

ENGLISH HERITAGE

New uses for Empty Buildings

CITIZENSHIP AND THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT



Empty buildings can often be found within walking distance of your own school, thereby removing the need to use coaches.

ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

This booklet contains a series of case studies showing teachers how they and their pupils can explore issues about the conservation of their local historic environment to address the National Curriculum requirements for the teaching of citizenship. These case studies demonstrate how primary, secondary and special needs schools in Sunderland and South Tyneside looked at the issue of

empty buildings. They also show how such a project can have cross-curricular approach, thereby enabling it to be incorporated into the already tight curriculum. There is a list of useful resources and contacts at the end of the booklet.

Citizenship links

Each case study led pupils to understand how they can have a say in the future of their environment, and to become involved in the life and concerns of their neighbourhood. They were also taught how to express their views to a wide audience in order to influence decisions and effect change. During each project pupils:

- worked together to make decisions, based on informed opinions
- voted on decisions that the rest of the group or class adopted
- collaborated on joint activities
- invited external people to contribute towards their project and made arrangements for them to visit the school, which also them to the world of work
- considered the reasons for preserving old buildings
- were introduced to local and national legislation that controls the way that buildings and our environment are protected or developed (political literacy)
- developed thoughtful proposals for improving their environment, which took account of the needs of others.

Empty buildings - use them or lose them

All buildings are clearly constructed to fulfil a specific function. Through time though, some of them are no longer needed and remain empty until a new occupier can be found or they are demolished. Reasons why buildings become redundant may be because the occupant has relocated to newer, larger, more comfortable or more cost-effective premises; the space is no longer required; new technology might have superseded older manufacturing processes; or there is no longer a demand for a particular service or product. Many of these buildings can be adapted for other uses; others are more problematic, owing to constraints of their physical structure; their location in a conservation area; problems of access; or whether they might have been 'listed' by the Government as having special architectural or historical merit.

Understanding why these buildings are no longer occupied can help pupils understand changes in their own lives and in the more recent past, particularly the changing patterns of social behaviour. Appreciating why they need to be protected will help them recognise what is significant about their past; and looking at the measures for protecting and reusing them will introduce pupils to the democratic processes that empower them to influence any change to their environment.

CASE STUDY I: THE OLD FIRE STATION, SUNDERLAND Redby Primary School, Sunderland. Three Year 5 groups.



The fire station was built in 1898. It was regarded as 'state-of-the-art', but has recently been superseded by a new fire station.

Context: The project was planned in conjunction with a visit to see performance at a local theatre and incorporated work in other subjects, including art, language, drama and storytelling.

Preparation: The teacher introduced the project to the class, explaining that in a few days time pupils were going to visit an important, but empty building in the city centre, with the aim of deciding its future.

The visit: On arrival, pupils were asked for their immediate thoughts about the building. What did it used to be? Did they like the building? Should it be kept or demolished? If it was kept, what could it be used for and who would want it. Pupils looked at buildings nearby to determine the character of the area and then to identify what type of business or organisation, requiring additional space, could use the building.

They were then asked, how far should a new owner be allowed to alter the building. What should be retained and how much could be altered? Pupils then defined what made the building special, and so needed to be preserved if a new use was found. To do this, they took drawings and photographs of important architectural elements.

Follow-up work: Back at school, ideas were discussed about potential uses for the fire station, and pupils were asked what they would do with the building. It was suggested that they should consider the views of other people before they made their decision, and so worked in small groups to design a survey to canvas opinion. This was drafted and produced using IT. (Looking at the language used in questionnaires and surveys could be integrated into literacy work.) For obvious reasons, pupils did not interview people on the street, but they could be encouraged to ask family and friends. The teacher introduced the basic planning processes that need to be followed in order to convert an old building for a new use, and for altering any part of it.

Then, in pairs or small groups, and using a template drawing of the existing building, pupils made annotated drawings to show its proposed new use. Using the information recorded during their visit they decided which features would be retained, removed, repaired, or extended. They were also asked to explain their ideas and justify their reasons.

Pupils presented their ideas to the rest of the class, and they took a vote. The 'winning' idea was to convert the building into rehearsal space and dance studio for a theatre which was very close to the fire station and which they had coincidentally just visited). This space could also be hired out to other groups for dance lessons and mini performances.

