



Belsay Hall, Northumberland



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When?

September was chosen for 'Alice' partly because Northumbrian weather at that time of year is often good (and we were amazingly lucky with only two wet days out of sixteen!) and partly because September is the beginning of the new school term. From an educational point of view, we hoped the work would be seen as a springboard for development in school, not just a one-off exercise. Both actors and audience would be out of doors almost all of the time, and although we provided our actors with rubber overboots and umbrellas, we all knew that 'Alice in the Pouring Rain' would hardly be a popular attraction!

How?

The Directors were engaged and presented with the basic concept of the event in the preceding February. From careful re-reading of the books and numerous site visits the ideas gradually emerged. The 'Alice' event had to contain learning areas relevant to today's 7-11 year olds but be also of sufficient interest to the wide range of people it was hoped would form the weekend audience.

The Directors' Viewpoint

In terms of society today, Alice was a remarkably careless child, indulging in behaviour of which we counsel our children to beware:

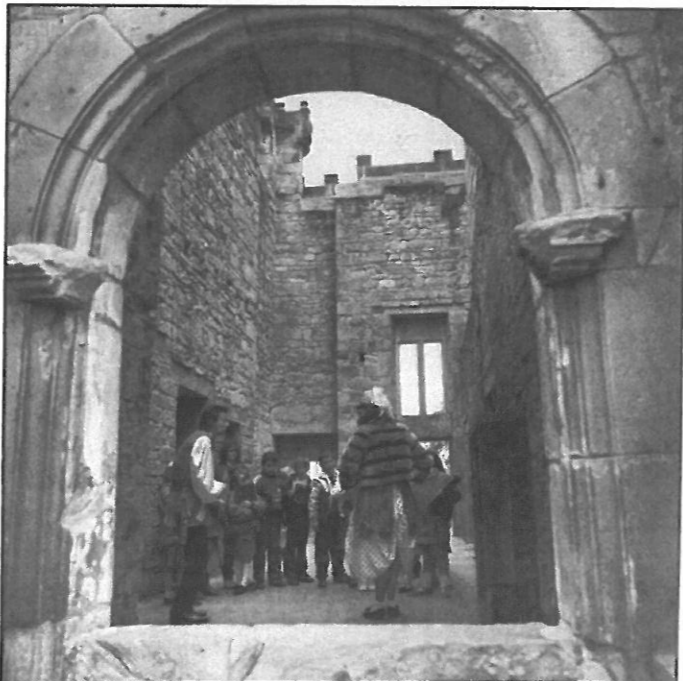
- talking to strangers
- eating and drinking strange substances with no knowledge of their source
- taking advice from people whose trustworthiness has not been established.

We decided to invent a dramatic framework which would allow these matters to be explored, and our choice of characters from all the possibilities in both books would be governed by these considerations.

The Dramatic Framework

The dramatic framework would, of necessity, place the children in role, giving them responsibilities in Wonderland. They would have a task, in carrying it out, they would interact with the Wonderland characters. They would be aware that the task was important, and the nature of the task would cause them not merely to 'meet' someone, but to reflect on the meaning of the meeting and to judge Alice's behaviour in Wonderland on the basis of their own experience.

The framework we chose was that Belsay Hall should become the Frung Institute for Dream Research and Analysis, where all literary dream worlds could be investigated. Professor Frung, with her computer F.I.D.A.R., held in existence all the dream worlds and could call people out of them for consultation to further her research. Thus the audience would be introduced to



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their part in the drama by Professor Frung's assistants (the Directors in role) and would enter the drama at the moment they entered the Institute. They would go through the dream world with tasks to perform and would leave the drama as they left Wonderland having programmed F.I.D.A.R. and solved the tasks set by Professor Frung. The Dream Institute had, in addition, a Technical Department in the cellars where experiments in the reproduction of dream effects took place using projected slides, percussion instruments and movement drawn from dream language. Thus our audience, in the role of Dream Researchers, first experienced the Dream Institute through this carefully built dream environment. Lack of finance for staffing precluded weekend opening of the Technical Department, an unfortunate but necessary compromise.

