

Professor: We all need a box full of memories

Expert on why we must protect snapshots, certificates and childhood bits and bobs for care-experienced young Scots

For many of us, the lucky ones, it is just there. Those of us fortunate to spend our childhoods with our parents will often still have a box full of memories in their loft or under the bed in our old room.

Perhaps it isn't a box, perhaps it is a battered holdall bursting with old photographs; school report cards; our first toys; first shoes; a baby tooth in a matchbox wrapped in cotton wool; a certificate for swimming; medals for netball; badges and ribbons; all the other bits and bobs.

It might not have been opened for decades. We might not have thought about it for longer but we know it's there. Memories we can touch. Our childhood in a box.

Professor Ruth Emond, of Stirling University, believes those boxes and bags do a lot more than gather dust. They give us a sense of ourselves, who we are and where we came from.

Children who have not had such luck, who needed care and support when their

parents, for whatever reason, could not cope, do not have those memories and Emond has been working with Aberlour Children's Charity to help change that.

Along with colleagues in Germany, a research project was launched to detail how residential children's homes capture and look after information relating to children, not only the formal and administrative detail but the often forgotten everyday things, the small delights, the fun.

After Aberlour donated its archive to Stirling University, the research team began cataloguing and analysing the information collected between 1920 and 1980.

Emond, a professor in social work, said: "Adults who have accessed their care records will often say the information on file is incomplete and too often about the paperwork process.

"Of course, the formal information about decision-taking should be retained



but we were more interested in what was kept relating to the day-to-day lives of children, about how they lived, the things they did.

"There is a whole other part of childhood memories that is not about being in care, it's about going to gymnastics, or who your pals were when you were six. That's the kind of information, we were interested in."

The huge archive of Aberlour records, now spanning a century and a half, was a gold mine for the research team and remarkable not only for what was there but what was not.

Emond said: "There was a hospital at Aberlour, for example, and often the medical records give a more illuminating account of children being children than the drier administrative files.

"We would get a glimpse of them having fun, climbing trees in the orchard or whatever, because one would fall and break their arm and end up in the hospital. These were often the places where the children's accounts were recorded in their voice."

The Aberlour magazine was also a useful source of information. Primarily written for donors and potential donors, the monthly pamphlet celebrated activities at the orphanage and often featured letters from old boys and girls looking to reconnect with childhood pals.

Emond said: "The children's voices are in there, carefully curated and selected, but they are there.

"The children used to call the magazine The Blue Liar, and were obviously aware it was a very sanitised version but their lives were still recognisable in its pages.

"We started with the assumption that information being held for children now would be better than then. That is true in some ways but not others.

"In the past, there was often an author's voice in the records, a personal opinion, a tone, but we seem to have moved to a more bureaucratic style of record-keeping."

The research is intended to help care providers ensure they are not only keeping records but keeping memories.

Children in care might not be fortunate enough to have a parent stuffing their childhood memories into a box so carers must.

Bespoke software shaped by the research now allows carers and children to create a digital album, a video

memory box, that can be accessed and added to through the decades. Designed by the research team, it is now being piloted by Aberlour.

How much involvement children themselves should have in the information kept by care providers and how it is recorded can be contentious.

Emond highlighted work to ensure children growing up in care know their family history and are actively involved in the records that are kept about them. However, she added: "We were surprised by how many of the young people we spoke to felt the responsibility for keeping that information and objects from their childhood rested with the adults.

"They were saying 'no, my pals don't have to look after their own photograph albums, why should I?'. That is completely understandable.

"Another issue is that children are expected to take whatever memory objects they have, photographs, certificates, whatever, with them when they leave care.

"Many said that was too soon. They would tell us they just want it to be kept in the equivalent of the loft for a few years, until they get sorted.

"That's not surprising because it is exactly the way other children feel. Parents keep this stuff for you. My mum still has my school reports tucked away somewhere and I'm 54.

"We might be busy in the here and now but we know this stuff is safe and also, importantly, that someone cares enough about us to hold onto all of these things. The challenge for us is to create that for young people in care."

"Children leaving care may not have a single photograph of their childhood."

The researchers realised many children leaving care feel they have nowhere to return to, that the option of "going home" during years of transition into adulthood, when young people will often leave home and move back, is not there for them.

Emond said: "We found in the archive that the orphanage had a house that young people could come back to.

"There was this idea that you could go home, which feels so innovative today.

