
Case Study: Whittington CE Primary School, Shropshire

How Heritage Schools involvement has enabled the school to better use the wealth of local history in the village – with unexpected opportunities for pupils

Background

Whittington Primary School is a small village school, with one class per year group. There are 238 pupils on roll, starting at Reception and going up to Year 6. One mile away is the town of Oswestry which has Anglo-Saxon origins, a castle, an Iron Age Hill Fort, was the home of Wilfred Owen and is near Offa's Dyke, so there is an abundance of local history close by.

However, the village itself has a wealth of history in its own right, with the community-owned Whittington Castle opposite the school, two now abandoned Victorian railway stations, with one disused railway line and another that is still active, an old army training base (now a housing estate) used in both world wars and 24 listed buildings covering every century since the 14th right up to the 20th century.

Before working with Heritage Schools, like most schools, the history curriculum could have been used in any school rather than being connected to their local area or utilising the history around them. The school did not even study castles despite having one in their village.



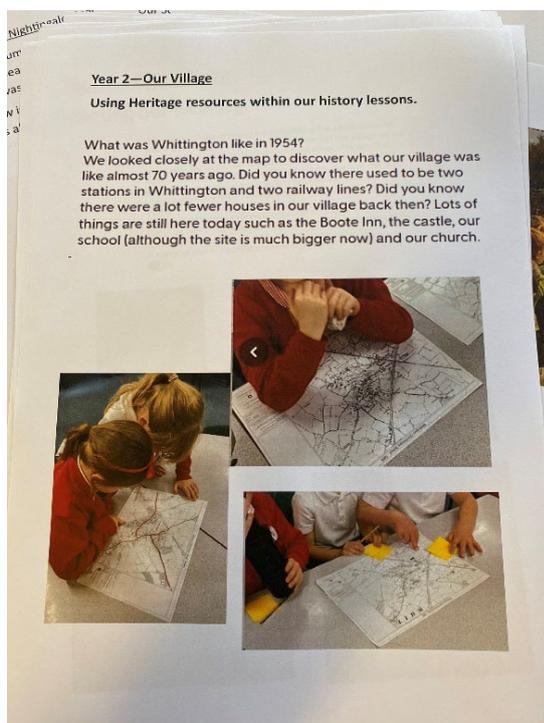
Whittington Castle – England's first community-run castle and c.150m walk from school

The starting point to really integrating local heritage into the curriculum followed a conversation with the Head from another local school in their cluster who had been working with Historic England for several years¹⁴.

"I said, right, where do I start? I want to revamp everything and they said you need to phone Martin Phillips [Local Heritage Education Manager] from Historic England. I just said, I need your help, what can you help me with and it just exploded from there. Now it's two and a half years on, and I'm so proud. It's completely changed how children perceive history, how teachers are teaching it, and it's all been driven by Martin. I have to say he's just incredible" – History Lead

The role of Heritage Schools

The Local Heritage Education Manager [LHEM] had numerous conversations with the History Lead, which led to history being made the focus of the school's development plan. The LHEM delivered two days of CPD training to staff which included taking teachers and TAs on a heritage walk to model how this could be done with pupils, showing staff how to use historic maps (provided by Historic England) with pupils and how to use resources such as Kelly's Directory and census records.



"I think if Historic England weren't available for schools, I don't know where I would have started. I'd feel really on my own" – History Lead

Through Heritage Schools teachers have gained access to useful resources, training, and support from Historic England to help enhance their history curriculum.

Support from Heritage Schools has been invaluable in helping teachers have the confidence, knowledge and resources to develop bespoke and exciting lessons.

The LHEM is still used as a resource to help provide knowledge, resources and advice.