The Dramatic Context

The experience of the 'audience' would be:

- working in a Technical Department
- meeting Professor Frung and, through her and her assistant, the White Rabbit, learning of her predicament with regard to Wonderland. Alice, due for a consultation, had slipped into Wonderland unofficially and with no instruction regarding her behaviour; in addition, it appeared that she had picked up the operating code-word to F.I.D.A.R. upon which depended the existence of the Dream World of Wonderland.
- They would be asked, as Dream Researchers, to trace the path taken by Alice, to find the code-word, and to collect information about the state and well-being of all the Dream people. They would then be able to programme F.I.D.A.R. to prevent the fade-out of Wonderland.
- The White Rabbit would issue a safe-conduct pass to each researcher (not at weekends because of prohibitive printing cost!), warn them to follow printed signs and give them the rules governing all travellers into Dream Worlds:
 - Nothing should be eaten or drunk
 - Paths should not be strayed from
 - They should at all times beware the Jabberwock

Wonderland

A window in the room next to Professor Frung's office led directly into Wonderland. The sixteen selected characters from the books were each placed in a particular location but not in a specific sequence. Indeed our actors, once they developed confidence, were to be found all over the site, carrying out personal interactions with the audience which had not been planned at all. Imagine the surprise of the Directors upon seeing the Gardener being flung out of a castle window by the Queen of Hearts and the Mock Turtle playing croquet with the Mouse against a visiting family!



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Our intention was that the audience, some of whom we expected to return to Wonderland more than once, (and a great many did!), should experience something of the disturbing nature of dreams. A character might be met in a place other than that at the first encounter and might be demonstrating different concerns from those first sampled. Thus each dream researcher had the possibility of acquiring information and undergoing experiences different from other researchers.

Characters encountered in Wonderland

The Gardener

near the entrance to Wonderland he was painting the rose. Sometimes he was colourblind, which gave him special problems, but he was always terrified of the Queen of Hearts.

The Mouse

she had her cosy nest in some bushes on the edge of the lawn at the end of which was the cake labelled 'Eat Me' and the bottle labelled 'Drink me'. Terrified of the Cheshire Cat and with her tail still dripping from her near-drowning in the pool of tears, she had seen Alice take a bite from the cake and a swig from the bottle.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee

on a huge croquet lawn backed by a high wall and tall trees which might have concealed the Monstrous Crow, they quarrelled interminably and fought over the rattle.

A Swordsman and his Apprentice

in a dark area of tall trees and thick undergrowth they waited to escort travellers through Jabberwock's territory. The Apprentice's one desire was to join the Guild of Vorpal Swordsman. The test was hard. Would she pass?

The Caterpillar

an ill-tempered fellow, his mood no doubt affected by ingesting the strange forest substances with which he was experimenting. Only strong resolve would prevent researchers from tasting his feast.

Humpty Dumpty

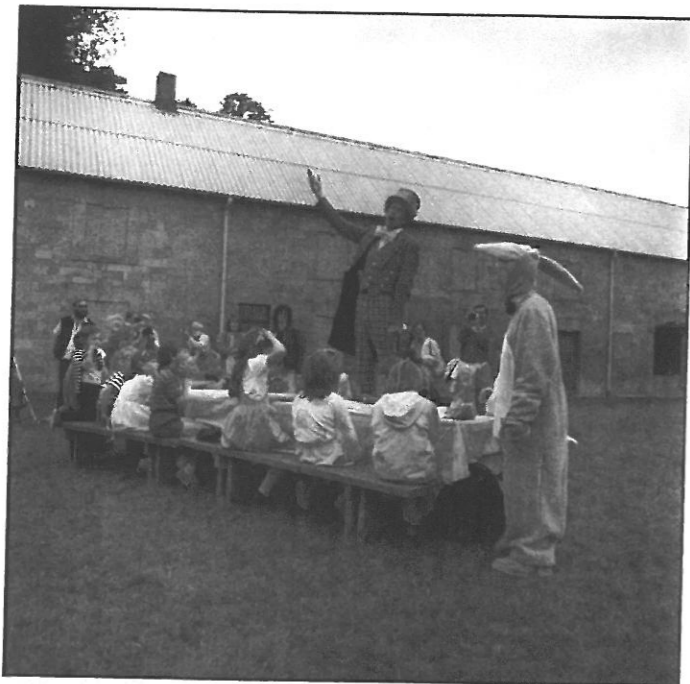
below a huge arch, he is enjoying his umpteenth fall and still his fascination with words makes him struggle to solve a riddle. (One Saturday Humpty cut herself on her eggshell and to the delight of the 'researchers' was being 'mended' by the St. John's Ambulance Brigade rather than All the King's Men).

