

Designing Popular Activities:

There's a story behind that . . . Using books and storytelling to support heritage visits

By Alec Williams



THE STORY BEGINS...

... a long long time ago. Our oldest prehistoric sites are rich with mysterious tales of 'fairy rings' or 'boulders that giants threw down'. Buildings have also attracted stories through the ages – famous or notorious occupants, hauntings, strange carvings in churches, priest holes in great houses. They still generate stories today; there is drama and mystery both in Lincoln Cathedral's ancient imp and York Minster's more recent fire. And the people who lived or worked in those buildings have their own stories – whether it's a lighthouse keeper's tale of a great storm, or a factory child's tale of an accident at the loom . . .

This section of the pack looks at using books and storytelling as part of visiting a historic property. It talks about using contemporary stories and poems as well as traditional ones; stories *from* the properties, or *brought alive* by the atmosphere they generate. It tells you how to *find* a teller, or *be* a teller. It tells you how to find stories, and find help. And it shows how children can benefit from stories – not just as a tick for the target, but as a memory for the mind. Because with minds to move them onwards, stories have a long long way still to go . . .

WHY TELL STORIES?

Put simply, children don't hear enough stories. If you are helping to 'right the balance' in your school, congratulations! If you need further reasons to tell stories though, especially on Heritage Open Days, consider these:

- local stories tell children more about the property
- a story brings the property alive, and the property brings a story alive
- stories can stimulate drama and creative writing, inspired also by the location
- stories need children to listen, and encourage them to speak
- stories can make a visit memorable – and fun!

You can tell a story prior to the visit, to whet the appetite; during the visit, with the property as a backdrop (if the site and weather permit!); or after the visit, to help recall the experience. If your own school opens its doors for Heritage Open Days, why not have storytelling in the school library for your visitors?

WHAT KIND OF STORIES?

First, try to choose something appropriate to the building you're visiting. It may be that there are local stories or legends about the site itself; your local public library or museum service will help you find these.

If not, look for something appropriate to the building's period, or its location – this could be either a folk tale, an extract from a children's historical novel, or a poem. Try the opening of Alan Garner's *The Stone Book*, about a church steeple; part of Dorothy Edwards's *A Strong and Willing Girl*, about domestic service in a big house; or an extract from E Nesbit's *The Railway Children*, about Victorian railways.

Remember it can be more than the building itself – the surroundings of Victorian houses may make you think of Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*.

Alternatively, you could choose something that simply fits the atmosphere of the place – a ghost story in a graveyard; the story of a medieval boy soldier at a castle; or a poem about a storm, for a maritime property. If your local authority has a schools library service (SLS), it's a valuable source of advice on finding material to use, whether it's fiction, non-fiction, or (like Sheila Sancha's *The Castle Story*) a bit of both!

For young children, don't forget picture books; Sally Grindley's *Shhh!*, set in a giant's castle; Graham Oakley's *Church Mouse* series; Ronda and David Armitage's *The Lighthouse Keeper's Lunch*; or Jan Pienkowski's *Haunted House* are just a few of the many that you could use. Simple poetry ("In a dark, dark, house . . .") or finger rhymes "*Here is the church . . .*" will set the scene too.

You could make up your own story, using an advance visit and a little research. Imagine the effect of weaving in small details which can then be dramatically 'discovered' by children as the story is told on site!

WHO'LL TELL THE STORY?

In this country, there's recently been a welcome revival of traditional storytelling; there's probably a venue or storytelling club not far from you where you can get a 'taster' – or try your hand. The Society for Storytelling (see below), lists hundreds of professional storytellers, many of whom include historical stories, and folk tales from your region, in their repertoire. Some even dress in period costume, bring historical objects to base stories on, or act in role.

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Alternatively, teachers (or volunteers, or parents) could take the part of storyteller. Use your SLS, public library service, or bookshop for books of 'story sources' – or maybe the older generation of your school community still know local stories from memory, that they can pass on! A few simple hints will help in the delivery:

- Prepare, by looking through a printed story, or rehearsing an oral one. This way you can spot high points, places to inject tension, rehearse or replace unusual words, etc.
- Think how you can introduce the story – lead in with words, an object, or a map?
- Develop your voice – vary the volume, check your diction, and control the speed
- Use different voices if you can – lower for a giant, higher for a princess!
- Bring a sense of drama, with expression in both your voice and your face
- Use simple gestures – mime 'he knocked on the door' with your fist, for example
- Look for opportunities for children to join in – with refrains, choruses, noises
- Keep children attentive by involving them – '... and what do you think he saw?'

Stories both from books and from memory are valuable in different ways. Using a book has closer connections with literacy; perhaps a shared visual focus; makes use of turning pages and opening flaps; and encourages re-reading by children afterwards. Stories from memory give greater freedom to the teller; can be personalised, shortened or lengthened; allow greater movement; and stimulate 'pictures in the head'.

Children themselves can also be tellers, both of existing stories, or of their own. A class can write or perform their own stories after a visit, re-enact one they have heard, or collectively make a story, led by the teacher. Inscriptions, gravestones and war memorials are all stimuli for stories.

WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

Your local library service (either the SLS, or public libraries) can help with books and other materials – and probably with some advice on nearby storytellers. Even if you employ someone to tell stories, it's vital to have books to prepare for, and to follow up from, their visit. You'll find contact details on your local authority's website, or in the phone book.

The Society for Storytelling will help to find a storyteller for you. Write to the Society at PO Box 2344, Reading RG6 7FG, telephone 01734 351381, or use the website at www.sfs.org.uk. The Society for Storytelling website has links to other sites such as StoryNet (www.storynet.org), and Storytelling Resources (www.timsheppard.co.uk/story).

If you want to improve your own technique, your library service should be able to obtain books by authors such as Eileen Colwell, Ruth Sawyer, Jim Trelease, and Jack Zipes; for 'in print' titles, a good bookshop is another source.

Keep an eye open for performances by local storytellers, and finally, talk to other schools about valuable guests and successful ideas. Above all, have fun! Storytelling at its best can energise a group of children, many of whom won't have experienced other live events, and it can bring you and them together in shared laughter or mock fright. They may never pass that building again without remembering the story that brought it to life for them!

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