Learning from the Past

Using a database to study census returns

Five days relief from usual tasks and pressures of work and household time and space to think - was not entirely distasteful! And in fact my expectations were more than met, as I hope to show in this article.

Of the available options, I chose ‘Northfield Village to Suburb’ for several reasons: firstly, Northfield (a local suburb of Birmingham) was an area about which I knew nothing at all, and I wanted to approach my project entirely from scratch; secondly, this option would give me practice in finding and using primary sources for local history, and thirdly, it would show me some of the problems teachers might encounter when trying to build up a local studies element in their curriculum.

Within this option group, we worked in pairs, and our remit was to follow a particular line of enquiry, at our own level, then to work out ways of using what we had learned in the classroom, and finally to present our work to colleagues from the other groups. We were given a minimal introduction to the area, told where to go for further information, and taken for a walk around the Conservation Area in Northfield. Then, with three days to work on our project, and the assurance that our leaders, Peter Stone and Tony Joddington were ‘at our disposal’, we were left to get on with it!

At this point, panic threatened! Where to start? Shouldn’t we have been given more information? We felt like amateurs in a very specialised field - what if we got it wrong? Whatever it was, we should be after all, have opted for another, more familiar, and thus less threatening subject, with tried-and-tested guidelines. As we later realised, this was a calculated strategy on the part of the leaders - we would learn more by doing than by being spoon-fed! By the end of the second day, we had all found our lines of approach, all different - the use of drama to enter into the life of an imaginary Victorian family in Northfield, a graveyard survey, analysis of early maps and census returns, oral history, a project on the church and our own project trying to find explanations for certain topographical features we noticed on our introductory walk.

We all became immersed in our individual projects, going to local and city libraries, doing additional fieldwork, and reporting back daily. It was good experience the excitement of doing our own bit of original research, and to be able to share our minor triumphs with the rest of the group. There was considerable overlap in the material we were using, so information and insights could be exchanged. I think these report-back sessions helped keep the momentum going, and prevented us from becoming absorbed in our own research to the exclusion of all else.

The necessity to share our work with others focused the mind wonderfully on the third day, and an atmosphere of suppressed hysteria prevailed (you know what it’s like before a School Open Evening) - much cutting and sticking, competing for wall space, time on the word-processor, long stories and the best coloured mounting card. However, any resultant stress was completely dissipated by the course dinner and party held on the Friday evening!

There was much to do. One needed to be selective - it wasn’t possible to take in or try everything that was available. I particularly liked ‘The Market Idea’, where colleagues gave brief accounts of their work, and, as a computer-illiterate, I appreciated the opportunity to try out various programmes with an archaeological/historical slant, under the patient guidance of Sue Bennett. There were displays of work, books, and videos to watch, as well as two evening lectures, but despite all this solid content there was nothing heavy about the atmosphere which remained buoyant throughout.

Looking back, I remember the course as thoroughly enjoyable and every respect. What has remained with me is a renewed realisation of the importance of discovery in learning - made possible because we were simply given time and opportunity to do that for ourselves. For that reason alone I would commend this course to anyone wishing to Learn from the Past.

Rachel Shaw
Education Officer
Northamptonshire Archaeological Unit

Tony, John, Rachel and Cillian, members of the Village Group

Learning from the Past

A Short Course for Teachers

Educational Use of Museums, Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings
Monday 2 April - Saturday 7 April 1990 at La Saine Union College, Southampton
**Learning from the Past**

**A Short Course for Teachers**

Organised by English Heritage, Department of Education and Science and Department of the Environment

Educational Use of Museums, Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings

Monday 2 April — Saturday 7 April 1990 at La Sainte Union College, Southampton

The central theme of LEARNING FROM THE PAST will be the investigation of the educational and interpretative aspects of visits to historical monuments, sites and historic houses, together with collections in museums, galleries and archives. It is planned mainly as a practical course. It will employ discussion, practice with a range of skills and materials, and the exploration of resources provided by particular sites. Course members will relate some of their work to specific targets in National Curriculum programmes of study. There will be opportunities to explore the applications of information technology. The educational methods developed during the course are intended to have wider applications than simply to the individual sites studied so that course members can put into practice what they have learned, using their own local resources, whatever their discipline or the age group with which they work.

Evening sessions including workshops will cover subjects of more general interest in developing a variety of approaches to the use of museums, monuments and buildings. Optional sessions give the opportunity to preview a wide selection of films, video and tape-slide resources available from English Heritage and other institutions.

The course will be limited to 80 members who will be asked to choose one of the following fieldwork groups in which they will be encouraged to develop an in-depth investigation:

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One Year or One Term Supplementary Course:

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Games for the classroom

9. Hoops

Hoops have been used as a pastime in most periods of history. The Greeks used them in the gymnasia to improve their fitness and Hippocrates is about 300BC recommended them as a gentle form of exercise for those with weak constitutions. In Roman times the poet Martial complained of being disturbed by the noise the metal hoops and sticks made in the street. Some were even fitted with bells.

