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**1 Introduction**

**What is oral history?**

* Oral history involves interviews with people who speak about their memories of the past; the interactions are often recorded using audio or video equipment.

**Why should young people do an oral history project?**

* Oral history interviews are an important source for understanding the past and enabling students to appreciate the emotional dimension to historical events. As detailed on the Oral History Society’s (OHS) [website](https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/how-to-do-oral-history/), oral history interviews can also improve community relationships; through speaking with older people, students gain an awareness of other people in society.

**2. Starting an oral history project**

**Picking a topic**

* To begin a project, the most important first step is to pick an appropriate topic. For BNG, HE invited former employees of the building company John Laing Construction to speak to students about their experiences. HE used photos from the [John Laing Photographic Collection](https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/archive/collections/photographs/breaking-new-ground-project/) (which contains 10,000 newly-digitised photos of buildings across the England) to stimulate the conversations. We produced films of the different oral history workshops which can be seen on the [Heritage Schools Vimeo](https://vimeo.com/heritageschools) website.
	+ The content in the Laing Collection is so wide-ranging (it includes photos of iconic buildings from across the country) that projects could be replicated using material that is relevant to your area, e.g. you could do a project about the construction of Coventry Cathedral or Preston Bus Station.
		- You can download photos for free from Historic England’s [Educational Images](https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/education/educational-images/?searchType=Educational+Images&search=laing). A selection of the Laing images can also be found in the [Building post-war Britain](https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/education/images-by-theme/building-post-war-britain) sub-category. You could also use this to do an oral history project on one of the listed themes.

**What do you want the students to gain from the project?**

* Before starting, it is worth thinking about why you want to do an oral history project. Do you want to produce a video or audio clip to present at an event? Or is it about trying something different with your students?
* If the aim is to create a **final product**, careful attention needs to be paid to issues such as whether the interviews should be recorded with a video camera or audio recorder. Other issues to consider include assessing whether your school has the capabilities, resources and time to edit the produced clips.
* If the project is focussed upon the **process**, the technical issues become less important and instead the sole focus is ensuring the students and interviewees gain meaningful experiences from the workshop.

**Equipment**

An excellent discussion relating to available equipment options can be found [here](https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/how-to-do-oral-history/3/#audiovsvideo) on the Oral History Society’s (OHS) website. To briefly summarise, you could use:

* **An audio recorder**

For a recent oral history project, HE used a Marantz Professional PMD 661 recorder.

* **A smart phone or tablets**

The camera in some smart phones or tablets is now so good that they are used to produce web-content for organisations such as the BBC and they could be used in an oral history project. However, there are ethical issues involved with recording a person’s memories on a personal device and sometimes the audio is poor-quality. Purchasing a microphone to enhance the audio mitigates poor audio quality. A tripod or handheld stabiliser would also be needed to ensure the footage is not shaky.

* **A video camera**

There are numerous options which could be purchased by a school and some DSLR’s are cheap.

**Finding interviewees**

* Finding suitable people to interview is a crucial, but sometimes difficult part of oral history projects. The Oral History Society (OHS) has provided a useful document with tips on [how to find interviewees](https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/how-to-do-oral-history/2/#schoolsgettingstarted).
* The easiest way to find participants is through known networks. With BNG, HE had links with the John Laing Charitable Trust (JLCT), a welfare organisation for former Laing employees, and they provided people to interview.
	+ If a school was doing a similar project about a Laing building in their area, they could speak to the JCLT to see if any retirees live locally. JLCT can be contacted through Alex.Finkenrath@laing.com.
	+ Alternatively, schools could put a shout-out in their newsletter to see if students have any relatives who had links with the company; interviewees could be former workers or people who remembered the building being made. Any connection to the buildings is fine if the interviewees have a story to tell.
	+ If this is unsuccessful, organisations such as Age UK or local history groups could be contacted.
* Once interviewees have expressed an interest in participating they should be contacted by the teacher, or person running the project. An ideal interviewee is someone who is interesting to speak to, but who is also a good listener. OHS has some useful guidance on safeguarding which [can be found here](https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/how-to-do-oral-history/6/).

**Scope of the project**

* It is possible to start a project with only one interviewee. However, sometimes many interesting applicants want to be involved; if a project shows great potential and you want to expand its scope, it could be worth applying for funding.
* OHS has compiled a list of organisations [that fund projects](https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/how-to-do-oral-history/4/#sourcesoffunding).

**3. Pre-interview lessons**

* Before the interview takes place, students need to understand why they are doing the project, which questions to ask and how to operate the equipment. These lessons can be expanded or condensed.

