

No puzzle, no learning: How to make your site visits rigorous, fascinating and indispensable.

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Chris Culpin builds on recent articles by Andrew Wrenn and Mike Murray with numerous practical ideas for good quality site visits at Key Stage 3 and GCSE. But this article offers much more than practical tips. Chris Culpin sets out a rationale for the centrality of site visits in the history curriculum, including arguments that can be used to explain to senior managers in schools why site visits are no mere option or luxury. He also presents a robust and uncompromising critique of those departments who simply take pupils out for light relief, or who devise low-level and rather pointless activities for pupils on site. Instead, the site-visit's success is dependent on devising a genuine puzzle. This puzzle, in the form of an enquiry question, must be both historically worthwhile and highly motivating for the pupils. Vague preparation is not enough. The lessons preceding the visit must prepare pupils very thoroughly for the enquiry that they will undertake, so that when pupils arrive at the site they are motivated, focused, informed, well-briefed and raring to go.

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Figure 1:
Dyrham Park, Talman's
East Front and Orangery
from Neptune.
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kind permission of
The National Trust.

You are going with your Year 8 class to Dyrham Park, a National Trust house just off the M4 near Bath. You have taken advantage of the free planning visit for teachers and spent a nice day there some months earlier, so you know you should leave the coach at the top and carry on on foot. As the gaggle of pupils come over the lip of the Cotswold escarpment, the ones in front stop and

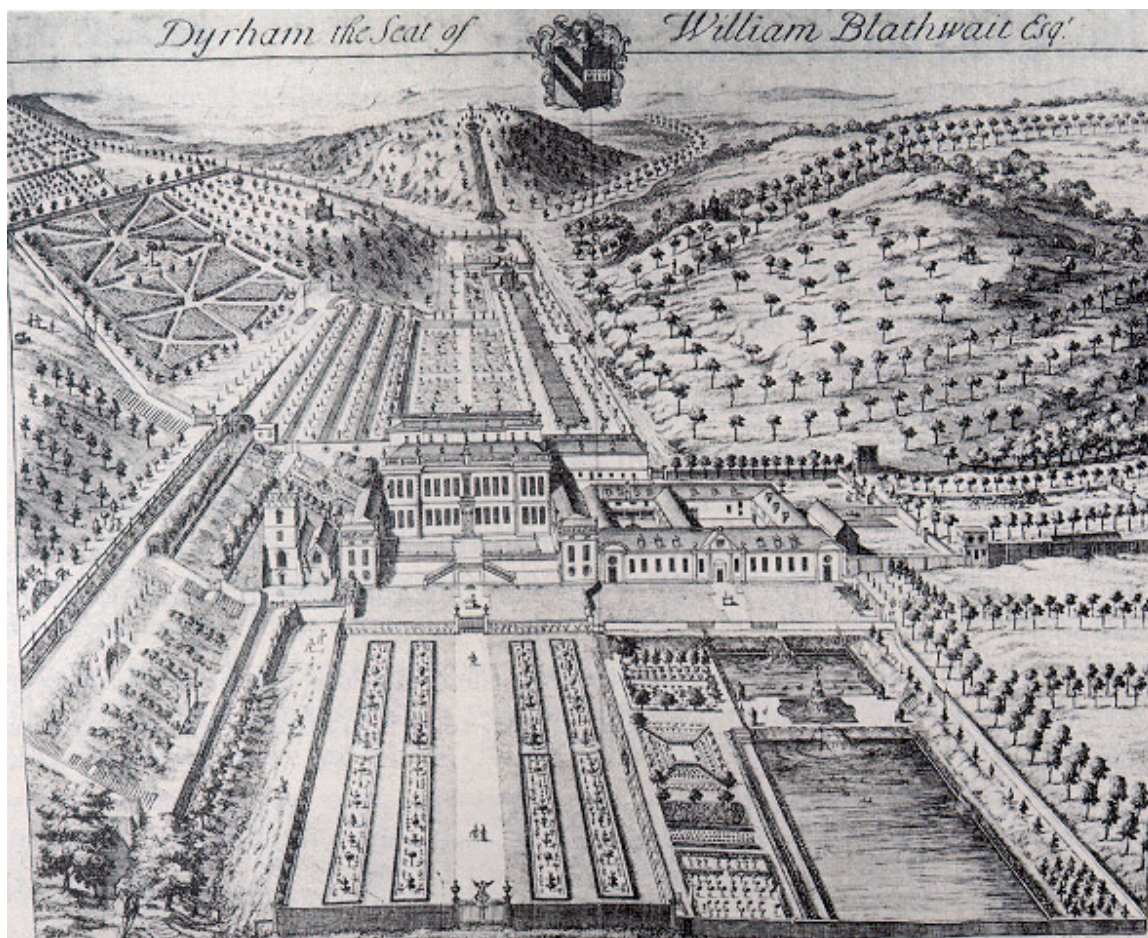
call out as the house suddenly appears below. You all go on to the statue of Neptune, overlooking the house. What on earth is a statue of a sea-god doing halfway up a hill in Gloucestershire?