The White Knight

through a huge door and in the shadow of a tall rock the White Knight boasted of his exploits and struggled with his latest invention, a trap for catching the Jub-jub bird.



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Queen of Hearts

ferocious as ever, she imprisoned everyone within sight, and was completely enraged at the disappearance of Alice.

Computer Operators

instructed researchers in the correct programming of F.I.D.A.R.

Mad Hatter, March Hare and Doormouse

(weekends only for financial reasons)

provided general entertainment, organised caucus races, had tea parties, held fancy dress competitions and awarded prizes.

ALICE

After much deliberation, we decided not to cast anyone as Alice. Had we done so, we would have had to have many Alices so that the audience could have met her in a number of places, or one Alice who accompanied the audience. In that case we could have had only one audience per half-day instead of four or five. In the end we realised that if the audience were to be a kind of composite Alice, they would be much nearer to experiencing her adventures than if they merely accompanied her. This enraged some of the audience, who felt cheated, and occasionally members of the public were quite abusive to the Directors, who, in white coats and in role as Computer Programmers, were sometimes taken for car park attendants!

The researchers' reward was to see that their finding of the code-word and feeding information to F.I.D.A.R. was preventing the assembled characters, who appeared by the Computer in a state of semi-fade-out, from fading into oblivion.

General Organisation

The characters were spread along a half-mile track, which took approximately two hours to walk if the audience stopped at every character. The nature of the Belsay grounds makes it impossible to plan a circular route, which would have been in many ways more satisfactory.

The audience entered Wonderland in groups. We found that groups of 15-20 allowed for the most successful interaction.

The actors had no scripts, but a series of ploys developed in rehearsal; each actor, all of whom were young professionals, had the responsibility of choosing a ploy suitable for each group. The Directors, as Computer Operators, warned the actors in advance if a group with a particular need,

- eg. very naughty children
- all pensioners
- severely mentally and physically handicapped
- adults determined to wreck the event
- totally committed and ready for anything.

was approaching, so that they could use their most suitable ploy.



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At weekends we admitted groups to Wonderland at approximately 15 minute intervals as soon after their arrival as possible. Lunch and tea breaks for the actors were staggered so that the performance could be continuous throughout the day and still allow every member of the team reasonable breaks. This led to some particular situations, such as one performance to two American tourists, because no-one else arrived at the same time, and a grand mushroom dance for 200 people organised in a forest clearing by the caterpillar, because in spite of all our efforts two or possibly three groups had joined up!

Schools were asked to provide clip-boards for the pupils to facilitate work at F.I.D.A.R., and worksheets were devised to encourage further reflection and decision-making after the event. We provided paper, crayons, and a covered space for computer work, along with a 'computer' in rainbow colours which filled two room-sized dog kennels and was staffed by qualified teachers who in the guise of Computer Operators were there to maximise the learning experience for the children. We were unable to open the computer fully at weekends due to staffing shortage; we found that the general public, unlike the children during the week, could not be trusted to programme the computer unsupervised!

We found that our scenery and properties, which of necessity were all over the Hall, Castle and gardens, had literally to be guarded at weekends while the actors were having a tea and meal breaks. We were fortunate in having a platoon of Army Cadets who would do guard duty in addition to carrying out a multitude of odd jobs. Without them, it is doubtful that any of the set would have remained intact by the end of the first day. We had not anticipated this, but it came as no surprise to the English Heritage custodians.

