Hyde Park's Speakers’ Corner gets its lively voices on record and into the classroom

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This volunteer-led project will preserve and celebrate the heritage of Speakers’Corner from 1866, when the Reform League tore down the gates of Hyde Park, to the present day. It will be run by On the Record in partnership with the Bishopsgate Institute.

Steering group member, Reinhardt Wentz, said: “I have been a member of Speakers’ Corner audiences since 1960 when I first visited as a tourist. I mingled with the crowd, listened to great speakers and enjoyed the wise-cracks of hecklers and the speaker’s repartee. It’s great that this oral history project has now been funded – the spirit of Speakers’ Corner must be celebrated and preserved to help inspire a new generation of budding orators and keep this unique place of public debate and free speech alive. I am happy to be part of this exciting project.”

Sounds from the Park aims to collect 20 oral history interviews with diverse speakers, listeners and orators. An exciting programme of learning workshops and public events will culminate in an exhibition, a radio show and a permanent archive of Speakers’ Corner oral histories and memorabilia at Bishopsgate Institute.

Sue Bowers, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: “This fascinating project will uncover and preserve the stories of orators, listeners and hecklers who were at Speakers' Corner during its heyday helping to make it a unique example of free speech, controversial debate and public entertainment. It deserves a comprehensive, accessible archive and now this will be achieved.”

On the Record is looking for volunteers from all walks of life and people with memories of Speakers’ Corner. Volunteers will learn how to archive material, carry out oral history interviews, conduct historical research, produce a radio show and curate an exhibition. They will also be invited to join the project steering group.

Speakers’ Corner is a place where strangers, who would not otherwise meet, debate all manner of ideas. It is probably the most famous site of free expression in the world. From the 1930s to the 1970s, a vibrant culture of direct political engagement, street theatre, heckling and debate was at its peak.

Sounds from the Park will provide a new perspective on social and political developments in 20th century Britain. The platforms at Speakers’ Corner included women’s suffrage, pacifism, socialism, LGBT rights, national liberation and religion alongside comic, often eccentric, speakers who entertained the crowds.

Notes to editors

On the Record is a not for profit cooperative that uses oral history to amplify voices and to educate and inspire. Our work builds understanding between young and old, settled and newly arrived. We produce interviews, podcasts, educational materials, radio shows, photographs, exhibitions, books and workshops to attract the widest possible audience for our work.

Bishopsgate Institute is an independent cultural institute based in one of London's most dynamic areas, just two minutes from Liverpool Street Station and Spitalfields. It is a welcoming and inspiring public space where culture, heritage and learning meet, and where independent thought has been cherished since 1895. Through its library, historic collections, schools and community learning programme courses and cultural events, the institute enriches, entertains, and stimulates independent thought in a vibrant city environment. Bishopsgate Institute website.

Further information

Laura Mitchison, On the Record Co-Director on 07787 243 656 or info@on-the-record.org.uk / On the Record website