Distribute Figure 2, showing what this whole park looked like in 1712. Spot the statue of Neptune (the

Figure 2:

Kip's view of Dyrham and the water garden, 1712. Reproduced with the kind permission of The National Trust.

The site
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present
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of puzzle



view in Figure 2 is looking at the house from the opposite side) and the water-cascade that once ran down 224 steps from where you are all standing. Talk a bit about change and continuity. Carry on down to the house. Tell them about William Blathwayt, senior civil servant to William of Orange: he was a 37-year-old bachelor in 1686. In the course of the next five years he got married, to Mary Wynter. They had four children, and then Mary died, leaving him the Dyrham estate. In the later 1690s he had the house built and the park laid out, both in the height of fashionable taste.

Their enquiry question is: What impression does Dyrham give us about the people who ran England at that time? They have some data capture sheets, a few guiding questions and time to wander and look. Back at school they use the notes they made, with some documents from the Dyrham teachers' pack, to write up the results of their enquiry.

What have they got out of this visit?

- Something completely different: the 'WOW!' factor.
- Development of site research skills: observation, recording, questioning, collating, relating visual and written evidence, relating new and specific evidence to recalled general information.

- Putting together skills and knowledge to reach an understanding of a real historical situation.
- Finding out about the people in the past— not just the inert structures and artefacts they left behind
- Specific knowledge and understanding: that the years after 1660 were a time when, not monarchs, but a few well-off property-owners ran the country and lived lives which emphasised their aloofness and control. With the site-visit and a few lessons, the second part of the KS3 unit on Britain 1500-1750 is sewn up.

Notice that 'proving that the past existed' is not on the list above. Too many visits, are simply 'Cook's Tours'. Their aim seems to be to show students that what they did back in the classroom/lecture theatre is real and has left some trace behind which they can see and will be described to them. If we are going to ask parents to spend money on coaches and admissions, and colleagues to do cover for us, we have to have better curriculum aims than that.

The 'puzzle' factor

So what kinds of site are we looking for? First, the site needs to present some kind of puzzle— some problem which the students have to investigate. As the father of

fieldwork in history, W.G. Hoskins,¹ recommended, the enquiry should be a mixture of muddy boots on the site and careful work with maps and documents. Fieldwork is the culmination of the course. In class, skills of evidence evaluation, understanding of cause or change will often be taught separately, concentrating for a while on one or the other. To get the most out of a site they are going to unravel, students will have to apply all the skills and understandings they can muster, *together*. Above all, the puzzle must be *real*.

This puzzle requirement may exclude many well-known houses and castles. These have been so carefully measured, explained and labelled that there is nothing left for the visitor to do. A colleague in South Wales used to visit the crumbling ivy-covered remains of a former iron-smelting works within walking distance of the school. The SHP GCSE coursework assignment was to work out what was there, what had been happening and when. Then some European money came along, the local authority tidied up the ironworks site and put interpretation boards all over the place. It was the end of the assignment as it stood, although there are other possibilities, as we shall see.

By no means all sites have been totally explained forever. Archaeologists and conservationists change their minds: new evidence becomes available, or old evidence is re-interpreted. Sites are arranged to tell a story to the visitor and sometimes the story of what it is you are looking at has to be changed. This presents us with just the kind of puzzle we are looking for.