¹⁴ see the Heritage Schools evaluation case study for Criftings CE Primary school from 2022

A local history curriculum which has continued to develop

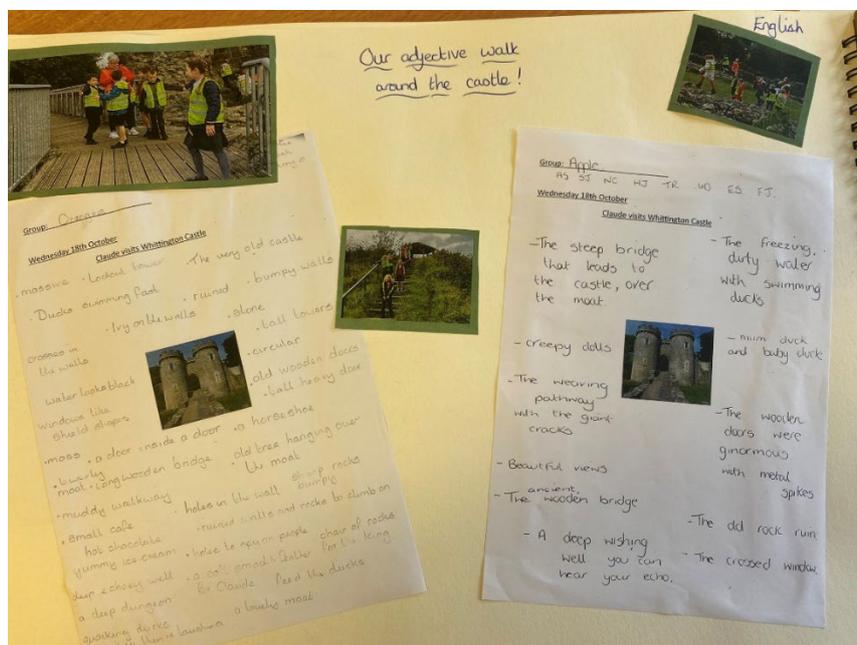
The school, currently in its second year of having a strong focus on local history, has a history curriculum which is chronological, where they aim to start each relevant topic with something local, before moving onto the national and, where appropriate, international story. Every year group has a local study.

Since working with Heritage Schools, the school has created a more tailored, relevant, and engaging history curriculum that is specific to their local area and pupils.

Other elements in the curriculum like art, English (factual writing and fiction), geography and PSHE have been taught or practiced using local heritage as stimulus.

For example Eglantyne Jebb, who was born locally and founded the Save the Children organisation at the end of the First World War, is the name of one of the school's four houses and is studied in PSHE.

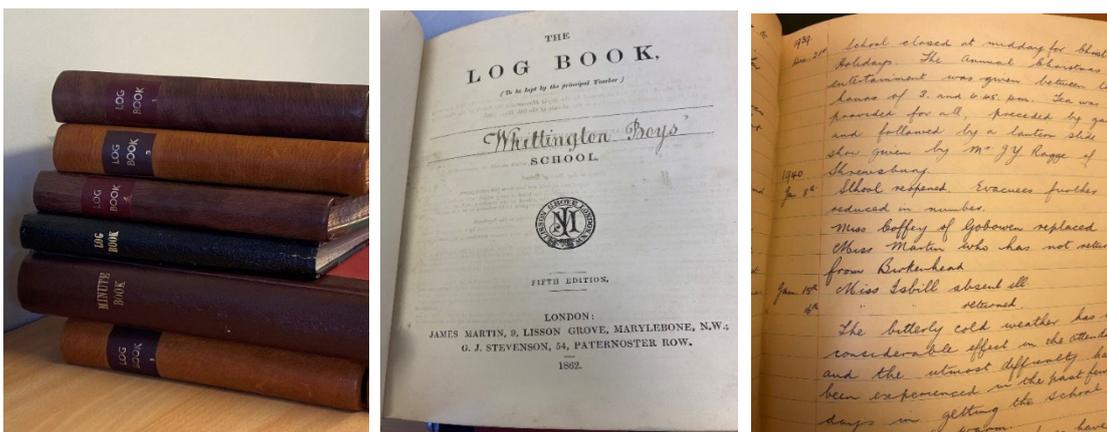
Year 2 read *Claude in the City* as a class book and use a visit to Whittington Castle as stimulus to write a story about Claude visiting there. Writing about his adventures provides the chance to practice capital letters, full stops and use adjectives invoked from their walk around this heritage site.