"Our understanding of experience changes over time as our understanding of the world changes and memory objects are a way of orientating us. Objects hold significant memories and are a way of saying to another person this is who I am and this is the life I have lived.



“It’s not just the photograph or whatever the object is, it is the story around them.

“We spoke to one young person who told us about the image of herself in a photograph but also about how her dad had printed it out and had held it.

“That almost meant more to her than the photograph itself.

“In the older archive, we have lovely handwritten notes. Contemporary notes written on a computer lack that personal touch.

“So, nowadays a letter or card from a child’s mum might be scanned and saved but, many years later, actually holding the bit of paper that their mum once held is a different sensory experience.

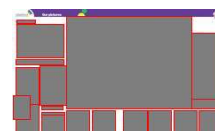
“There is thinking to be done about technology and what might be lost as well as gained.”

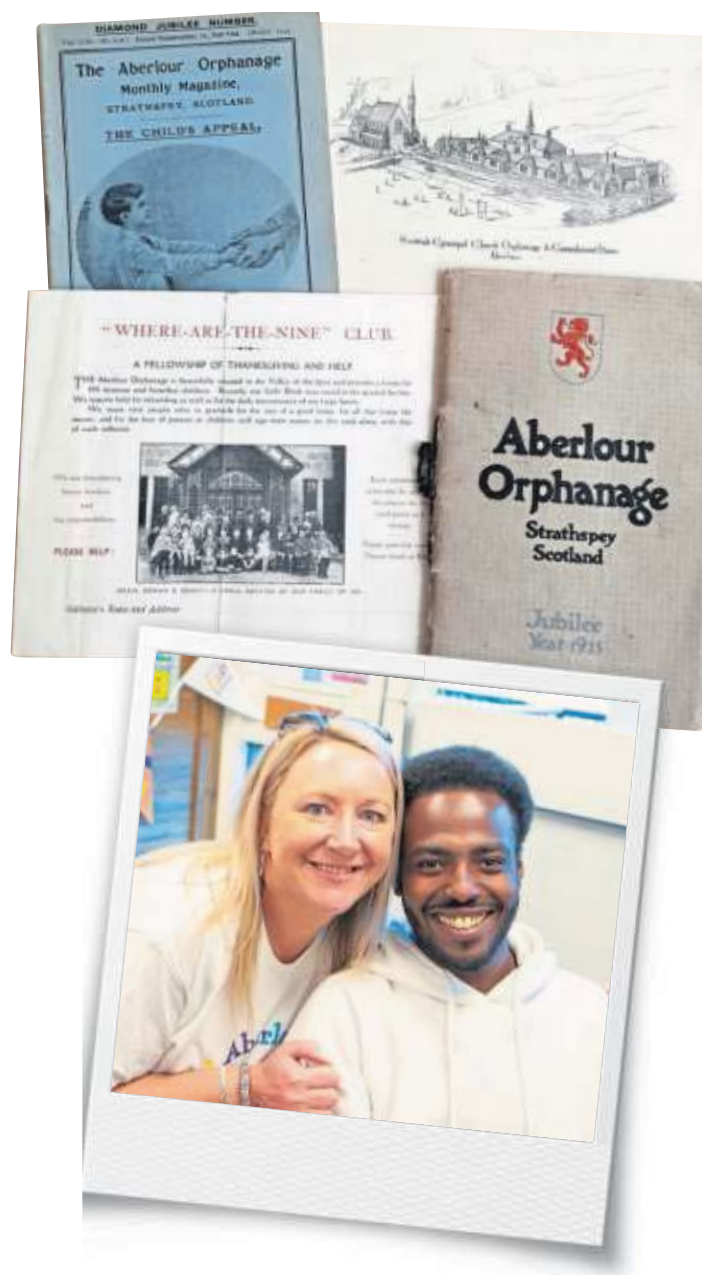


Professor
Ruth
Emond.



Boys from the orphanage have fun at the Falls of Linn, near Aberlour, in the 1960s and the beauty spot today.





Children and staff at Aberlour orphanage smile for the camera in a snapshot from 1949 seen in colour for the first time, main, and, above, an edition of the magazine and other memorabilia in the archive now gifted to the University of Stirling, and Julie Craig, who works in Intensive Family Support, with Omar Ibrahim, of Youthpoint, join the fun at an Aberlour 150th birthday party in Glasgow in April, above.

