



CASE STUDY

Sandford Award Criteria 5

Educational resources and facilities are provided which enhance the quality of the learners' visit

In this case study primary school children meet a reminiscence volunteer whose wartime childhood experiences inspire empathy with how they would have felt as evacuees.

Victoria Tunnel, Newcastle upon Tyne



The Victoria Tunnel is a preserved 19th Century wagon-way under the City of Newcastle-upon-Tyne from the Town Moor to the Tyne, built to transport coal from the Spital Tongues Colliery to the river. The tunnel operated between 1842 and the 1860s before it was abandoned. In 1939, the tunnel was converted into an air-raid shelter to protect thousands of Newcastle citizens during World War Two.

In 2008 the Victoria Tunnel was carefully repaired with funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Tyne & Wear Partnership. Since renovations were completed in 2010, the Ouseburn Trust has operated guided tours using award-winning volunteer guides.

The Session: KS2

A one hour classroom activity – ‘We offer an opportunity to handle original and replica artefacts that may have been lost and found in the Tunnel during World War Two, our reminiscence volunteer talks about his own experience sheltering in the Tunnel as a child and offers a Question and Answer session.’

A one hour tour underground – ‘We will kit out you and your class with hard hats and torches and take you for a short walk along the Ouseburn Valley and into the Victoria Tunnel.’

Classroom activity: Reminiscences and object handling

The pupils were assigned to meet with their tutor and an eighty-eight year old volunteer, Basil, who had used the Tunnel when it was an air-raid shelter from 1939 and throughout World War Two.

Questions and answers

A series of closed and increasingly open questions very quickly demonstrated that the pupils’ knowledge [of WW2] was well above average and that their overall speaking and listening skills were high. Having established the ability and knowledge attainment levels, the tutor began to challenge the pupils to discuss and explain the differences between Anderson, Morrison and other forms of air-raid protection. Individual pupils quickly explained differences in structure and position of the shelters but proved not to have understanding of their worth as protection.

At this point, Basil was introduced. The children immediately accepted Basil’s willingness to answer questions and so began a fascinating period when focused, sensible questions received answers that only a person who had experienced using both Anderson and Morrison shelters could offer. The problems of dampness and water with Anderson shelters was explained and the fact that the weight of the Morrison type meant that they were only viable on the ground floor of buildings. Supplementary questions elicited information that surprised the class teacher who herself posed other questions.

Inspiring empathy - evacuees

When a pupil suggested that another means of keeping children safe was by evacuating them, it turned out that Basil and his brother had been evacuated. His descriptions of their experiences as evacuees kept the class entranced, especially tales centred around how to ensure that you were assigned to someone that you wished to live with and how two girls escaped back to Newcastle in a fresh-vegetable delivery van. A useful interlude enabled children to explore empathetically how they might have felt leaving their homes

and family to live in a stranger's house in an unknown location.

Basil's school days included wearing gas masks, air-raid drills, corporal punishment, rationing of food and sweets, and clothing coupons. Every new topic was accompanied with original or replica artefacts, carefully choreographed by the Tunnel staff tutor, who also used his considerable teaching expertise to keep the learning opportunities on track. In this manner, the notion of make-do-and-mend was explained together with the idea of handed-down outgrown clothing and the reason why everyone had to carry an Identity Card.

'... the best school trip ever!'

This was a session of dense learning when pupils were able to accumulate a mass of new facts that would almost certainly be retained because Basil's delivery was authentic, friendly and supremely interesting. Practice in speaking and listening skills was evident whilst many new words were added to vocabularies. A splendid, unusual and extremely worthwhile learning experience. The class spent much of their lunch period talking about Basil's experiences, using the new words that they had learned and stating firmly that this was the best school trip ever!

Underground tunnel tour

Following lunch, the class was introduced to their guide to the Tunnel. The Tunnel guide (a retired female teacher costumed in clothes of the war period) had been apprised of the group's abilities and this enabled her to use this information to ask a series of challenging questions to check not just their knowledge, but also their understanding of the implications of what had been gleaned from Basil's talk.

