The Bancroft Villa Thriller

During the Milton Keynes Year of the Environment in 1989, the site of Bancroft Roman villa was interpreted and displayed in a public park. In 1990 local schoolchildren worked on the site and interpreted its story in a variety of ways.

'I found it! It's a piece of mosaic and I found it! It's got straight sides like a match box! Oh, and this is a bit of broken land drain; it's Victorian so it is only about a hundred years old. But this has been here for two thousand years - that's twenty lots of a hundred years. And I'm the first to find it since the Romans!' (Francis aged 8, 1990)

'Who's that?' (Children playing in the stream at Bancroft Park two years after the event. Tarans was a Romano-Celtic god.)

'Yes! I'm Tarans!' (Children playing in the stream at Bancroft Park two years after the event. Tarans was a Romano-Celtic god.)

A few months after the opening of the villa to the public, rubbish began to fill the genuine Roman pond, graffiti appeared on the interpretation panels and plants were uprooted from the 'Roman' garden. It was decided to try and give the local community a sense of ownership of the site by actively involving their children in its interpretation. For six weeks in the summer of 1990, 250 children from five local schools worked on the site and in their schools to tell their view of the villa and its story in an exciting open air performance.

The project was inspired by primary evidence: pottery, tiles, oyster shells, burnt stones, bones and mosaic tesserae found on site by the children, and during the archaeological dig. The emphasis throughout was on active learning, finding out, handling and questioning the evidence in an exciting and stimulating way. The children became archaeologists searching for clues on the ground, employing all the deductive and recording skills used by the professionals. As detectives search for clues to solve a crime, so the children searched for clues to solve the mystery of the villa and its inhabitants.

Young Archaeologists - Looking for Clues

The children quickly became totally absorbed making genuine discoveries for themselves. They rapidly distinguished between natural and made objects. Eyes glued to the ground, engrossed in searching for clues, they walked systematically across the site to the surviving Roman fish pond. Surveying the rooms of the villa, the children noted discrepancies in the plan as excavated and the reconstruction.

During the dig, the pond had been emptied of rubbish thrown into it over 2,000 years. Now it was rapidly filling up with new rubbish. What would the lager cans and chocolate wrappers tell us about the people who visited and used the site today? The young archaeologists soon realised how easy it is to date and interpret litter, and how we can use it to build up a picture of past societies.

Each find prompted a whole series of questions. Children researched books for more information, but soon realised that information just about the finds would not sustain a convincing story, and began to research the wider historical context. When did the Roman occupation begin and end? When was the villa at Bancroft built, burnt down, and rebuilt? Where did they get their produce from? What happened when Romans met Celts? How different were they? Did they influence each other? Why did the villa fall into disuse so soon after such high quality, expensive mosaic floors had been installed?

The children interpreted the evidence they found on the site (some of it plaited strategically in the rooms of the reconstructed villa). From all this evidence they worked collaboratively to produce their version of events on site. They became the interpreters of the site, the adults the enablers. The archaeologists interpreted the villa's history in a lengthy report, the children by writing, designing and performing a play of their own.

Below: Looking for clues on site.
A Teacher’s Guide to Using Portraits
Susan Morris
Portraits are the gossip columns, newsflashers, party political broadcasts and family albums of the past. They are found in every country house and museum and this book aims to help teachers decode some of the messages they contain. 48 pages, A4, 1989
ISBN 1-85074-233-6
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See also Slide Packs

A Teacher’s Guide to Geography and the Historic Environment
Tim Copeland
Geography is about places and the relationship between people and environments that shapes what a place is like and how it works. This book aims to help teachers understand the places that we live in by investigating how they were used in the past and how that past has influenced the present. It explores individual sites and local landscapes and demonstrates how a range of geographical skills may be developed through working with the historic environment. 36 pages, A4, 1993
ISBN 1-85074-332-0
£5.95
Product code: XP 10314

A Teacher’s Guide to Maths and the Historic Environment
Tim Copeland
This book explores the unique problem-solving aspects of mathematical processes when applied to the historic environment. It will help teachers prepare to get the maximum from a visit to an historic site or building. 36 pages, A4, 1992
ISBN 1-85074-339-0
£3.95
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See also Videos

A geography project at the Rollright Stones, Oxfordshire.

A Teacher’s Guide to Using Historic Houses
Gail Durham
There cannot be many schools more than 30 miles from an historic house which is open to the public. This book helps teachers plan visits and develop ways of learning from such rich resources. The book covers houses from the medieval period onwards, looking not exclusively at grander country houses but also at empty and ruined buildings and the more common furnished house. 36 pages, A4, 1993
ISBN 1-85074-390-8
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A Teacher’s Guide to Using Listed Buildings
Crispin Keith
About 440,000 historic buildings of all shapes and sizes are protected through listing. They are an easily and cheaply available local source, with a wealth of interesting and important issues attached. 36 pages, A4, 1991
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Storytelling at Historical Sites
Eric Maddern
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New

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