Three attacks on Camber Castle

Camber Castle is a remote and atmospheric site near the medieval town of Rye in East Sussex. Jennie Fordham shows how three schools used the site for different approaches to castle study.

Three different approaches

Though pupils of St. Thomas CE Aided Primary School can see Camber Castle from their school, it is still relatively unfamiliar to them and to their parents. The school decided to take 32 pupils and eight adults on a cross-curricular approach was taken, and the class was divided into smaller groups. The site was an ideal place to develop English skills. The pupils had a chance to talk and write about the atmosphere of the castle, and to make comparisons with any other local castles they had visited. Most children had visited at least two other castles, but they had had no time to rest and think, and this made a real impact both on their visit.

The symmetrical plan of the castle gave ample scope for measuring angles, lines, circles, and radii, while some pupils studied the extent of the weathering of the walls and looks of the variety of building materials. The site and position of the castle led naturally to studies of coastal erosion, and as the area around the castle is a site of special scientific interest it provided the opportunity to look at various – and sometimes rare – wild flowers and insects. To study the Tudors, the group looked at life in the castle on a practical scale – looking at the kitchens and gunports brings home the domestic and military aspects of castle life.

Key Stage 3 pupils from Thomas Peacocke School visited the castle as part of a specific history topic on castle development. Once back at school they used the information they had collected on site visits to build a range of models showing changes in castle design. Sixth-formers from Hildenwood School followed the KEB ‘Alternative’ History A-level syllabus. This has a paper which deals with different types of evidence, including buildings, so their teacher jumped at the chance of using Camber Castle as one of their resources.

After their visit the students were asked to write an extended essay on how useful they found the site as a piece of historical evidence. This provided them with a good, detailed example to refer to in their examination. This would hopefully help them avoid falling into the trap which, according to examiners, so many students fall into – namely that of having too many ideas backed up by too little practical experience.

Telling the students that the coastline has changed does not have the same impact as taking them to the site itself. Letting the pupils see the ruinous castle in the distance, as they walk across the fields towards it, can have a profound effect on them, particularly as the castle seems to stand in the middle of nowhere.

A model assignment in teacher training

English Heritage sites can play an important role in training courses for teachers. Jennie Fordham reports on a project at two Kent castles linking maths and history.

The National Curriculum for history requires that pupils at all Key Stages are taught how to find out about the past from a variety of sources, including buildings and sites. Yet we sometimes expect newly qualified teachers to ‘pick up’ knowledge and ideas about how to get the most out of historic sites in an accessible and attractive way once they have started teaching. With the best support in the world, this is not an ideal time to reflect and be creative about opportunities. Far better to build into a course for training teachers an element about using the historic environment as a basis for teaching in a variety of subjects. The students’ experiences and discussion can then be built on in a practical way on teaching practice or in the first teaching post. Earlier this year, a small group of training teachers from Brussels spent a week’s residential course in Kent, working on Dover and Deal Castles. The students were from the Erasmus College, Brussels (the equivalent of a College of Higher Education) and were studying maths and English. The English Heritage teacher’s guide...
Maths and the Historic Environment encouraged the tutors, led by Mr Ron Langenus, to think about using an historic site to deliver the aims and skills of subjects other than history. Part of the course in maths was the requirement for one week of project work. This was traditionally carried out inside the college, so a field trip was a completely new idea, and one which motivated and intrigued the students.

Planning

The 13 maths and English students were involved in the planning process from the start, six months before the visit. This in itself was valuable, as it encouraged them to think about all the practicalities involved, as well as the reasons why they were going. Funding was an important consideration, as the costs to students needed to be kept as low as possible. Money was raised by various methods, including holding an antique and junk market, giving lectures and donations from an ex-students’ club. The students themselves contributed a small amount.