Year 6 read *Goodnight Mister Tom* in English whilst also doing a local study about Park Hall which, on the historic maps they use, was an army training base and now has housing where half the pupils live. They also use the school log books which record that 16 evacuees came to the school during the war and have a visit with a Q&A session with a former evacuee who lives in the village.

Having a focus on local heritage and seeking information has led to the History Lead having conversations with lots of local people and organisations, itself resulting in numerous unexpected opportunities for the pupils:

- Whittington Castle were working with Shared Past¹⁵ and Time Team which resulted in pupils being invited to have practical hands-on experiences to learn about archaeology – an experience they would not have had if the school had not been encouraged via Heritage Schools to connect with the Castle Trust
- The schools original log books, dating back to the 1860s, were rediscovered when redecorating the Heads office and are now used as a teaching resource. Entries from the 1940s include notes on evacuee children coming to the school
- Recently the school were contacted by Oswestry Library to say they had a visiting Australian family who would like to visit because their great, great, great grandfather had been the Head. The school still has the log books going back to 1863. The History Lead mentioned she was trying to piece together the history of the school for her Year 2 class, only for the librarian to say she had been researching this for several years but had never seen the log books before – the school and the librarian are now sharing information and stories
- Having been shown an interesting part of Offa's Dyke to visit by someone working for Historic England, as access to the land was considered too rough for pupils, the teacher tried to find out who owned a nearby field which had easier access. A boy in her class said was his granddad who was happy for them to walk to the Dyke across his land
- When talking to a local resident who is a long-standing friend of the school, it turns out he was an evacuee during World War 2, which the History Lead did not know. He came into school to talk to Year 6 pupils about his experiences.



School's log books going back to 1863 – including pages about evacuees in WW2 used by pupils and make the experiences they are learning come to life

¹⁵ <https://sharedpast.org/projects/whittington-castle/>

Given the age of many of the houses in the village, the school is looking to use census data to find out about who lived in different houses in the past – and then pupils will write letters to the current residents telling them what they have found out.

Impacts of Heritage Schools on pupils

Their knowledge of the local area is built up as they go through the school, along with the historical skills they develop and their sense of pride in where they are from.

Using local history has encouraged pupils to be more curious and inquisitive, asking themselves and others questions. The physical remains of an old castle, a disused railway or a variety of different houses in the village provides plenty of stimulus.

In addition, the school has invited older residents in, with pupils asking them about toys they used to play with when they were children (Year 1), what school was like when they attended (Year 2) and what life was like as an evacuee (Year 6). This has all come out of doing local heritage projects.

"We're finding lots of children are asking their own questions and going off and saying, I just asked so and so and did you know [this or that], even as young as Year 2 ... they're becoming little historians themselves and want to find out more"
– History Lead



Heritage Schools has facilitated more interaction with the local community

Different Year Groups have gone to the Senior Citizens Club coffee mornings and asked the older villages about their memories of toys when they were young, or what it was like in school in the past. The Heritage Schools project work has provided a

purpose for these intergenerational conversations, with older residents becoming a useful and valuable resource.

"They had some good stories about what school was like in their day, things like the toilet being outside. It was crazy. The children absolutely loved it" - teacher

Having an actual evacuee come and talk to Year 6 was so much more impactful than simply reading about someone's experience.

"He talked for an hour and a half, they [the pupils] were so respectful to him and, asked really good questions, I think the fact that he was here actually talking to them in person, not just someone on the video or something ... and that it was places they knew, it makes it so much more relatable" – teacher

Teachers feel pupils' enthusiasm and engagement for history has increased, as they can relate more to studying this through the prism of local heritage.

