



Historic England

# Education

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## Heritage Schools Case Study

### Building Coventry Cathedral:

*Pupils used the John Laing Photographic Collection and an oral history approach to learn more about a significant place of worship.*

**Where: St Osburg's Catholic Primary School, Coventry**

**Who: Year 5**

The project used images from the [John Laing Photographic Collection](#), held by the [Historic England Archive](#). The project introduced pupils to using archive photographs as primary sources and as a stimulus to generate questions about the construction of Coventry Cathedral and the people who were involved in this historic undertaking. Based on the [Heritage Schools aims](#), the aim was to develop a sense of pride and curiosity in where the pupils live and to understand how their local heritage relates to the national story. Pupils examined the photographs as sources of primary evidence about their local area. These visits and questions were filmed to provide a lasting legacy of the project.



The project took place over two days. The pupils explored images from the wider Laing Archive before focusing specifically on photographs of Coventry Cathedral taken at different phases of its construction. The first workshop allowed pupils to learn what clues help us date a photograph, how to describe the images in accurate detail and how we make choices about what photographs we would keep when creating an archive. The photographs acted as a stimulus for pupils to devise questions in preparation for a Q & A session with two former Laing employees, one of whom worked on the building of the Cathedral. These questions were collated by the BNG Outreach Officer. On the second day, the pupils met the two former Laing employees, Pat Kenny and Edwin King, and asked their questions, with some pupils taking notes. Pupils were encouraged to ask supplementary questions, based on the responses they heard. Later, the pupils joined Pat and Edwin on a tour of the Cathedral, led by the Cathedral's Education Team. The pupils brought Laing Archive photographs and identified details from the images, on their tour. Their immersion in the archive photographs beforehand, enhanced the pupils' appreciation and understanding of the architectural details of the cathedral, and the significance of its history, during their visit.

#### Intended Outcomes:

- Pupils to understand what a photographic archive is & how it can be used as a source of primary evidence
- Pupils to devise historically-valid questions to build an oral history based on Coventry Cathedral
- Pupils understand how important aspect of their local heritage relates to a national story
- Pupils develop a sense of pride in where they live

## What we did:

- Pupils considered what they liked / disliked about their area and what made it feel they are 'home'.
- Pupils worked in groups to look at a range of photographs from the Laing Archive to consider questions such as: "Why are photos a good historical source? What do you know/can you infer from a photograph? How would you describe this photograph to someone who could not see it?"
- Pupils studied photographs from different phases of the construction of Coventry Cathedral.
- Pupils were asked them to consider what they would like to find out if they met former Laing employees who worked on the Cathedral's construction and what questions they would ask. How do we ask 'good' questions to gather interesting responses? What is an open question?
- Pupils interviewed former Laing employees, starting with a structured, planned order of questions.
- Pupils and the Laing employees went to visit Coventry Cathedral, bringing images from the archive so they could identify the details from the photos. The pupils were given a guided tour by the Cathedral's Education staff, adding a further layer of detail onto their knowledge about the building.

## Challenges:

- Finding former Laing employees who could participate in the project was difficult. The construction was completed in 1962 so many of those involved are no longer alive.
- Co-coordinating the timing of walking pupils to the Cathedral with transporting the former Laing Archives, lunchtime arrangements and the Cathedral Education Team being ready to receive the class, took some planning. All issues were successfully managed.
- The closure of schools, due to the Pandemic clearly interrupted any follow work and prevented us from conducting a return visit to the school to see their learning outcomes and assess the impact.

## Successes:

- Activities were well-planned by the BNG Outreach Officer and the class teacher was very enthusiastic about the project, being extremely flexible about arrangements.
- The pupils were enthusiastic and engaged from the start, making excellent observations and responding well to guidance about how to interpret archive images. Their behaviour was immaculate throughout the whole of the two days.
- Group discussions relating to the images – such as which archive photos to 'lose' - were constructive and focused
- The pupils generated a great range of thoughtful and pertinent questions in preparation for Q & A session. The session was well-prepared, ran smoothly and lots of interesting information was elicited.
- The former Laing employees were friendly and approachable and established a very positive and productive rapport with the pupils, as did the cathedral Education Team.
- The comments from the pupils, during the reflection session, were extremely thoughtful and intelligent

## Resources and web links:

- Film - [Breaking New Ground: The Story of Coventry Cathedral](#)
- Teaching Activity – [What makes a place of worship worth exploring?](#)
- [John Laing Photographic Collection](#)
- [Using the John Laing Photographic Collection for oral history projects](#)

## Next steps/extension activities:

- The school booked Heritage Schools training to support their heritage curriculum development
- Pupils to write up their oral history accounts and record their visit to the Cathedral
- Pupils create their own photographic archive either of the Cathedral, or the school, buildings in Coventry City Centre, the area where they live
- Use their oral history skills to interview other members of their local community.
- Find out more about oral history from the [Oral History Society](#)
- Find out more about [Local Heritage Curriculum Planning](#)