John Laing- Breaking New Ground

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Introduction

• *Breaking New Ground* is a partnership project between Historic England and John Laing Charitable Trust.

• 10,000 images from the Laing collection will be digitised, conserved catalogued and made available online.

• The final selection will include iconic Laing sites: the Barbican, Coventry Cathedral and British Library.
The Barbican

Coventry Cathedral
Oral histories

• Alongside the digitisation work, there will be a public engagement programme.
• Overarching aim: To discover the human stories behind the images and make these stories accessible to the public.
• We will:
  o A) Interview former Laing employees and create 2 films which will be uploaded onto HE’s website, Vimeo and YouTube
  o B) Take former Laing employees into primary schools to talk to children about their work for Laing. Produce 1 film detailing these interactions.
Previous work that has influenced this plan

• ‘Irish Heart, Coventry Home’
  – HLF funded partnership project between Coventry Irish Society and the Herbert Museum and Art Gallery
  – Celebrated contribution of Irish community in Coventry
  – 65 people were interviewed, testimony was used for an exhibition and film
HE’s Topical Press Agency Medical Collection

• Partnership between HE and Wellcome Collection
  – Digitised images which documented health care from 1938 to 1943.
  – Produced a webpage and film where 4 nurses were interviewed about collection.
Lessons learnt

1- Adaptability-
   - Need to fit around people’s diaries.
   - Easier to do local projects vs. national
   - Have someone who is recognised as face of project. Easier for getting more interviewees.

2- Curation –
   - So important for oral history- need someway of organising such a vast amount of material- whether that is a film, or clips on a webpage.
   - I think HE’s approach to Wellcome Collection is a good option.

3- Technical-
   - How to ensure material is accessible in the future?
   - Best to work with a larger organisation- Irish project- worked with Herbert who took the material- otherwise we wouldn’t have been able to store it.
   - Large organisation has different challenges- how to build corporate memory?

4- Managing expectations
   - Always obtained consent before the interviews and always gave interviewees chance to withdraw.
   - I gave all interviewees a copy of the final interview.
   - Not all interviewees were happy with final cut- need to be very clear about outputs from the start.
How have these lessons influenced Breaking New Ground?

• 1- Important to build a large pool of interviewees.

• 2- Work towards clear outputs (using interviews for the films and launch of the collection) - this gives the interviews a clearer structure.

• 3- Use basic transcriptions.

• 4- Strong emphasis upon accessing content online and linking this to Archive.
Conclusion

• Great benefits from oral history.
• There are useful resources online such as the Oral History Society.
• Challenges:
  – Mixed messages about what copyright is needed after GDPR.
  – Technical preservation- how will things be preserved in future? MySpace is a cautionary example.