"Now I'm teaching units [on our local history] that are never going to be in any other school and the children love it. For me the biggest difference is the children now, when they speak about history, you can tell they are really invested because every unit, apart from ancient Egypt, has a local element to it. It's all about their history, so they're so enthusiastic about it, you know, they want to know why [things have changed or developed as they have]" – History Lead

Having a very local focus has enabled the school to have even stronger connections between the school and the local community. It also means that the TAs have become more empowered as most have lived in the village for a long time and are interested in its history, as well as having their own stories which help bring the lessons to life.

Using local heritage and some of the ideas and resources provided by Heritage Schools has led to more purposeful and meaningful learning experiences for pupils, as they apply historical skills to the places around them.

The resources provided by Heritage Schools, such as the historic maps of the same local area covering different time periods, have been used to discuss change and continuity over time and helped with historical enquiry, using evidence that is more comprehensible to (and less abstract for) the pupils.

"One really good thing about using the old maps, is they can say that's where my house should be or that is my house. And that really just makes it relatable, doesn't it" – teacher

Physical evidence in their local village has helped comprehension and understanding when covering concepts such as historical interpretation, cause, consequences, similarities, differences and chronology.

For example, Year 5 do a study on railways, exploring why two lines and two stations once existed in the village, exploring why they were first built and why only one of these railway lines remains and why they have two abandoned railway stations.

"We never did anything about railways. I live opposite the railway, and there's a house in the village called Lower Level Station which is now a house. We started digging around and I thought, why on earth aren't we doing a railway unit. There's the old, disused railways where they all go on their bikes. Well, now they know, well, that was because that was the railway to Oswestry and we don't need it anymore" – History Lead

Teachers feel that their local study has improved writing skills, as pupils have been more engaged and consequently produce better written work. Their local studies have provided plenty of opportunity to write with a clear purpose, be it using a visit to the castle to inspire adjectives in story writing or writing a biography of Thomas Savin (railway engineer responsible for the Cambrian railway which went through the village and who lived locally) whose story they have had to research.

"Inspiration for writing is huge, they have to really be hooked but actually writing about something that is your local area, makes them have more empathy. The fact that it's their village, I think did produce some good writing" - teacher

Students have developed a stronger sense of pride and respect for their local community and the history and heritage of their local area. Meeting the volunteers who look after Whittington Castle, knowing why the place is of importance and why it makes their village different and special has changed how they view the place (which has free and open access).

"They actually really enjoy history now because it's relevant to them. But also they just have a bigger respect for the community as well, which is a massive thing ... they're at the castle now ... but we find they are just respecting that area more because they realise the history and it feels a bit like it's theirs because they learn about it here. They have a newfound respect for our village" – History Lead

"We had an awful situation where someone smashed all the swan eggs a few years ago [which were in the castle moat], which was just horrific. Straight away, we knew it wasn't any of our children, absolutely not. There was uproar, the children were disgusted because they feel like it belongs to them" – History Lead

Summary

The school has a wealth of history on its doorstep, with physical buildings including a castle, famous local people who have lived nearby, older residents in the village who have lived there a long time and even being in a Victorian school (with its log books) – but little of this was being utilised before working with Heritage Schools.

The support, resources, encouragement and guidance from the LHEM has helped the school turn the wish to utilise what was on their doorstep into teachers actually delivering local heritage lessons.

“The pupils are completely immersed in the history around them and again this is all thanks to Martin [LHEM] just for signposting a few things, giving us some training, and providing us with that pathway for us to go down. So without him, we would still be doing the history curriculum but it wouldn't be like this” – History Lead

Although it requires more time initially to prepare the schemes of work, changing their history curriculum so it has a very strong and definite local focus has created a scheme of work which is seen as richer and more engaging.

“100% hands down. It's worth every minute. I think that comes across when you're teaching it because then you are super passionate about it” – History Lead