Lastly, pupils designed stage sets and backdrops to perform scenes from their current class reading book in the 'new' performance space.



Taking measurements to help determine what spaces could be used for.



Sketching important building details.



Creating stage sets for a performance of the class reading book.

**CASE STUDY 2:
THE OLD ORPHANAGE, SUNDERLAND
Felstead Special School, Sunderland. One Year 12 group.**



The 'Union Orphanage' was built in 1861 as an orphanage for mariners' children. It has had a chequered history of occupation after its closure in 1939. First as a base for the Home Guard during World War 2 and then as a community centre until it moved to newer premises nearby.

Context: The project was an extension of a local study in history - the development of the port of Sunderland, and began with students exploring the building's relationship to the port.

The visit: On their first visit, students took drawings and photographs of the building, focusing on its design, the materials used and interesting architectural features, such as decoration, window surrounds, chimneys and gates. They also used words and short phrases to record their feelings about the atmosphere of the building and its surroundings.

Follow-up: On their return to school, students researched the social history of the building using material provided by the local studies library. To help their research, students composed a letter to the local newspaper asking for information from readers who had connections with the building either as an orphanage or as a base for the Home Guard.

Following the appeal for information, a number of former residents, contacted the school. Some agreed to be interviewed by students, who conducted short taped interviews. Staff from the new community centre also invited students to visit and showed them a

display of photographs of local events.

The group agreed that the building was important and decided that something should be done to highlight this to the local community and to the City of Sunderland to gain support for its future survival. Given the learning difficulties of the students, the teacher suggested that this could be effectively achieved in a visual way - a textile hanging that could be suspended inside one of the boarded-up windows, which would portray aspects of the building's past. It would be a collaborative piece, incorporating students' drawings, photographs, research and emotive responses. The textile hanging would take the format of layers of imagery and text recorded on acetate, fabric, tissue paper and netting, which were woven into a single piece of muslin.



'Weaving in' words and feelings into the artwork.



Incorporating appropriate imagery to focus on aspects of the building's past.



Visiting the new community centre to talk to local residents.



Selecting which imagery to use from material gained through research.



Unveiling the textile hanging.

CASE STUDY 3: BUILDINGS IN SOUTH TYNESIDE Hebburn Comprehensive School. Six Year 7 groups.

Context: This project was funded by TEDCO (Tyneside Economic Development Company), with support from English Heritage Education. TEDCO'S Enterprise in Education programme aims to help young people to become more effective in their personal and educational development by influencing the process of teaching and learning across the curriculum.

The aim of the project was to support work in English by creating a reason for pupils to write for different purposes - in this case what to do with an important or interesting local building that had fallen into disuse. It involved letter writing, note-taking, drafting formal proposals, explanatory labelling, advertising and information-giving. A number of buildings were identified, but only two are described below.

Preparation: Before the site visit each class visited The Customs House to:

- appreciate how a group of ordinary, but enthusiastic and determined people were able to 'rescue' a building and give it a new use
- understand how a building's function can change significantly within a community
- consider the need to preserve historic buildings of significance
- look at an example of how modern and Victorian architecture can be sympathetically combined to give a building a new use
- identify what makes a building significant in terms of architectural merit or its historical significance.

The worksheet includes a header with 'Name: J.A. G.A.' and 'Class: 7/1'. It contains instructions: 'You can take 1 photograph to record the details of this building. Look around and decide what part of the building you find interesting. Look at the number on the top of the camera. Write it here: 23'. Below this is a section 'Now take your photograph:' with a small grid. The main part of the worksheet is a large grid for notes, with a drawing of a building facade (The Customs House) overlaid on it. The drawing is labeled 'THE CUSTOMS HOUSE' and shows a building with a central archway and two side wings.

Pupils' sketches of interesting external features.



The 'Grotto' at Marsden was constructed against the cliff face in 1830 as a house and inn. Its name is derived from the caves in the cliff which were incorporated into the building. It became a popular and interesting place to visit for generations of local people owing to its romantic connections with smuggling, but was recently closed.



The Customs House, South Shields. In 1980 this building was in a poor state of repair. ALMA a local group of arts enthusiasts bought the building for £1. They raised £400,000 to convert the building to create a theatre, cinema and art gallery.