There are fourteen century illustrations of people jumping through hoops but by the eighteenth century one writer said they were troublesome in contemporary streets and referred to trundling as a childish game.

By Victorian times they were only for children and the Revd Wood in The Boy’s Modern Playman’s lists several games.

Racing - hoops should be of matched size so the small hoops are given a start.

Tournament - two or more hoops are driven against each other at speed and the one that remains standing is the winner.

30m

Turnpike - players draw lots for the hoops and those that don’t get them become tollekeepers. A large circle, 30 metres across, is marked out and on this at equal distances each tollekeeper places a couple of large stones about 10 cm apart. This is the turnpike and the trundlers are bound to drive their hoops through every turnpike on the road. If the hoop raises the turnpike or touches it then the tollekeeper and the trundler change places.

Posting - as above except that each player has a stick and as trundler approaches the posting house he gives the hoop an additional impetus and hands it over to the player stationed there. Any one who lets a hoop fall misses a turn.

Teachers studying the 1950s with their classes and who remember the bula hoop craze could perhaps demonstrate their skills.

Gail Durbin
Regional Education Officer
South West, English Heritage

History in the Landscape
John Porter
Oxford University Press
ISBN 0195133158 £2.95
(hardback £4.95)
Age range: Lower secondary.

This is one of a series of topic books designed to complement OUP’s “Presenting Past Books 1-3”. It is an attractive, colourful publication with good photographs and lively, clear plans and diagrams that are well tied into the text and questions.

The author has chosen 13 places in England and Wales to illustrate how today’s landscape holds a wealth of vital evidence from the past. Readers are taken from the problems confronting the builders of Stonehenge, through the interpretation of Iron Age landscapes, place names, and Dooneys book to the creation of deer parks in the 14th century. The selection of sites for inclusion must have been extremely difficult, but I cannot help feeling that the book would have benefited from a slightly wider perspective - both geographically and chronologically. Why, for example, is it that prehistory is always represented in such books almost exclusively by sites from Wessex? Does Scotland really have no site (prehistoric or historic) worthy of inclusion? And what about mentioning the long history of human occupation before the Neolithic - or, indeed, after the 14th century? There are no imposing physical remains from the former but we should not fail to point out the length of time the islands have been occupied and there is palaeolithic and mesolithic evidence available. Again, the abundance of more recent remains - seen everyday by children in their immediate environment - could be used as a path into discussing some of the more interesting and complex issues surrounding archaeology, heritage management and - what the National Curriculum History Working Group has called - “inheritance”.

The book really does attempt to ask questions from the physical remains and to link concepts between sites and periods. The questions are simple (perhaps too simple in some cases!) with clear instructions that often encourage analysing both written and illustrative material. The photographs should stimulate a real desire on the part of teachers and children to get out and actually visit the sites.

However, my overall feeling is that the book seems unduly restricted by its own scope. I left every page wanting to know more, to ask other questions and to develop different arguments. And then again, is this its strength...?

Peter Stone
Regional Education Officer
South West, English Heritage

Packed Lunch for the Museum
Steve Eales
Mantle 1987
ISBN 082609 16X (hardback) £2.25

We’ve got one like that at home!

This book for 6 to 9 year olds takes its readers on a journey to ‘The Museum’ with Mrs Grace’s group - part of a lively, happy class. The group’s extravert is Chirag.

On arrival group members view a selection of the more spectacular exhibits from the wide range available; they also discover that their practical needs are catered for as there is a place to ‘meet back here if you get lost’, a cloakroom, lavatories and a room in which to each packed lunch. Chirag has something to say in most parts of the museum - he’s quite a comedian!

The text is brief but enjoyable. The illustrations contain amusing detail and capture the stance and expression of individual teachers and children particularly well. Those reading the book will find the story interesting in its own right and will also look forward to their museum visit.

One aspect of the book is worrying, however: Chirag is set too often on the wrong side of the ropes which protect the exhibits. Mrs Grace is shown to be either unaware or unworried, perhaps because she considers Chirag to be excitable but harmless. Accidents do happen Mrs Grace! However, this could be a point for class discussion.

Packed Lunch for the Museum is especially welcome because it is in dual language. It therefore increases confidence and encourages the interest of those for whom English is not their first language. The text I read was in Hindi and English but it is also available in Bengali, Gujarati, Panjabi and Urdu.

It would be nice to see sequels to this book in which children visit the museum to explore in more detail exhibits relating to a particular topic.

Ross Barker
Education Officer
Historic Royal Palaces