasons that people join the OHS. Some join for transactional reasons and others for altruistic reasons. She said the Society could better advertise how cheap membership is – the equivalent of less than a cup of coffee per month. Mary was concerned that a member directory would incur administrative costs. She also spoke about finding a balance with the accessibility of guidance and resources: the Society existed to promote good practice in oral history, and this should remain open, but it was also important to find new member benefits that would add to the transactional reasons for joining. She suggested more could be done with charging non-members for events.

Julia asked for more information regarding website statistics, in particular which pages were accessed most frequently. Her impression was that the legal and ethical guides were very popular and the associated resources were regularly downloaded and used. She questioned whether this guidance should be placed behind a paywall as it is core to the Society's aim to support people to do oral history work legally and ethically. There was a discussion on whether the legal and ethical guide could be better presented. Julia found it to be clear and the FAQ format helpful.

Regarding the Regional Network, Julia questioned how it would work in practice to limit the advice given to non-members. The Society would need to monitor advisers. Would advisers be paid for providing bespoke advice to members, if this was a membership benefit? She explained that the advisers encourage people to purchase OHS membership at the first point of contact. To be persuasive all advisers should be fully briefed on the selling points of OHS membership.

John reflected on Julia's question regarding payment for advisers. Everything behind the paywall would need to be of a very high standard. People producing this content may be self-employed and rely on this kind of work for their income. How would income generated by this work be distributed? All income accrued would go to the Society.

Michelle explained that the Opportunities page draws new people to the website. She would be hesitant to put pages that serve this function behind a paywall.

Rosa added to the discussions relating to jobs and essential advice. She thought that a directory for members would be a good idea. She suggested that the legal and ethical advice could remain free, with the downloadable resources available to members only, to encourage people to join. Mary was very keen that the templates remained freely available, to help projects and also the archives that manage oral history material in the long-term.

Craig expressed concern that these discussions were taking place prior to consultation with the Regional Network. Rob emphasised that this was not an outline of proposals but a spark for discussions that would feed into the agenda for the 2027 strategic weekend. Beth spoke about previous discussions within the Network on this subject and Padmini agreed it had been a recurring theme over the years. Julia was hosting a drop-in session for the Regional Network soon and would invite a discussion on ideas for the paywall and what the advisers think should go behind it.

Mary asked if there could be a slider on the website about the OHS: how it is run by volunteers with a small amount of paid freelance support, how long it has been going, the work it does, how joining as a member will make a difference. The Society should improve its messaging about how it is run and what it does.

John spoke about sustainability. With new content and new initiatives, to maintain existing standards and professionalism there would be an increase to the Society's administrative costs. The Society must ensure it has the resources to pay for what people expect. He said that the paywall was just one option for discussion.

Beth drew the conversation to a close. She spoke about some 'quick wins' that could be achievable, such as making current membership benefits more visible to non-members and the use of Vimeo for audio/visual content. She asked for volunteers who could look at the website content in detail to see if there is anything that could be comfortably placed behind

a wall. Another option would be to accept that all the existing guidance should remain accessible to fulfil the Society's mission, and that the question regarding a paywall should relate to new material. Beth agreed with Mary that the Society should make itself more attractive to potential members. She said that this would involve content writing and asked for volunteers who could help with this.

Rob announced that Cai would be launching a membership survey soon, to give members the opportunity to share their views and ideas.

John thanked everyone for attending the meeting. Rob thanked John for everything he has done for the Society.