The windmill at Whitburn was built in 1786, and worked for 75 years grinding corn from local farms. It then stood derelict for over a hundred years before restoration in the 1980s when it was opened as a museum and interpretation centre. It is now once again empty and unused.



Pupils looked at both the inside as well as the outside of the building to appreciate how the building's change of use had minimal effect on the exterior of the building.

The visit: At the selected building, pupils used cameras and structured activity sheets to record interesting or important architectural aspects. They also compiled a list of descriptive words identifying what they could feel, see, hear and smell, which in addition to helping pupils get a 'feel' for their building, were later used to create poems.

Follow-up work:

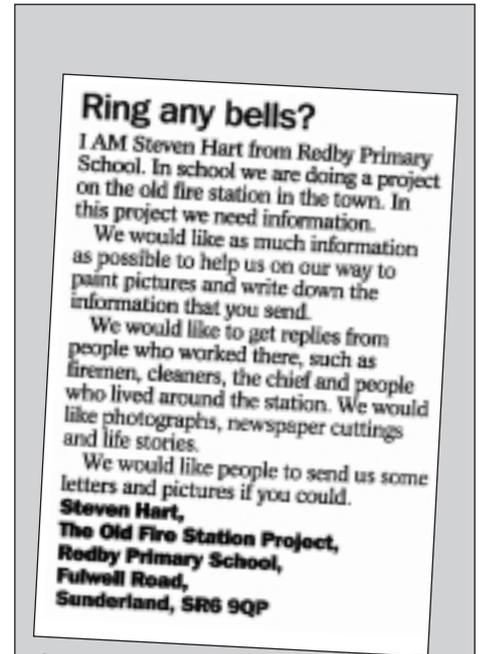
Letter writing To find out more about their building, pupils wrote letters to a local newspaper, appealing to readers for personal accounts and information about the past use of the building. Examples of letters written to newspapers were looked at first, then two support sheets were used: one provided a concise framework for writing letters for pupils who needed support; the other offered a structure to support independent letter writing.

Designing a leaflet Working in pairs, pupils designed a leaflet to point out the importance of the building, highlight its current condition, and prompt the reader to consider ideas for a new use for it. They used information from the site visit, materials supplied by the local history library and responses to their newspaper article. Some pupils used IT; others used a 'cut and paste' method. The 'Mencap' leaflet 'Making it Clear' provided 'tips' on how to present information to the widest possible section of the community.

Discussing new uses Pupils discussed in pairs potential new uses for their building. Questions on the Planning Proposal Sheet (see below) helped structure their thoughts. Attention was drawn to access issues for people with various forms of disability, and solutions were sought for incorporation into the proposed new use of their building.

Producing labelled diagrams Pupils created a labelled artist's impression to show how their building would look. They used a pre-drawn outline of the present structure.

Drafting planning proposals Pupils wrote a formal proposal for the building's conversion. A pro-forma (see examples below) gave them a framework to present their ideas. Some pupils used IT to present their proposals. Some classes were able to submit proposals for 'planning consent' to a class 'planning committee' of elected individuals.



Letter to the local newspaper appealing for information.



Supporting material such as photographs, historical information and images showing the building's use helped pupils demonstrate why the building is important.

PLANNING PROPOSAL SHEET

Name

What was the building used for in the past?

Change of use:

What will it be used for?

Do you need to extend or remove parts of the building?

What problems might there be to changing its use?

Who might object to your changes?

How would you overcome any problems or objections?

Client group:

Who would use or visit the new building?

Access:

What changes will you make for it to be suitable for people with disabilities?

Two support sheets were used for this element: the Planning Proposal Sheet and the Planning Submission Sheet. The former provided a framework for pupils to organise their thoughts; the latter outlined a structure for pupils to use to submit their planning proposal.

Outline of proposal

I propose to change the grotto into an activity centre for young children and a disabled bar for any person who is disabled in any way. Other parts will be a museum and gift shop filled with things to do with the old grotto. Also there will be sweets and an ice cream and candy-floss parlour. Amusements will be installed for anyone who wants to use them. Really, the new improved building will be for all ages.

