

Lives from the Archives:

On The Record Transcript

Laura: My name is Laura Mitchison, I'm an oral historian and artist with On the Record.

Rosa: My name is Rosa Schling, I'm one of the people involved in On the Record. We have stories deposited at Bishopsgate in a number of archives. We've actually deposited five archives so far.

These archives are about Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, they're about radical community centres like Centerprise, about child care, including an archive related to the first parent-led cooperative nursery and also an archive of oral history about the SUS laws, which were used to police ethnic minority communities in the 1970s.

Laura: The first project that On the Record did with Bishopsgate Institute's support was an oral and visual History of Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park.

For people that don't know London, it's the last surviving open-air oratory place in the world. It goes back to the 19 century when the Reform League were agitating for working people to get the vote, and has more distant origins in the tradition of condemned people having a right to a last speech before they were hung at Tyburn.

What a lovely question. From the Centerprise project, I love revisiting poems written by everyday Hackney residents like Lottie Moos, which we gathered at Bishopsgate and into a free mobile phone app called ahackneyautobiography.org.uk. I'm going to read you one from the Jewish Refugee Lottie Moos:

"Some poems are snakes in the night.

They slither under the sheet, others are humble, dither and fumble, keep to the light but stumble over their feet.

The snake ones whisper into the shell of your ear, the others trumpet, go bumpity-bump it, like it or lump it for fear.

No one will listen. No one will hear.

Put out a saucer for snake to lap. A gentle inducement,
not a trap.

Yet don't lock the humble ones out at night,
they fumble and stumble but they fight, are easily sadly defeated.

It's when snakes and tumblers fraternally twine.

You shall have your cake, eat it and drink your wine."

Rosa: It's so hard to choose which stories are especially special. Just a couple that come to mind, Sharley Mclean and the Speakers' Corner Archive, who just had this amazing life story.

She came on the kindertransport from Germany as a child and one of the first places she went was Speakers' Corner where I think she could find fellow German speakers and she co-founded later, the Hyde Park Gays and Sapphics platform, I believe it's called and I know Bishopsgate has a banner from the platform elsewhere in their archives. So that's a nice way that the collections at Bishopsgate tend to complement each other.

Laura: Well, where else is there? It's the greatest library, archive, and cultural resource in London. Probably the world. On the Record wouldn't exist if it wasn't for the encouragement of the library staff. Whatever your experience with research, you're going to have an encounter with someone who is welcoming, friendly, politically engaged, deeply knowledgeable about their collections, which span the most contemporary events like the COVID-19 response or the anti-Trump marches, right back to the Reform League protests of the 19 century.

Rosa: So our mission is really to collect history and memories that are useful and relevant to the present day. So we hope that the stories we've collected will be used to inform and inspire people to act now, and we think that one of the best ways of making sure that happens is to work with Bishopsgate because they are so engaged with collecting archives of people trying to make a better world today, right now, and they really are doing that.

Laura: So I hope they'd learn from Londoners having intimate conversations about the relationships that matter the most. I hope they think differently about childbirth, parenting, sex, and mortality.

I hope they'd learn about some of London's deeply inhabited but overlooked spaces. I hope they'd feel entertained and inspired by people's efforts to change their lives and the lives of people around them.
