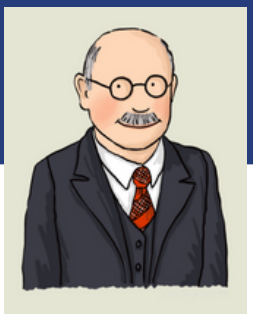
An Introduction 1/2



Sir John Laing – a much-needed role model?

Monkey See Monkey Do

"Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" Hebrews 13.7 (NIV)

Bonnie Tyler is still holding out for one, while Bowie claims we can be heroes - just for one day. We all love a hero. Even as adults, we are often mesmerised by celluloid or sporting heroes.

In recent years we have endured scandals about famous entertainers, store owners, newsreaders, sportsmen, clergy, authors, monks, dancers, police, princes, presidents and more.

Social media, and the media in general, relishes the making and then breaking of a hero – both stories sell. The rise and fall of heroes is easy to engineer in these days of phone tapping, trolling, investigative journalism and the public interest argument. And while people guard their own mental health they often display a disregard for the mental health of others, as they post vicious criticism and abuse to their fallen heroes.

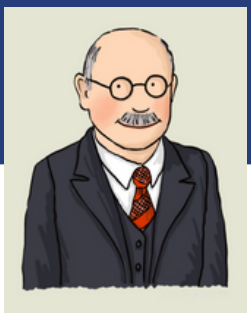
This leaves us, our children and our young people with several questions to grapple with:

- Does fame/constant adoration corrupt, and absolute adoration corrupts absolutely?
- Does 'Joe Public' bear any responsibility in creating this celebrity culture?
- What are young peoples' criteria for picking a role model or hero?
- Do we equip them to recognise good characteristics?
- What values do our young people aspire to or articulate?
- Are heroes and role models different?
- Are we introducing our young people to stories about good role models in an accessible and exciting way?
- Are we exploring with young people the role of common humanity, kindness, forgiveness, justice, second chances, responsibility and empathy?

This matters because negative influencers, heroes or role models have a staggering impact on the lives of young people, shaping the way they behave, what they believe and how they interact - with studies showing that young people with positive role models have better self-esteem, better academic performance, and are less likely to engage in unsafe behaviours.

'Since it is so likely that children will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage.' C S Lewis

An Introduction 2/2



The tone of voice our children and young people hear, the behaviours they observe, the values they absorb have a significant effect. Role models need to demonstrate what it looks like to live with honour, purpose, morality, civility, authenticity, wisdom, kindness and respect for others.

For children and young people are watching, listening and copying -- it is ‘monkey see monkey do’. And in an era when boys, for example, are more likely to own a smartphone than live with their father it can be argued there is often a role model gap. We, as educators, need to mind that gap.

It was with such thoughts and questions in my mind that I took up a grant from The Laing Family Trust to produce some educational materials on the life of Christian builder, Sir John Laing. At first glance he may seem an unlikely hero, but he is a wonderful role model.

While our young people need to hear inspiring tales of courage and adventure, the majority of us will be called to live our day to day lives in relative obscurity. We sometimes need to be reminded how to do that. John Laing’s path was an ‘everyday’ one in many ways, but his servant-style leadership offers a different kind of role model to the ones often presented. His humanity means that he couldn't live a perfect life, but he did live an extraordinary one. His was an ordinary life lived responsibly, with intent, resolve, humility, strength, thanksgiving, contentment, enthusiasm, empathy, compassion, kindness, challenge, resilience, great generosity and hard work.

Perhaps there is little capacity in the school curriculum for stories that illustrate and promote timeless values, but I believe space should be made. Many children and young people are searching for purpose, direction and stability. They need us to advocate for them.

I offer you the life story of Sir John Laing.