Sometimes sites present puzzles of *interpretation*. Here are some examples of visits focused on an interpretation puzzle:

- Tintagel, in north Cornwall, has long been presented as a 'Celtic' monastery. Recent new work has torn holes in this theory and the 'cells' may in fact be living accommodation for the castle-builders of the 13th century. How would you explore these rival interpretations?
- Chedworth, in Gloucestershire, has always been presented as a Roman villa. But if it was, why are there two dining-rooms, no posh bedrooms or living-rooms and huge numbers of other small rooms? What else could it be?
- Cotehele, on the Tamar, is presented as an unspoilt late-medieval manor house. But are we in fact looking at a 'stage set', consciously contrived in the 18th century as a 'traditional' baronial hall?

Investigating each of these would involve some focus on what subsequent interpreters have done to the presentation of the site *and why*.

The Schools History Project and fieldwork

It is one of SHP's great achievements that its History Around Us component has led to generations of 14-16 year-olds going out of school to investigate local sites.

In a very well-observed article in *Teaching History* earlier this year, Mike Murray described how questions for site investigations have changed over the last twenty years.² He characterised early SHP approaches as concentrating on evidence evaluation. He then charted a second stage, where enquiries were led by National Curriculum attainment targets. Finally, he outlined his view of the way forward for the Year 2000. He showed how, recently, the best investigations tend to foster a much more open approach in which pupils collectively work out their own line of questioning and are often required to adopt a critical focus on modern interpretation and representation. Pupils working out their own line of questioning may be difficult at GCSE, where assignments and mark-schemes have to be approved by the board in advance, but he is surely right to take this line in Year 9 for the gains in motivation which such approaches would bring.

It is unfortunate that mark-weightings for SHP History Around Us were down-rated in one of the last government's periodic acts of petulant interventionism in the 1995 GCSE criteria. Fewer marks have meant a lower priority for teachers, but the new requirement to engage with Assessment Objective 3, including interpretations and representations of sites, has opened up new possibilities. Some examples from 1999 included:

- Was Alexandra Palace really a People's Palace?
- Kenilworth Castle: Fortress, Palace, Romantic Ruin or burnt out factory?
- Southgate School, Enfield set up an assignment using documents around their visit to Vimy Ridge and other First World War sites. Tasks for students included analysis of different representations of trench warfare, such as that shown by the museum at Notre Dame de Lorette.

Following Mike Murray's characterisations of current practice, a 'Year 2000' look at the South Wales ironworks site described above might look at how this European money has been spent (and why European money?). What is the message of the brightly illustrated interpretation boards at the site? Do they concentrate on technological innovation? Or on the entrepreneurial skill of the ironmaster? Or on the sheer hard graft and danger it was to work there? And why is the site now being presented in this way? What kinds of visitors are being targeted?

The role
play opens
up citizenship
issues about
decision-
making

Sutton House

Sutton House, in Hackney, east London, was built in 1534. It is a brick house with, among other features, wonderful linen-fold panelling. It has gone through several 'lives':

- It was the first marital home of Ralph, later Sir Ralph, Sadleir, Secretary to Thomas Cromwell and long-serving Tudor courtier.
- It belonged to Captain John Milward, rich— and rather dodgy— Jacobean silk merchant.
- Sarah Freeman ran a girls' school there in the late 17th century.

- In the 18th century Sarah de Sainte Croix, a Huguenot refugee lived there.
- Then, as Hackney slid down the social scale from fashionable suburb to working class dormitory, it became the base for the Rev. Algernon Lawley's Anglican mission to the inner cities.

All these people left their mark on Sutton House and their lives can be traced. However, there is another type of investigation, another context, for Sutton House. In his stimulating article in the last edition of *Teaching History* Andrew Wrenn described a number of 'identity-shapers'.³ Obviously old buildings have an important part to play in shaping our ideas of national



Figure 3:
Sutton House in 1990 before restoration. Reproduced with the kind permission of The National Trust.