Access issues

In my planning I have thought about how wheelchair users can access the beach. I will have the lift shaft strengthened instead of having to walk or pull wheelchairs down those very steep steps and then not be able to get back up. Also, the few steps that take you down to the shore will be replaced by a ramp. For the blind I will have railings leading up to the building. For the deaf I will have interpreters to help them with the sounds because they can't hear.

I believe that you should authorise these changes to Marsden Grotto because the building is going to be used for a number of different things and for people of all ages. One of the main reasons is because I am giving disabled people the opportunity to have some fun and get around more often. I think you should think about this very carefully and trust you will make the right decision.

Submitted by K Wood

OUTLINE OF PROPOSAL

I propose that I will change Marden Grotto into a 5* hotel. I will do this by adding another two storeys. I will also put five different things on the bottom floor, such as a kitchen for the chefs, a cafe where people sit to drink tea and coffee, a play area for children when they get bored sitting with their parents, a pub for all the men when they need a drink at night or during the day. Finally a swimming pool with an aquarium over the top of it.

On the second floor I will have some hotel rooms and a second-floor reception where you get your key for your room.

On the top floor there is a penthouse and a couple more rooms.

ACCESS ISSUES

In my planning I have considered putting a roof over the stairs so that they don't get slippery.

I will also let people that are disabled use the lift because you can't go down the stairs in a wheelchair. I will let blind people use the lift because they can't see the stairs.

SUPPORTING STATEMENT

I believe that you should allow us to make these changes to Marsden Grotto because when people come to the beach they'll need somewhere to stay. It will also attract celebrities because it is a 5* hotel.

Submitted by

Ben Johnstone 7A4

What pupils learned about planning issues

"I did not know how much effort you have to put in for permission to do things to an old building."

"How long it takes to plan."

"That you have to consider people with disabilities when you change something."

"I did not realise that you could make buildings do a lot of things."

"How to present a proposal."

"That you have to think of every person when you plan something."

Pupils' proposals (including qualifying statements)

"I would like to turn the Grotto into a day centre for the elderly and sick. When they come there to be beside the sea it will make them feel happy and give them something to look forward to and even make them better."

"I want the windmill to become a place where you can go to escape to be on your own and relax. It would be really cosy to be inside it on a horrible day."

"I propose that you let me change this building [Grotto] into an adventure park with archery ranges, rock climbing, bird watching and aquarium. These are all things that are connected to the sea and what there is around."

"I propose to turn the Grotto into a seafood inn. I thought it might be a good idea to have a fish inn next to the beach where fishermen bring different fish and while people are eating their meals they will be able to smell the sea too."

"It would make a good lifeguard centre and first aid place. People could also leave their babies there when they go for a swim. I would knock down the bit to the right and build some more on, only better"

The windmill particularly generated a lot of creative thinking. Other ideas for reusing it included making it into an

observatory; using it as a library with a cafe where people could sit and read; converting it into an art and craft gallery; adapting it into a gym and health spa; changing it into a residential home for the elderly; or making it into a music and dance studio.

Pupils' considerations when drawing up their proposals

"I have considered making the glass thick for safety reasons."

"I have also thought about blind people so they can feel it to feel what it is."

"There will be ramps for wheelchair people and bright signs with tape on the edges so blind people can read them."

"There would be a wall of braille to tell the history of the windmill and what it was used for. There would also be someone who shouts clearly at the deaf people. And wheelchair people will have someone who pushes them around."

"There would be an underground car park so people could still use the grassy field."

"There would be security cameras so if there was a problem outside, people inside could help."

"I would put speakers in the lift for blind people."

"Make the path straighter and rent a guide dog."

Links with art and design

Some of the groups were able to incorporate work in art and design into the project. As part of their proposals for a new use for the building, they created a design for a new architectural feature to represent the building's history and any links it had with the community. Pupils were asked to design a commemorative window for the fire station and a gate for the windmill. Below are some of the explanations pupils gave for their designs.

"My inspiration for the gate comes from elements and forms of the windmill and its history."

"My design is about everything you can see around you and shows why the windmill is important."

"It's funny seeing a windmill by the seaside, but I suppose it is very windy there. Old ships also needed wind to make them go, so my design is about how important wind was to make things work."

"I got my inspiration from the torches at the front of the fire station and I got the idea for the helmet from an ex-fireman who brought an old helmet into school. The film strip is there because the building is going to be a cinema."