Communication over such a large performance area was crucial; we were fortunate, at weekends, to be issued with radios so that the Directors could be in contact with each other, the Custodians, the Army, the St. John's Ambulance personnel, the Car Park and the Computer.

To Conclude

The original idea was mooted more than a year before the September performance. Directors were engaged to begin work in February, from which time onwards site visits, administrative meetings, planning, research and liaison with ground staff and custodians were ongoing. Scenery and costume makers were interviewed in May and began work in June. We discovered that this kind of operation needs some resolution of people's respective professional requirements, some of which lead to different styles and modes of operation. There can be no accepted formula for this, and therefore the bodies involved need to invent their rules as they work.

For example, the actors were auditioned, engaged and measured in June, and had a rehearsal period of 8 days at the end of August, going immediately into performance. The production team agreed to a schedule which meant they had no days off at all; this was a mistake, and their example should not be followed!

Readers who may be contemplating such an event should be aware that such projects are expensive to mount. This one was funded jointly by Northumberland Education Authority and English Heritage. Much of the staffing was carried out by personnel already employed by the two funding bodies but in addition it was necessary to employ one Director: two scenic and costume experts and seventeen professional actors, all at professional rates of pay.

We have been at pains to point out some of the considerations inherent in such projects: it is beyond the scope of this article to detail them all. However, a body of knowledge does exist here in Northumberland which could be consulted by anyone considering similar events. But it must be said that there is immense satisfaction to be gained. Some five thousand people had the 'Alice' at Belsay' experience; we found them surprised, puzzled, fascinated and occasionally furious.

Would we do it again?

Probably!

Heather Cooper and Eileen Pennington.
Project Directors.



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Conisbrough Castle

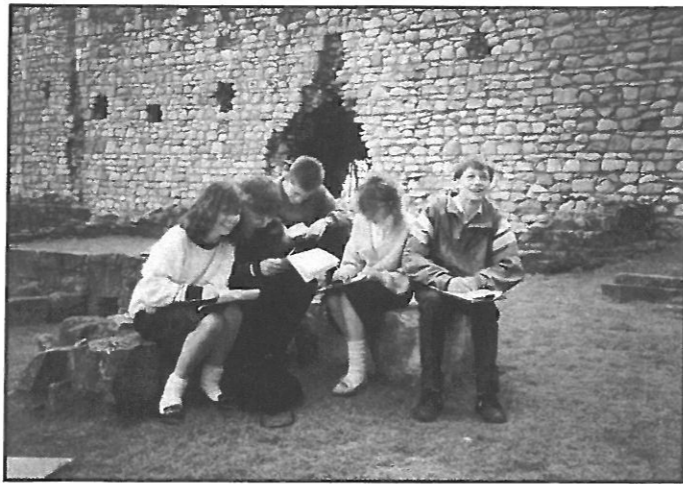
The arrival of GCSE course work has led to an increase in the use of English Heritage monuments as a teaching resource for secondary schools. Teachers using the Schools Council History examinations have been familiar with this approach for some years and if used well the 'History Around Us' coursework is a stimulating and enjoyable element for the students. There are however problems in using sites with upper school students as many teachers are unfamiliar with the approaches and most of the materials available are aimed at junior or middle school children. This is certainly what I found when I started using the castles theme, so I felt very uncertain about what I was doing.

Determined to improve matters I applied for the English Heritage DES Course 'The Educational Uses of Museums & Historic Buildings' and found it extremely helpful — but not long enough! However, encouraged by my local adviser, I decided to follow it up by applying for a Teacher Fellowship at Trinity & All Saints College in Leeds. The result was a package of work for the 'History Around Us' Section Schools Council GCSE exam, using Conisbrough Castle.

The work consists of 3 sections:

1. A Personal Investigation of the Site.
2. A study of the relation of the site to its historical context.
3. A study in Empathy.