Figure 4
A role play exploring ideas about heritage at Sutton House

The pupils' debate will shape the learning context for the visit

Group 1—The National Trust

You have owned Sutton House since 1938. Since then it has been let to various people to provide an income for the Trust but it has been empty since the last tenant, a trade union, moved out in 1983. For many years the Trust has put most of its efforts into conserving country houses. A house in east London is not the kind of property the Trust has wanted to pay much attention to. Attitudes are changing now, however, following criticism of the National Trust as just propping up the old landowners and irrelevant to modern concerns.

Your priority: conserving this historic house

Group 2 –A property developer

You are interested in buying Sutton House and converting it into flats. This will be expensive, so they will have to be expensive luxury flats. You will ensure the building is preserved (it's been altered many times over the years anyway) and bring better off people into Hackney, a poor, working class borough.

Your priority: making a profit from the conversion

Group 3 – Hackney Council

Hackney is one of the poorest boroughs in Britain and the Council wants to do all it can to improve the lives of local people. One of Hackney's problems is a shortage of cheap houses or affordable flats to rent. Another is a shortage of places for local people to meet. You regard Sutton House as a symbol of the old, well-off Britain.

Your priority: providing cheap housing for local people

Group 4 – Local residents

A group of local people have come together because they are shocked at what is happening at Sutton House.

Your priority: to see Sutton House preserved and used by local people

Local study identity. Britain, however, is not too sure what its identity is and thus what it means to be a citizen. This is a problem which pupils need to be able to explore and question.

is now

prescribed The story of what happened to Sutton House in the 1980s can open up some of these issues. The house was given to the National Trust in 1938. By 1987 it was derelict and vandalised. Squatters were living in the attics. There were fierce arguments in Hackney about what should happen to it. (Newspaper accounts to explore the debate are easily available).

for the

NC unit on

1750-1900

Figure 4 on page 33 provides a role-play for a debate about the future of the house. It sets up some of the issues which pupils could explore before visiting the house. It not only opens up several citizenship issues about decision-making, it explores different views about what our 'heritage' should be and how important such ideas of 'heritage' are.

The debate resulting from the activities in Figure 4 - whatever the outcome - shapes the *context* for the visit. They will find out who won, for a start. But what message will Sutton House give them now? How is it presented? This shows the vital importance of thorough preparation for the site. The preceding lessons must prepare very carefully indeed if the pupils are ready to engage in a proper enquiry.

Water for a city

Another local study, of a completely different type, but which also relates powerfully to citizenship issues, is *Water for a City*, produced by Birmingham Teachers in Development Education.⁴ This investigation has five parts:

- Why did Birmingham need a new water supply? (This is about public health issues in Victorian Birmingham.)
- Why did Birmingham choose the Elan Valley to supply its water? (This decision-making exercise raises all kinds of citizenship issues about who made the decisions and whose voices were ignored.)
- What problems did the planners face and how were they solved? (This is about opposition, problem-solving and the pros and cons of a paternalistic attitude to workers conditions.)
- What were the consequences of the Elan Valley development? (for Birmingham and for the Elan Valley.)
- What can we learn from the Elan development today? (Here the Birmingham study widens out brilliantly but naturally to raise all kinds of contemporary global issues about decision-making, about whether the decisions would be made in the same way today, and about the problems of water availability in less-developed countries today).

The 'site' is the city of greater Birmingham, all of which benefited, and still benefits, from the 1895 plans. However, schools in the city can make a 'springboard' site visit into all or part of the enquiry by visiting one of many facilities which still remain: public baths, pumping stations, reservoirs, boating lakes, fountains and so on.

'...But history trips take up far too much curriculum time'

Building a strong argument for history in the field.

If historical investigation of sites is so important and worthwhile, why is it so rare in secondary schools? Here are a number of possible reasons and some thoughts about countering them:

1. Heads are reluctant to allow classes out of school as it disrupts the curriculum.
2. Setting up good site investigations is a lot of work.
3. Site visits play no part in most history degrees or the training of most history teachers.

1. Fieldwork in the history curriculum. One answer to Heads who take the view that fieldwork is not part of the history curriculum is to monitor the school-time visits other departments have and ask for parity. It is also worth noting that there are many schools where each year group goes out on a history site visit.