**1st Lesson- Introduction to subject-matter (Key Stages 2-4)**

* One of the BNG workshops focussed upon Easiform (a form of social housing that Laing built across England). The Key Stage 2 (year 5 and 6) students who participated in the workshop were unfamiliar with the topic, but, after some preparatory lessons, they were able to interview former Laing employees who built Easiform houses.
* A full PowerPoint of the lessons can be found [here](https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/education/teaching-activities/what-makes-a-housing-estate-special). These lessons could be tweaked for different topics.
* **Activity 1- Image selection**

Introduce your chosen topic to the class using the images you’ve chosen from the Laing Collection; You can download photos Laing images for free from the [Building post-war Britain](https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/education/images-by-theme/building-post-war-britain) sub-category. The students can then be asked to split into groups and cut the 15 photographs down to 5 using the criteria:

* + Which photographs tell the best story?
	+ What evidence do they give us as historians?
* They then have to justify these choices to each other and to the wider class.
* This task encourages students to think about how historians use different sources to understand the past. It also gives them the opportunity to communicate their ideas to a wider audience.
* Historic England also has images which are relevant for a variety of oral history projects and they can be downloaded from their [Educational Images](https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/education/educational-images/).
* **Activity 2- Film**

As part of the BNG project, students were shown a short film, shot in the 1960s, about Easiform housing. Students were then asked to discuss what they noticed in the film e.g. the Easiform video shows the importance of housing to the post-war era.

* This task familiarises the students with the subject-matter so that they start to think of questions to ask the interviewees.
* [BBC](https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/), [MACE](https://www.macearchive.org/) and [BFI](https://www.bfi.org.uk/) all have free archive footage which can be tailored for different oral history workshops.
* **Possible homework activity**

If the subject-matter is unfamiliar to the students, they could be asked to research more about the topic to create better questions.

* **Activity 3 - Writing Questions**After looking at photos and watching a film the students can be asked to imagine interviewing someone who built one of the buildings from the photos.
* Students could be asked to write 5 questions in their exercise books; the questions needed to be open-ended, e.g. did you enjoy work?- As these questions are suitable for interviews in contrast to closed questions which provide short answers, e.g. how old were you when you worked for Laing?
* Students then interviewed each other and were encouraged to practise ‘engaged listening’, where, after listening to answers, students followed up with relevant questions.

**2nd Lesson- Technical workshop (Key Stages 2-4)**

* If the interviews are being filmed or recorded by the students, it is useful for them to practise with the equipment.
* The structure of this lesson depends upon the equipment being used, but whatever it is, using their 5 questions from the previous activity gives them focus when ‘playing’/’learning’ how to use the new bits of equipment.

**3rd Lesson- Oral history as a source (Key Stages 3-4)**

* If working with students from Key Stages 3 and 4, additional activities can be added. For example, students could be encouraged to think about using a historical source which relies on memory.
* **Activity 1- Subjectivity**

Replay the film which was seen earlier (for BNG this was the Easiform film) and then ask 3 students to leave the room. Whilst they wait outside, the class thinks of questions about the film, e.g. how many cars featured in the footage? The students who have left the room then return one-by-one and are asked the questions. The respondent’s answers are usually different which shows how our memory of events is subjective. A wider discussion can then be approached about how historians need to rigorously analyse sources to reconstruct the past. For oral history, it is important to be mindful that the interview is just one person’s testimony and should be cross-referenced against other sources.

* **Activity 2- Ethics**

An additional lesson could be added which explores the ethical dimension of oral history. Begin by outlining the 3 main ethical issues to consider when producing oral history interviews:

1. **Challenging interviewees**

If an interviewee says something disagreeable, the interviewer should not correct them, they are there to listen and record.

1. **Interviewee consent**

In oral history, it is wrong to use an interviewee’s testimony without obtaining their permission. This is why consent forms should be signed, as they give the interviewer permission to use the interviewee’s memories.

1. **Upset interviewees**

If an interviewee gets upset, it is good practise to stop recording and ask if they would like to continue.

**Stages of an oral history interview:**

Detail the ideal oral history interview:

* 1. The interviewee and interviewer greet each other. The interviewer informs the interviewee that that they have the right to withdraw at any time.
	2. The interview begins and the interviewer asks appropriate questions.
	3. The interviewer politely listens to the interviewee’s responses. They might ask follow-up questions:

**1st question-** What did you do for a job?

**Follow-up question**- Did you enjoy it?

* 1. The interviewer does not correct the interviewee if they say something they disagree with.
	2. The interviewee stops the interview if the interviewee is upset.
	3. The interview finishes. The interviewer reminds the interviewee of their right to withdraw. If there are no issues, the interviewer collects the consent forms and then leaves.

The class then could be split up so there are 3 people in each group. The small groups could act out a mini-oral history interview, where one student is an interviewee, one student is an interviewer and one student is an evaluator. The interviewee and interviewer should act out the interview, but agree to miss out two stages of the interview process. The evaluator isn’t told which stage will be missed, but needs to watch the interview and work out which stage is missing. This task will lead to a greater understanding about the process of oral history and why it is important to pay attention to ethical problems which can occur in an interview.

**Other things to consider**

**Pictures and memorabilia**

* For BNG, interviewees were asked to bring photographs and work-related items to the interviews. One interviewee brought in old tools which were met with an enthusiastic reaction from the students. Bringing items into the classroom helps to include students who are too shy to speak and also encourages sensory learning.