1995 saw both tutors read the essential preliminary visits to the sites. Dover Castle was chosen as the base for the week’s work, as the Education Centre was necessary for the activities that were being planned. The Centre contained measuring equipment for use on site, both at Dover and Deal. These students’ handbook for both castles, which provided an excellent planning resource. The tutors also had to identify a place to stay. This was not easy on a tight budget, and the accommodation needed to be close enough to both Dover and Deal to minimise travelling time. A work room was also rented in the local library for evening study. Back in Brussels, preparation continued. Mr Langenus prepared a brochure for his maths students giving background information on the castles and on model making. Practice tasks in building geometric models were given, but the students were not told exactly what they would be building when they reached Dover – this was kept as a surprise.

Measuring and modelling

The first part of the maths project focused on the Roman phases, the oldest surviving building at Dover. Information was gathered about its history, using the guidebook; the teachers’ handbook and other reference books available in the Education Centre. The students were then sent, (in driving rain) to take accurate measurements of the raised phases. The next task was to build a scale model of the phases as it was when it was complete. To follow this up, the students were asked to write a booklet on its history and to explain how the measuring was done, how the model was built and the relevance to the Belgian National Curriculum, especially maths for 12- to 16-year-olds. It was interesting to see how two groups of students tackled the tasks, using different materials, different scales, and various model-making techniques. This had been preparation for the major task – making a scale model of Deal Castle. The students were given a site plan and had to make their own decisions about how to measure it. A major feature of Deal Castle is its apparent symmetry and this presented various mathematical problems to work out. The students worked on this collaboratively, suggesting solutions and trying them out before moving on to the next problem. The tutors did not interfere, preferring the students to learn from their mistakes.

Back in college

After their return to Brussels, the students finished their written work and began building their model of Deal Castle. This took longer than expected, but the results were very impressive. An evaluation meeting was held soon after the group returned and the outcome was very positive. All the participants agreed that working in a practical situation had helped in their understanding of mathematical principles and broadened their approach to the teaching of maths. Their motivation increased and it was hoped that this would be shared with their future pupils.

At English Heritage we are delighted that student teachers are being encouraged to use the historic environment as a basis for their future teaching. We welcome such groups from colleges or universities on free visits and are happy to discuss specific needs. For advice, please contact the Education Officer in your region (see contents page). For further details of free educational visits to Dover and Deal Castles ring 01304 223229.

Jennie Findhorn Education Officer, South East and London, English Heritage

Activities not lectures!

"An inspiration to go back with new ideas and fresh vision... A genuine sense of purpose throughout for all involved" – these were some of the comments after the 1995 South West History Conference.

This year’s annual South West History Conference, held in association with English Heritage, will be in Exmouth, Devon, on 8-9 July 1996, at Hymers’ University’s Faculty of Arts & Education, Rolle Campus. The conference aims to give teachers from all over the country many practical ideas for high quality teaching and learning in the classroom.

There will be no boring lectures; instead 40 or so activity sessions will be held giving lively and imaginative ideas for you to try. All teachers should find the sessions useful, irrespective of the age-group they teach. The conference will offer a flexible menu of activities so you can decide beforehand which suits you best. Workshop sessions will be led by practising teachers, authors and enthusiasts from all over the South West and beyond. At the time of going to press John Finnis, Colin Shepherd, Chris Culpin, Paul Noble, Christine Counsell, Sean Lang, Tony McKinney, John Cooper (from the National Portrait Gallery), had all been booked, along with Mike Garbriel and all the Education Officers from English Heritage.

No boring lectures – just lively activity sessions are guaranteed instead.
BBC Focus is broadcasting a number of English Heritage videos as part of the early morning "Learning Zone". On BBC2 each Wednesday morning in March (4th, 11th, 18th, 25th, 29th), from 5:00am to 5:30am you will be able to see 'The construction of a great church, which looks at the sophisticated technology, engineering and design skills behind the building of a cathedral. We hope that more of our videos will be broadcast later this year. Look out for details in future issues of Heritage Learning.'

Free Educational VHS 1996-97, the latest edition of our comprehensive teacher's guide to English Heritage sites will be available at the following schools throughout the year:...