Conisbrough Castle is an excellent site to study and the unusual design of the keep makes it particularly interesting. For the personal investigation I wanted to stress both observation and the interpretative approach so the questions were strictly related to what can actually be seen by the pupils on the site. For instance the chapel at Conisbrough is particularly fine so one of the questions was: What kind of evidence does the chapel provide? What could historians learn about the castle from this type of evidence? Other questions involved identification of features of the castle from the remaining evidence and an interpretation of

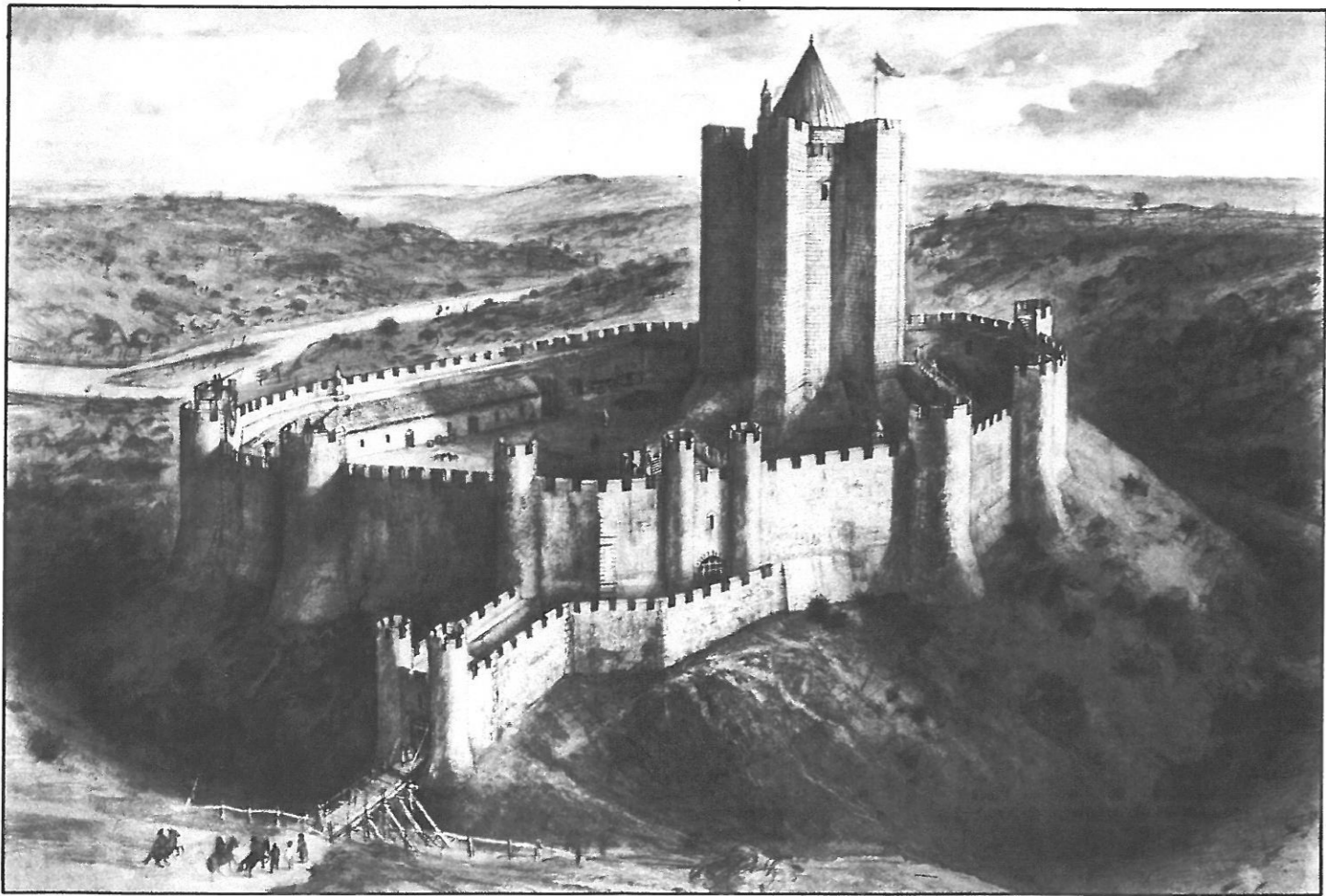


4th year GCSE students from Hall Cross Comprehensive School, Doncaster, working at Conisbrough Castle.