**Consent forms**

* If the interviews are being filmed or recorded, it is important to draft consent forms giving permission to record participants; the forms need to be signed by participating student’s parents or carers and interviewees. An example of the one we used for BNG is included in the appendix and these forms could be tweaked and used in your own workshops.

**4. Interview**

**Format**

* The interview format depends upon how many interviewees are involved, what space is available and whether the interviews are going to be turned into an output.
* For the BNG workshops, there were usually four interviewees visiting multiple classes; you may find the following example of how this worked useful (it is important note that for all the examples, a teacher was with the students at all time, the students were never alone with the interviewee):
	+ One room was assigned as the ‘filming room’ with one former Laing employee sitting at the front of the class. Two students sat next to the employees and asked them questions. Students asking the questions were rotated every 5 minutes. This allowed the video camera to have an unimpeded shot of the interactions and the audio was clear because only two students asked questions every time.
	+ In the other two rooms, with no recording equipment, the former Laing employees sat at the front of the classroom with students placed in their usual seats asking them questions. A couple of pre-selected students asked questions at the beginning to break the ice.
		- The big difference between the two formats was that filming can intrude upon the flow of a conversation (e.g. changing camera batteries etc.); without a camera the conversation flow was more natural.

**What makes a good interview?**

* **Open questions and engaged listening**Good oral history interviews rely upon open-ended questions which lead to more personal, in-depth answers. Students often rigidly stick to the questions they have formulated, but they should be encouraged to listen to the answers and provide follow-up questions that relate to the interviewees answers.
* **Moments of insight**
Interviews can often bring up unexpected moments. For instance in BNG, one of the interviewees disclosed that he left school at a young age and this elicited a sympathetic reaction from the students. Moments such as this are enlightening because they help the students appreciate how people used to live in different circumstances. It is the teacher or facilitator’s role to steer the conversation to bring out these moments; the key is to ensure conversations are personal without being intrusive.
* **Reflection**

It is important to have a short reflection session after the interviews have taken place so that students can absorb what they have heard. Students should be asked what they enjoyed about the day. There could also be a short discussion about how oral history is one source that is used to access the past and, like every source, it has its flaws. A discussion could be held about the merits and drawbacks of relying upon memory to understand historical events.

**5. Post-interview**

**Edit**

* If you chose to film or record your videos, you will need to put them onto a computer. After this is done, they can be edited down into a product, i.e. a short film, podcast or audio clip for a website.
* Editing the footage can be quite technical; the OHS has some useful which can be found [here](https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/how-to-do-oral-history/3/#squelch-taas-accordion-shortcode-content-2).

**Storage**

* If the interviews are created in the form of video or audio recording, it would be useful to back them up on an external hard drive. The consent forms from the participants should also be stored with this footage.

**Post-interview activities**

* The OHS has an excellent list [on its website](https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/how-to-do-oral-history/3/#squelch-taas-accordion-shortcode-content-6) relating to possible activities that schools can do using oral history testimony.
* One possible event to also consider is a celebration event where participants gather and watch or listen to the produced oral history output. With BNG, HE visited the building that the workshop focussed on i.e. Coventry Cathedral in Coventry, to round off the workshop.

**6. Further reading**

* + [BBC: Hands on History](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00jkgm0)
	+ [Oral History Society: How to do oral history](https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/how-to-do-oral-history/3/)
	+ [Oral History Society: Advice on remote oral history interviewing during the Covid-19 pandemic](https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/covid-19/)

**7. Appendix
7.1 Consent form**



**Consent form for filming/audio/photography for John Laing former employees**

I hereby consent to Historic England using images/audio of me captured in video/audio recordings, and/or photographs on \_\_\_ at the \_\_\_ and at \_\_\_ for use in a Breaking New Ground Education Film.

I also consent to any recordings or photographs being used for marketing and publicity-related purposes and used in other Historic England publications, including on the Historic England website. I understand that they may be preserved as a permanent public reference resource within the Historic England Archive and may also be used for education, broadcasting, selected commercial uses, and on the internet.

I understand that:

* My images and personal data will be held in accordance with (i) the Data Protection Act 2018 and any successor UK legislation, as well as (ii) the General Data Protection Regulation ((EU) 2016/679) (‘GDPR’) for inter alia archiving purposes in the public interest and /or scientific or historical research purposes and that Article 17 (3) (d) GDPR shall apply accordingly;
* the images and/or audio of me captured in the video/audio recordings and/or photographswill be the copyright of Historic England and any other intellectual property which arises in the recordings will also belong to Historic England;
* I hereby agree to irrevocably assign all property rights in my performance and/or recordings to Historic England;
* I hereby agree to waive all moral rights in my performance in the film and/or recordings to Historic England.

Name [print] …………………………………………………..……………………………………….

Signed………….……………………………………………………………………………………….

Date…………………………………………………..