"My idea is about fires and people escaping from fires and the people who help them. This is what this building was built for."

"My design has got bright fiery colours to get the feel that it used to have something to do with fire of course. I have also got ballet shoes burning on top of hot flames to show what happens inside [dance studio]."

PUPILS COMMENTS ABOUT THEIR PROJECT

"It was so different because we had visitors coming to work with us in school."

"My strongest memory was going to the actual building and seeing it close up."

"I really liked designing what we were going to do with the empty windmill."

"We do not normally get to work in groups as much as we did on this project."

"The project was really good because we were trusted."

"The work was different because we were designing something that was useful for the community."

*"I would like to design my school now."
"In the future I would like to change Hebburn Park."*

MAKING A VISIT

When visiting an empty building with your class you should check access arrangements with the appropriate organisation or owner. However, if the building is derelict, it is unlikely that you will be allowed to go inside or even want to, because of health and safety reasons. If you explain the purpose of your study, the owners may be able to provide photographs of the interior.

To make the most of your visit you must make a preliminary planning visit to the building to prepare activities, take any photographs that you need and to think about how pupils will be organised on the day of the visit.

Checklist for planning your visit

Safety: Buildings that are not open to the public may not meet usual health and safety standards. You should contact your LEA to check on insurance, adult/pupil ratio for supervision and risk assessments. Walk round the building to check for any hazards, so that you can give pupils and helpers the appropriate guidance.

Access: If you have pupils who are wheelchair users or who have mobility problems check how well they will be able to access the area around the building or the inside if entry is permissible.

Drop off point: If you are travelling by coach look for a place where it can drop pupils off.

Toilets: Locate the nearest public toilets and work out arrangements for groups to be escorted there as and when necessary.

Lunch: If you are going to be away from school over lunchtime, locate a suitable place to eat packed lunches. Remember to take a mobile phone and basic first aid kit.

Briefing helpers

If possible meet with any helpers to brief them before you set off. Helpers should be aware of the aims of the visit and the specific activities to be undertaken so that

they can keep pupils on task. They should also be aware of any health and safety issues.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Local contacts

Local studies libraries: will help you to find documentary sources and maps.

Archives department: may be able to source and supply copies of original documents. Not all areas have their own archives department so you may need to contact your County Record Office.

Conservation officers: are employed by many local councils, and may be able to advise on issues and schemes that affect the historic environment.

National organisations

National Monument Record, part of English Heritage, can supply archive photographs; details of listed buildings in your area; aerial photographs; with teacher's notes and ideas for activities. Contact: Education Officer, NMR, Kemble Drive, Swindon SN2 2GN. Tel: 01793 414600.

Also see Images of England, www.imagesofengland.org.uk. Mencap. The leaflet, 'Making Ourselves Clear', outlines minimum standards for accessible writing and will help to raise the importance of access issues with pupils. Tel: 020 7454 0454 for copies.

Teacher's Handbooks

Copeland, T, *Teachers Handbook for Local Studies*, English Heritage 1998, ISBN 1-873592-37-X.

Keith, C, *Using Listed Buildings*, English Heritage 1991, ISBN 1-85074-297-9.

Davies, I, Webb, C, *Using Documents*, English Heritage 1996, ISBN 1-85074-478-5.

Primary History, English Heritage 1999, ISBN 1-85074-650-8.

Video

Doorstep Discovery - working on a local history study, English Heritage, 1993, 30 minutes. Suitable for INSET.

Acknowledgements

TEDCO (Tyneside Economic Development Company) Enterprise in Education.

South Tyneside Planning Department. Sue Harrow, Felstead School, for her contribution to the Orphanage project.

Staff of the English Department at Hebburn Comprehensive.

Staff of Redby Primary School. Residents of East End, Sunderland.

Staff of East End Community Centre, Sunderland.

Staff of the Customs House, South Shields.

Sid Ord and Dennis Barker, former fire fighters.

Gordon Bennet from 'Into Work' for his support of the Orphanage project.

Mike Halliwell for volunteering to talk to pupils.

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Written by David Walmsley and Anne Curtis
Produced by David Walmsley
Designed by Small World Design
Printed by Palladian Press
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