More power will soon be given to your elbow by the new national curriculum. For the two prescribed British 'Areas of Study', 1066-1500 and 1500-1750, there is the phrase '... including the local area where appropriate.' Even more: for Britain 1750-1900 the 'where appropriate' is dropped, so local study is now prescribed for this period. For schools doing the Schools History Project for GCSE, of course, *History Around Us* is an integral part of the course. There is a strong case for at least one visit in Key Stage 3, so that pupils don't have to learn site investigation skills from scratch for their live coursework.

2. Support for setting up site investigations. It is certainly true that the kind of textbook support which is available for National Curriculum and GCSE topics is not commercially available for local studies. But setting up a good local study does not necessarily mean days of your precious time spent on your own in the Record Office. Figure 5 shows the education support offered by the two major heritage organisations. Almost all museums and galleries have similar educational support and the quality of the service they provide is improving all the time. Record Offices and Local Studies Libraries are increasingly supportive and may well have published, or pre-selected, document collections, and/or have specialist education staff. New technology is revolutionising this, as everything else. Several local

Figure 5 Making the most of national organisations when devising site-based enquiries

The National Trust 36, Queen Anne's Gate, SW1 9AS (0207-222-9251) School membership (rates according to school size) provide free visits. Many properties now have education officers and every region does too. 64 properties now have teacher packs with ideas for enquiries, support documents etc. The website: www.nationaltrust.org.uk/education has material for teachers, including the facility to search for properties by period. English Heritage Portland House, Stag Place, SW1E 5EE (0207-973-3442) Extensive publications list includes ideas for using types of property as well as 8-page booklets for each individual site. Free visits. Education officers to help you plan your visit. Website: www.english-heritage.org.uk has information on how to plan visits, links to other sites, including the National Monuments Record, which is developing some interesting materials on using the local area	
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A good local study need not mean days spent in the local Record Office

document collections to support site visits are available on CD-ROM. This immediately gives the teacher much greater flexibility about where to do the research, how to use documents with different groups of students, and so on. I know of such collections in Greenwich and Hackney—there must be others. The most remarkable local authority initiative is in Walsall, where a huge local studies pack, 'Windows on our World', has been produced for Key Stages 1, 2 & 3.⁵ There are local documents, maps, suggestions for work including visits. Most have overt citizenship links. All the historical documents are available on paper and on CD-ROM. *Images of England*, a huge project to put on the web a photograph of each of the all 360,000 listed buildings in England, will have the first 15,000 images up by summer 2000.⁶ This raises the possibility of the 'virtual visit'. Several interesting sites can now be viewed quite thoroughly on the web.⁷

3. Fieldwork in Higher Education. Ian Dawson and Joanne de Pennington have recently carried out some research into fieldwork in history teaching at British universities.⁸ More than half of the 83 students who responded had done none at all. This included one who had taken a course on medieval monasticism

without (in teaching time) visiting a monastery. The authors quote Christine Hallas as concluding that 'generally the use of fieldwork in higher education history courses has been sporadic ... occasions when some light relief is required from sitting in the lecture hall.' These, of course, are the same universities that spent some of the summer slagging off school history for being too narrow.

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- ² Murray, M. (1999) Three lessons about a funeral: Second World War cemeteries and twenty years of curriculum change, *Teaching History*, 94.
- ³ Wrenn, A. (1999) 'Build it in, don't bolt it on: history's opportunity to support critical citizenship' *Teaching History*, 96.
- ⁴ Development Education Centre, (1998) *Water for a City*, Development Education Centre: Bristol Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham B29 6LE in association with Severn Trent Water
- ⁵ *Windows on our World*, published by Walsall MBC, Civic Centre, Darwall Street, Walsall, WS1 1DG
- ⁶ *Images of England*, National Monuments Record, Kemble Drive, Swindon, SN2 2GZ
- ⁷ These include, for example, Durham Cathedral (www.durhamcathedral.com). There is a 'site of sites' for all museums in Britain at www.mda.com.
- ⁸ See Dawson and Pennington's work in Booth, A., and Hyland, P., (1996) *Learning from experience: Field Trips & Work Placement*, edited by Blackwell.