Amazing historical facts

The walk was punctuated with interesting and useful historical facts centred around the Ouseburn Valley at the beginning of WW2. Although most of the houses had been swept away, one small dwelling remained. The children were amazed to learn that thirty people had lived in it and that they had no running water, electricity or flush toilets. An otherwise potentially boring walk alongside the Ouseburn was made interesting through a challenge to count how many green bottles (an art installation to recall that a bottle-making factory once flourished here) embellished the railings alongside the pathway.

Once equipped with torches by the costumed ARP Warden on duty, the Tunnel was entered. Immediately, another period of dense explanations began. Told that 9,000 people each night stayed safe from bombing raids inside the Tunnel, pupils asked how so many could get in. The answer amazed everyone (including the class teacher). It was found that the average width of the Newcastle 'bottom' in 1939 was 22 inches: this knowledge was used to work out that 9,000 people could sit nightly inside the Tunnel. The walk down into the Tunnel was filled equally with other fascinating information.

Life in the tunnel air-raid shelter

The length of the Tunnel was lighted with electric lights, with supplementary lanterns in case of a failed electricity supply. Bunk beds were supplied and over time some people brought down their own bedding and even put curtains around the beds. A blast wall was

encountered and explained, yellow patches of 'canary yellow paint' on the roof of the Tunnel were explained as a gas warning: if gas was used, the paint turned pink and gas masks were quickly fitted. As no gas was used in WW2, the paint stayed canary yellow. In answer to a question about the availability of toilets, a graphic description of chemical toilet provision was given together with how the chemical phenol was used copiously to cover smells. The highlight of the Tunnel walk was when all torches were switched off and everyone stood in total darkness for a short period.

The comment by one girl that "I never knew that such interesting places existed: I wish that I could bring my Mum to see all this!" perfectly sums up the visit.

From knowledge to understanding

The best evidence to show the engagement and inspiration engendered by the programme was the manner in which the students (and their teachers) steadfastly paid attention to all that was presented to them. This group had already gained impressive knowledge of life in wartime Britain of 1939. During this visit they also gained understanding - together with an element of empathy - as the impact of the war was discussed with a volunteer who had lived through it and even used the Victoria Tunnel as an air raid shelter. To walk through the Tunnel, sit on the benches and to imagine what up to fifteen hours sitting there must have been like was real learning!

This was no passive 'sit and listen' encounter: every student made at least one contribution to learning, some via questions, others in discussion or by expressing their feelings about an aspect of the information offered. During the day, in several instances, knowledge moved from knowing about and recognition of an artefact or event to understanding its impact at a particular time in history.

This had been a fun-filled visit but, at the end of the day, students were brought gently back to an understanding of the reality of war when it was explained that not far from where they were now sitting, fifty people were killed during one air raid on Newcastle. In addition, seventy other people were injured. When, at the end of the air raid, those people kept safe from harm in the Tunnel emerged from it, many found that their houses had been destroyed and they had no place to live.

Educational Resources and Facilities – What Impressed the Sandford Award Judge?

'The major resources are the Tunnel education staff members. Friendly, informative and displaying high-level teaching skills, it was this element that encouraged students to interact with them, and with each other, to participate actively in all aspects of the sessions. The volunteer, Basil, is a frequently used resource owing to his wartime background, and his close knowledge and understanding of the topics. Such was his ability to gain the group's attention, that questioning and discussion was friendly and continuous.'

'Careful planning and organisation has gone into providing original and replica resources to fit exactly the requirements of the topics. This enabled every student to see an original

gas mask and to try on a replica - this included a fun element in seeing how quickly and accurately each student could fit the mask.'

'The Tunnel is the resource that impacts most on students and adult visitors. Carefully and expertly restored, it offers a unique experience far removed from the text book air raid shelters that visitors know about. Once voted 'the worst air raid shelter in England' it is now a wonderful resource. The volunteer ARP Warden and the group's tutor interact well to explain how the Tunnel was used during wartime bombing raids.'

'Overall, human and physical resources are in place and used with great impact during visits.'