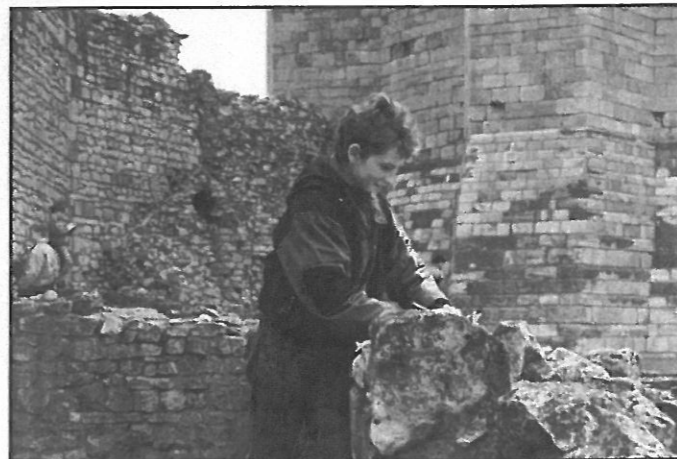
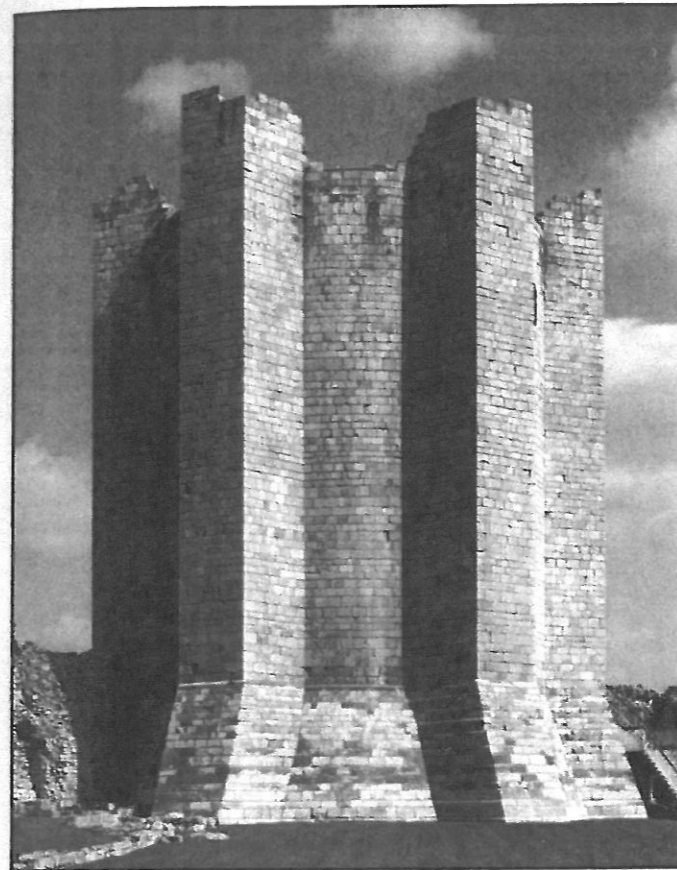
the use of the keep.

The aim of the relation of the site to its historical context was to give the pupils some understanding of the purpose of castles and the role of Conisbrough itself. Documentary sources are usually an important element of this piece of work. Conisbrough had little documentary evidence relating to its early history — but plenty for the 19th and 20th centuries. I therefore designed a series of questions to look at Conisbrough's changing role — starting with the reasons for castle building after the Conquest so that sources such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle could be used.

The other exercises look at William de Warenne, the 1st Earl of Surrey; Walter Scott, Ivanhoe and the date of the existing building; the decline of the castle and its revival as a tourist attraction today. The latter enabled me to use a 19th century article advocating the total destruction of the town of Conisbrough in order to enhance the view of the castle — this was



Reconstruction drawing of Conisbrough Castle.



an excellent vehicle for use for a discussion of how we should present and use monuments today.

In the study in Empathy I was determined to try and find something that would make historical characters really live. I was lucky as John de Warenne had kidnapped Alice Lacy, the Earl of Lancaster's wife and a private war ensued in which Warenne lost Conisbrough Castle — an excellent 'human interest' story. In fact the 8th Earl Warenne was an extremely colourful character so I decided to show the main events of his life in newspaper and cartoon form. Although the event needs to be seen in the context of the problems of Edward II's reign the story of the kidnapping is a good one for arousing the interest of the students. The work in this section has two parts, an interpretation of Warenne's motives for kidnapping Alice Lacy and an interpretation of why Edward II didn't do more to save Warenne from losing his lands.

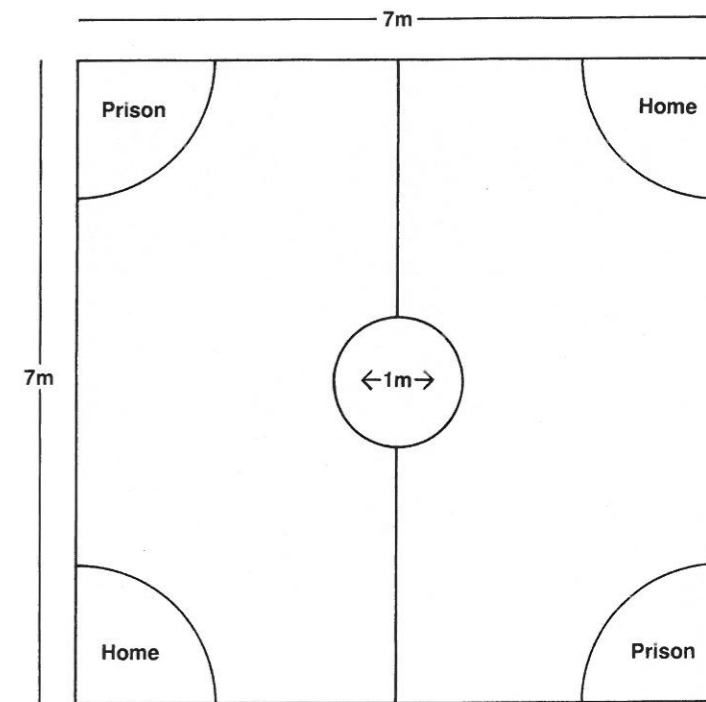
So far the new work seems to have been successful at least with parents; at a recent parents' evening several told me how much they had enjoyed the Conisbrough work. It turned out that they had been persuaded to drive to Conisbrough on Sunday afternoons so that their children could make further studies and improve their drawings. I've never really looked at castles properly before, said one. Why is the keep such an odd shape...?

Marilyn Creese, Hall Cross Comprehensive School, Doncaster.

Games for the classroom

No.7 Prisoners' Base

This is a rowdy medieval game and needs to be played outside rather than indoors. It was played by young and old and was regarded as such a nuisance that in the reign of Edward III it was banned from the grounds of the Palace of Westminster because it interfered with the business of Parliament.



The Rules

1. Divide children into two teams of at least ten players. The game was so anarchic that there is no maximum number. Each team has a captain.
2. Mark out a 7 metre square playing area. Divide the field in half. In the centre mark a circle or 'chivvy' 1 metre in diameter. In each half of the field mark a home area and a prison area. The home and prison area of the two teams should be diagonally opposite each other.
3. The teams stand in their home areas.
4. The captains toss a coin for the first run. The captain of the first team sends out his fastest runner to the circle where he calls 'Chivvy!'. At this point an opponent is sent to tag him but his captain sends a runner in pursuit of his pursuer. The second captain then sends a player to pursue that pursuer and so on.
5. Each player tries for his home base but should he be tagged he waits in the opponents prison until he can be tagged by a teammate and released.
6. The game ends when one team is locked up in prison.

These rules are suggested in F Grunfeld, *Games of the World*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1977 — a book that is strongly recommended. Highly illustrated, it is full of games from all cultures.

Gail Durbin